

Challenged by insanity of war

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by Emma Young

THE challenge that war poses to the human condition will always be fertile material for fiction writers. Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Heller, Pat Barker, Sebastian Faulks and Caryl Phillips are but a few who have constructed works around the traumatic disjuncture of recent wars. The first-time novelist Shira Nayman has edged towards this pantheon of battle-curious writers with *The Listener*. Set in a psychiatric hospital in the state of New York in 1947, the story engages with tensions that linger at the end of World War II. Many of the patients in the asylum are psychologically disturbed by the physical carnage they experienced as soldiers. To prove the point, a particularly fraught inmate hangs and slits the throats of two dozen rats, mimicking a crime committed by Nazi soldiers in a Polish village. *The Listener* is told from the perspective of the hospital's long-suffering director, Dr Harrison. It soon becomes clear that the doctor's professional responsibilities aren't necessarily met by stability in his private life. All is not well in the house of Dr Harrison. Much of the narrative centres on the director's interactions with a most inscrutable patient, Bertram Reiner, an ex-soldier with battle fatigue and an inventive relationship with truth. Having committed himself voluntarily, he has intimidating insight into his mental state; his therapy sessions are more like debates between equals than one man treating another. The dynamic between the two men is further complicated by Matilda. She is both a nurse and a third point in the romantic triangle she's destined to create. The duplicitous Bertram and seemingly benign Dr Harrison have at least one thing - one woman - in common. In *The Listener*, Nayman enjoys testing the boundaries of what's thought of as normative behaviour. It is not only the openly troubled patients of the rather elegant asylum whose sanity and judgment are questioned but also those who are supposed to be their guardians. Dr Harrison treated men with shellshock during World War I and had been responsible for patching together their frazzled sanity, making them just fit enough to hold a gun and fire at the enemy. Meanwhile, Bertram is disgusted by whom and what the American government was willing to sacrifice to gain control of the Nazis' great scientists. The obligations of war, we're reminded, put everyone in a precarious moral position. While this is Australian-born Nayman's debut novel, it's not her first work of published fiction. Her collection of short stories, *Awake in the Dark*, attracted acclaim and interest in what was to follow. As an author with a doctorate in clinical psychology, it's not surprising that she was inclined to weave much of her specialised knowledge into this more substantial narrative. At times her interest in the technical aspects of psychological treatment and war neurosis is perhaps a little overdone. As a consequence, there are sometimes more ideas at play than the story can comfortably sustain. Nayman isn't the first writer to imagine therapy sessions with patients decimated by a world war. Pat Barker did so memorably in *The Regeneration Trilogy* when she included Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon as couch dwellers in the therapist's chamber. This way of interrogating individual characters and ideas of war in general is just as likely to reappear in stories addressing the fallout of more recent battles, such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan. *The Listener* is a novel that makes a mystery out of one man's insanity and duplicity and another's obsession with him.