Murder in mind

Speculative-fiction debut is a stylish, original puzzle.

by AMY McDAID

Imagine you could spend one more day with a lost love one, or have another chance with “the one that got away”? What if you could step back into the most devastating moments of history and rewrite them? Angelique Kasmara addresses a long-standing concern about the superficial nature of our history in her highly original and stylistic debut novel, Isobar Precinct. The novel was attracting attention even before it hit the printing press. An early draft manuscript took out the University of Auckland’s Wallace Foundation Prize in 2016. Three years later, it was a finalist for the Michael Gittins Award for an unpublished novel. With a strong narrative drive and a cast of characters as diverse as the city in which it’s set, Auckland, it’s not hard to see why.

Our narrator, tattoo artist Lestari, is a self-confessed hater of change who savours the permanence of ink on skin. She’s the right blend of spunk, strength and sensitivity. She’s a martial-arts expert unafraid to take on a burglar, who also harbours feelings for a grumpy (and married) police officer called Tom. The minor characters resist easy categorisation: Tom smokes dope and has a rebellious streak; 15-year-old Jasper, orphaned and homeless, wants to be a physicist.

The action kicks off when Lestari and two friends witness a grisly murder among the gravestones of Symonds St Cemetery. The group is traumatised, but where’s the evidence? There’s no body, not a drop of blood. A grainy video recorded on a phone is the only indicator the whole thing was not a figment of their collective imagination.

The murder catapults Lestari on an investigation, in which she discovers a dangerous and disturbing trial of a drug with some extremely unusual effects. Delving deeper, she finds the seemingly disparate parts of her own troubled life – a spate of burglaries, her missing father; her involvement with the city’s rough sleepers – are inextricably linked.

The story’s central mystery drives the narrative at a steady pace, with twists and turns through time. There’s not a single dull moment, and some gorgeous fantastical ones: tattoos crawl off bodies, storms appear from nowhere, snakes drink wine.

The premise is speculative, but the world is firmly grounded in the present – the gritty and vibrant surrounds of Auckland’s Karangahape Rd, with its colourful history, hidden corners and unusual characters – with all its possibilities and constraints. Kasmara uses this to her advantage. A young investigator these days will use Google, and if something bizarre happens, there’s likely to be someone nearby capturing it with a cellphone.

Isobar Precinct gives all the satisfaction of putting together the final pieces of a puzzle while not being too neat. Story is forefront, but behind it lie some big existential questions. If we were able to rewrite our lives, at what cost would it come? Is our sense of control an illusion?

There’s a thread of compassion for those on the edges of society that adds poignancy. As Lestari asks: “How do we go about healing people, so the place we want to be is right here, right now?”

Speculative fiction gets a hard rap sometimes among literary types. But perhaps it’s just fiction, which locates us in the mind of a small group of people experiencing life as we know it, is insufficient to push into bigger questions. The speculative nature of the novel allows Kasmara to examine some uncomfortable truths about human nature, and gives it the feeling of a cult classic.

Angélique Kasmara examines some uncomfortable truths about human nature.