Thrillers

Cuckoo in the nest

A damaged couple trying to start a family take in a boarder who has sinister intentions.

by MICHÉLE HEWITSON

The day Marisa goes to view the house she will move into with Jake, with whom she will soon, she plans, have a baby, a magpie flies into a room. Marisa hates birds. She hates their flappiness, their nasty sharp beaks, "the smallness of their dead pebble eyes".

Magpies are thieves. They steal bright and shining things. Also, a single magpie is a bad omen: "one for sorrow", says the old nursery song. Marisa is already planning which room will be the nursery in the new house.

In MAGPIE, by Elizabeth Day (Fourth Estate, $32.99), Marisa and Jake are a bright and shining couple. Perhaps. He doesn't ever tell Marisa he loves her. He doesn't believe in showing emotion; he believes, Marisa thinks, that overt displays of emotion are "insincere". Jake and Marisa, beneath that bright surface, are damaged. His mother is at once cold and possessive. Jake was sent to boarding school as a little boy. Marisa's mother left her when she was a girl.

But together, they will make a perfect little family, once the baby arrives. There is one small problem: Jake's business is not doing well and he decides they must take in a boarder, Kate. Marisa finds her to be irritatingly confident; she treats Marisa's house as her own; she takes over Marisa's kitchen and makes Jake's favourite macaroni-and-cheese dinner and it is superior to Marisa's version. She is the cuckoo in the perfect nest. Or the magpie thief of bright and shining things. Or neither. Crafted as intricately and painstakingly as a bird's nest, Magpie is by turns terrifying and tender.

Stella has come home to Wellington from London, where she worked as a private investigator whose job was mostly dull. She chased cheating spouses. She was a cop in New Zealand and was supposed to become a detective, until she stuffed up badly. She fled in shame, away from a shadowy past.

There are shadows everywhere in Wellington. There is the dark and desperate grittiness in the undergrowth and in the skips where homeless man and violin player Mad Dog scavenges for cardboard to make his tragically temporary night shelters. On a good day, "everything looked beautiful in sunlight". There is also glitz and money and that stunning harbour. Still: "Like overbearing matrons, the moneyed apartments of Oriental Bay pushed against her back."

Stella's best friend, Teri, is found dead on the night of an anniversary party. She was drunk and toppled from a balcony. Stella, stroppy, damaged, still a stuff-up, is determined to prove she was murdered. The harbour is home to a sculpture: the LEANING MAN, also the title of this excellent debut by Wellington writer Anne Harré (The Cuba Press, $37).

There really is a sculpture of a man, by Max Patté, leaning out into Wellington Harbour, called Solace in the Wind. Stella has a sort of kinship with the Leaning
Sophie goes walking in Dark Places and comes across a mysterious sign: Dig Here.

Man. They are both finely balanced; they might topple at any moment into the harbour, which can look benign on a day when there is sunshine.

Tallulah is a teenage mother who never comes home from a party in the woods in THE NIGHT SHE DISAPPEARED, by Lisa Jewell (Century, $37). She has a baby boy, Noah, at home, left in the care of her mother, Kim, who would rather be at the pub. But it’s the first time Tallulah and the baby’s father, Zach, have been out since their baby was born. Tallulah texts her mum to ask if it’s okay if they go on to a party. The party is at a rich girl’s house. There is a swimming pool and unlimited booze and a frisson of menace. The house is incredibly lavish and eccentric. It is surrounded by woods called Dark Places, which sounds like the sort of place you really shouldn’t go near after dark with a bunch of rich kids you barely know.

That’s half the plot. The other is set a year later, at a posh boarding school whose grounds meet the woods. Sophie, who has moved to the school to live with her head-teacher bloke, goes walking in Dark Places and comes across a mysterious sign: Dig Here. No good comes of digging in dark places. We are led on a sort of anti-treasure hunt of dark clues, dark motives and deeply dodgy or just utterly unlikeable characters. You just about need to concoct your own treasure map to follow all of this, but you can’t complain that it’s not twisty enough to keep you guessing.

I grew up devouring sci-fi, but as an adult have shifted slightly sideways into books that flit into magic realism and the supernatural. I’ve read multiple books by Haruki Murakami and Salman Rushdie — my favourite of his is Midnight’s Children — and found it impossible to put down THE ABSOLUTE BOOK, by Elizabeth Knox.

The Auckland-based family doctor and writer’s book, THE UNEXPECTED PATIENT (HarperCollins, $37.99), exploring fascinating cases she has dealt with, is out in mid-September.

I love THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA by Ernest Hemingway. I like his other works also, because they are intriguing in their depiction of the sort of manly manhood that I find both fascinating and strange. But this short novel, with its tale of an unlucky fisherman and the enormous marlin that pulls him out to the far reaches of the Gulf Stream, is a compulsive read, exploring life and death, empathy for the natural world and the elemental struggle between failure and success.

To cheat a little ... It’s easier to talk about the types of books I love rather than picking specifics, such as those written originally in Spanish. I read these in English, but there is something about their sing-song cadence, their easy assimilation of the spiritual with the natural world, their gregarious nature and rich, bright colours. Hence works by Gabriel García Márquez, Pablo Neruda and Isabel Allende are treasured.