

# Mortality tale

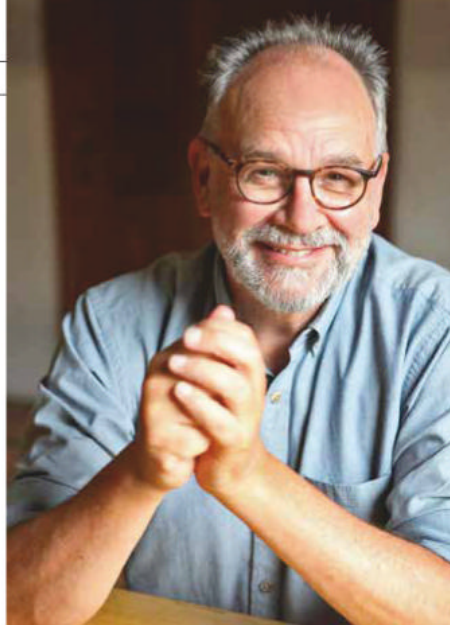
This charming little story deals well with death.

by MICHELE HEWITSON

**S**eb makes his living from the dead. He's an embalmer at White Lily Funerals, wedged between Supercheap Auto and Discount Wheels. He's good at his job. He often makes the dead look more alive than they did when they were living.

He wears a black suit every day, but his soul – if there are such things as souls; he has never seen any evidence; a body is just meat, destined to decay – is grey.

His wife seems to despise him. His teenage children barely acknowledge his



**Zirk van den Berg: less hard-edged.**

existence. He has no friends. He barely has a life. He deals in death every day and, in turn, dies a little every day.

He is disengaged from what passes for his life. There is barely anything to engage with, except his cadavers. Nothing much happens to him. He goes to work and goes home. Nobody wants to hear how his day was. Dealing with the dead is not work people want to hear about. It is gruesome and reminds people of what they do not

want to be reminded of: their mortality.

Then one day a woman, Annie, and her 10-year-old son, Gabe, turn up at White Lily and ask to see him. Annie explains that Gabe has an incurable disease and will soon die. He wants to know, from an expert, what will happen to his body after his death. He also wants to try out a coffin.

Gabe tells Seb a folk tale about a stupid man and his wife who are gifted three wishes. The stupid man wishes for a plate of sausages. The man's wife is so furious that she wishes the sausages would stick to his nose and so they have only one wish left. "You see how that could be a problem?" Gabe says. What, he says, would Seb wish for if he was given the three wishes?

Zirk van den Berg more usually writes hard-edged, finely controlled thrillers. Here, in *I Wish, I Wish*, he has written a sort of fairy tale that is fey and charming, a truly lovely little story. ■

***I WISH, I WISH***, by Zirk van den Berg (*The Cuba Press*, \$25)

