

Guy Stevenson

Summer of Adultery

Free Love

By Tessa Hadley

(Jonathan Cape 320pp £16.99)

This book tells a subtler story about the 1960s than its title and cover promise. Taking its name from a hippy slogan, and with a cover depicting a sultry Nico-type figure, Tessa Hadley's latest novel looks suspiciously like holiday reading. What it offers is a combination of Mills & Boons-y romance and moving social realism.

At its centre is Phyllis Fischer, a forty-year-old Home Counties wife who abandons her family for an aspiring writer half her age. She begins the novel in the suburban England of Elizabeth David cookbooks, a world in which experimentation means bringing garlic back from camping trips to France and scabby-kneed boys play 'Red Indians' in the woods; where everyone is 'terribly kind', homework is 'rotten' and you call a 'little man' to come and fix things in your house. She ends it in Ladbroke Grove among poets, sculptors, musicians, new West Indian immigrants and squatters, immersed in the counterculture of the 1960s.

Hadley is better at capturing suburbia than bohemia. Her portrayals of Phyllis's Just William-like son and of the pained and kind restraint of her civil servant husband, Roger, are convincing, but the hippies whom Phyllis's lover, Nicky, introduces her to are a bit cartoonish. Hadley treats each character with gently mocking motherliness – even when they are maddening. Nicky, for example, is a trust-funded recent graduate, high on R D Laing and other new anti-establishment fashions, who passes off his carelessness with possessions as a stand against capitalism.

At moments, there are echoes of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Standing tipsily in her hallway, Phyllis sees the home she has made as 'a stage set, for a play by somebody out of fashion'. Hadley's own set is a work of meticulous reconstruction, right down to the post-rationing tinned mandarins and lamps 'made out of glass demijohns'. Such details seem intended to stifle, mimicking the tightly ruled world they describe.

Sentences are crammed with adjectives, which makes them either crystalline or swollen. There is also a scene that could land the author on this magazine's Bad Sex Award shortlist: the adulterers share their first kiss while they're searching for a child's lost sandal in a neighbour's pond, their mouths 'opening and closing, aching, slippery' like goldfish. Mocking primitivism, Hadley veers close to it, describing Lévi-Strauss fan Nicky as 'fallen into a hot cave of grown-up pleasures, which was somehow also Brazilian'.

There are no such clichés in Hadley's psychological portraits. We see the subtle changes brought about by an affair and its unexpected realities: Phyllis's shockingly clean conscience in the act of deception, for instance,

and her giddy rather than guilty awareness that she is giving a 'cheerful performance of herself'. Hadley is also excellent on the jilted husband, a man whose Foreign Office authority is offset by his kind eyes, 'bloodshot, apologetic, full of intelligence', and a tragicomic connection to the boy doing the jilting.

Phyllis runs off with her much younger lover for all the expected reasons: a desire for self-realisation out in the world; frustration with the politeness of traditional married life. It is hard to see, though, how she could have chosen to destroy her family for this loping, pretentious would-be radical.

Unworldly and less bright than he thinks he is, Nicky lectures her on marriage ('an aspect of capitalistic exchange') and war ('a lie at the bottom of our civilisation') and wows her with platitudes: 'the system's bigger than any individual.' Hadley hints at the insecurity of being a woman in 1960s England. In common with Ibsen's Nora, Phyllis behaves like a child in part because she is treated like one – by her husband, by her hypocritical lover ('women were entranced, Nicky thought, by the ... *idea* of thought, the outward look of it') and even by her small son. But aside from a painful glossed memory of a sexual assault, we never get a proper sense of how Phyllis has internalised the sexism of the times, which makes her girlish impulsiveness discomfiting: 'If he won't have me', she says after that pond-side kiss, 'I'll die.'

*Free Love* is often deeply perceptive and affecting, and sometimes up there with Richard Yates in its treatment of suburban life, but sometimes cheaply romantic. At its best, it lets you imagine what it was like to wrestle with old and new ways of thinking in an age that shaped (and continues to shape) our own – especially on questions of sex, race and what it means to be a woman. At its worst, it occasionally reduces these to breezy or implausible entertainment.