

Mystery-solving in capital about more than just crime

THE LEANING MAN

Anne Harre

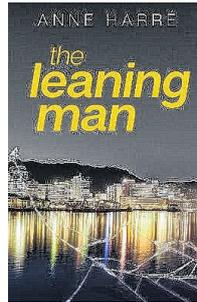
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By PETER STUPPLES

Stella Weston arrives back in New Zealand from spending some years in London to attend her parents' 40th wedding anniversary. She is in disarray, with persistent toothache and irritation at being back as she is reminded of her reasons for leaving — an affair with a married man leading to the suicide of his wife. In Wellington, she had been a policewoman in training, in London a private eye, on the outside of the misalliances of others, just as in New Zealand she had been part of the problem.

Stella is a smoker, a drinker. She uses coarse language. She catches disapproval from her parents, but also concern and love.

At the anniversary party she meets up with old friends, particularly Teri, picking up from her an anxiety, a mystery there is no time to talk about. The next morning, Stella learns Teri fell



from a fourth-floor balcony the previous night. The consensus is suicide. Stella is convinced it is murder. The novel follows Stella's attempts to solve this mystery, involving her friends, her parents, rough-sleepers, exploiters of others. It takes time to develop character, to set the scene.

This is Anne Harre's first book, but reads like the mature product of a veteran writer. Her Wellington is a major character, just like Ian Rankin's Edinburgh and William McIlvanney's Glasgow. The streets of the inner city, the slopes of Mt Victoria, Courtenay Pl and Cuba St are painstakingly described as to

making it possible to identify every site of the action.

Wellington's winds sweep every scene. Back alleys lead to grim back entrances to grim ramshackle buildings — faintly picturesque by day, alive with menace by night. The harbour is a relief of natural beauty for those looking out, backs to the city, like “the leaning man”, Max Patte's bronze *Solace in the Wind* on the waterfront.

The characters are drawn with care. Stella is an anguished, complex contrarian; craggy, barely lovable, carrying the contradictions that make this novel a work of merit. *The Leaning Man* is not only about the crime and its resolution, but has a wider canvas, the eternal conflict between men and women, the struggle to regulate sexual desire within the individual as well as society, in an era when the old conventions are questioned, and each person is left to find a pragmatic solution.

Peter Stupples, now living in Wellington, used to teach at the University of Otago