

New Zealand Books

Edited by PAUL LITTLE

I WISH, I WISH

by Zirk van den Berg,
Cuba Press — \$25

The novella is an increasingly rare item, especially in stand-alone form. Back in the 1970s, as prestigious a figure as Frank Sargeson was forced into the indignity (as he saw it) of joint publication for his short work *En Route* which was joined to Edith Campion's *The Chain* in a volume called *Tandem*.

So Cuba Press's novella series, of which *I Wish, I Wish*, is the second offering, is a brave and welcome departure. If all the volumes are as enjoyable as this, we have much to look forward to.

Van den Berg's book is about death and marriage and how similar they can be. Our protagonist, Seb, is a funeral director in a company that is — counter to the old saw about the funeral industry's immortality — on its last legs. As is his marriage.

Imagine his and our surprise

when he makes two throwaway wishes that come true. He spends the rest of the book convinced he has a third wish, wondering what he should use it for. Readers may feel increasingly alarmed on Seb's behalf, since in most stories on this theme, wishes have a way of rebounding detrimentally on the wisher. In this case it all ends not unhappily.

Documentary details about the minutiae of the funeral business are spot on, although the claim that “not having work stories was one of the hazards of [Seb's] profession” is incorrect. Any funeral director will tell you that there is a boundless public appetite for details of their work.

I Wish, I Wish is a taut and funny pleasure, suffused with a laidback, understated wit that at its best makes one think of Muriel Spark or Evelyn Waugh.