



Angelique Kasmara

Reality fractures in tales from the seedy streets

ISOBAR PRECINCT
Angelique Kasmara
The Cuba Press

By JESSIE NEILSON

This highly imaginative novel takes place in Auckland but quickly leaves a near-contemporary scene for jaunts through alternative worlds.

It stars Lestari, a tattoo artist in her late 20s, working out of a low-fi studio on K Road. She and business partner and fellow artist Frank have been subjected to regular break-ins recently and strongly suspect it is the work of a business rival. Their distinctive tattoo designs, and those of their rival, are frequently sighted around town. Lestari's work has a recognisable flavour, incorporating serpents and spirits from myth, drawing on her Indonesian heritage.

While a frustrated Lestari follows up on leads, Frank pursues his other artistic dreams. While channelling the Sex Pistols with his steampunk garb, kohl make-up and piercings, he appropriates graveyard statues and alters them to become icons of peace.

Though they are comfortable in seedy environs, what they witness together in the Symonds St cemetery one day becomes all too much.

In the "thriving open-air hotel" that smells of roses, urine, petrol fumes, and cypress, a fight takes place between two ageing men. The violence and gore fills Lestari with horror, while Frank films it. However, when viewing the recording at the police station, the evidence does not stack up.

Before long, reality as they know it ruptures. Lestari is losing all sense of perception, time, and identity. Items from her youth mysteriously turn up on unknown persons, and characters with changing personas mimic figures from the past amongst inexplicable happenings. A shaggy-haired, unkempt, and



unwashed street sleeper nevertheless finds colourful costumes in which to adorn himself. Through his bug-eyed mirror sunglasses, it is impossible to connect with him. Yet for some reason Lestari feels responsibility, as she does for young Jasper, who is living under the stairwell of their building. He, like Lestari and Frank, has links to communities on the edge, to prostitution, drug users, and other transients, and it is towards these corners that the focus quickly turns.

There are whispers of unorthodox drug trials, of comas, dysfunction, and even death. Lestari's nights are haunted by recurrent nightmares, echoes of which slowly penetrate her days. As much as these individuals try to function as such, they are smudged by back-stories.

Indonesian-Kiwi writer Angelique Kasmara has already won prizes for this work. She packs in huge amounts of complex detail, in characters with precision and thought. After an enthralling opening scene, the pace continues throughout.

Her first-person narrative is clever, witty, and outspokenly honest, with fresh imagery and immediacy. Lestari tells of "stitching a nest of my bones", and "gold-panning" her mind. In yet another strong offering from independent Wellington-based publisher, The Cuba Press, the results of similar sifting are here in Kasmara's very impressive debut novel.

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