

## **Novel has a Mental Edge**

Review of *The Listener* by Jim Webber, *The Waikato Times*

This irresistible tale twists and turns in the turmoils of the head of a New York asylum, Shadowbrook, and a battle-fatigued patient who often challenges him. Shira Nayman had the idea for the book while working as a psychologist in a psych hospital. She found the world of the hospital so vivid, so pulsing with raw and interesting experience and emotion, that it was like being in a fiction-writers' paradise.

The listener of course is the director, Dr Henry Harrison, narrator of the story and a troubled man. His marriage is leaking away. Furtively he smokes opium. He lusts after the same nurse, Matilda, as his enigmatic patient, Bertram Reiner. Sometimes, as he tours parts of the old private hospital where the air is thick with madness, he seems pursued by the despair of past inmates.

His therapy sessions with Reiner dominate most of the book which is set in 1947-48. The interplay between them is fascinating, beautifully structured, disturbingly dark at times. I'm reminded of the classic 1955 film *The Prisoner*, which explored the developing relationship between a cardinal charged with treason (Alec Guinness) and his interrogator (Jack Hawkins). Reiner and Harrison also work through their sessions with edgy role-reversal an ever-present threat and a treatment breakthrough by the interrogator an unlikely event.

Overall it's a depressing yarn, with so many of its negative values part of many peoples lives – yet the sensitive telling of them and the consequences of not dealing with them, leave a final feeling of being well satisfied by Nayman's construction of truth and deception. She has quite a lot to say about clinical relationships, magnified by the tensions stretched between two war veterans – the doctor with his plain and emotionally thread-bare life, the patient with a classified military background and who also has a private butler who attends him at the hospital.

Also under scrutiny is the legacy of war and the role of psychiatrists who patch up the victims so they can go and have another shot at it. It is hard to sympathise with Dr Harrison, possibly because his patient, Reiner, seems to have a better handle on life – quicker on the uptake, eager to deal with what he sees as a problem. Harrison tries to get into the patient's skin and see how the world looks from there, and he clumsily succeeds, up to a point. But in the end it costs him dearly. We never really discover what happens to Reiner – and it doesn't seem to matter: Nayman's tale examines the wayward pathways of the mind, so it becomes just another mystery.

More than most novels that I've read that examine psychiatric issues, this one generates discussion. Indeed there's a useful list of discussion points for book clubs at the end of the book, along with a conversation with the author in which she observes that the psychological ravages of war will be as true today among soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq as they were in World Wars I and II.