

# Questions arise in oasis amid chaos

A SKY OF WRETCHED SHELLS

**Mark Blackham**

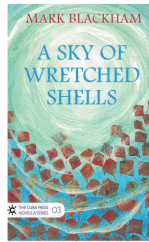
*The Cuba Press*

By JESSIE NEILSON

This book is the third in The Cuba Press' novella series and has come out of the Whitireia publishing programme. It is set on a Micronesian atoll. On the sparsely populated island of Woleai the people are largely isolated and self-sufficient. Traditions and gender roles are firmly established. There are overarching spiritual beliefs that dictate behaviour and boundaries, and thus the people know that the nearby island of Paliu is off-limits.

Similarly, the lagoons are taboo at their centres, with an unknown force thought to lurk within. The exact nature of the force is not to be investigated but simply accepted, as that is the territory of Nareau, the creator of Heaven and Earth, and if these rules are obeyed then the delicate harmony of the island will hold.

While *A Sky of Wretched Shells* has a realistic setting, it soon delves into the world of speculative fiction. It is set in the present or a close future, and the



world is close to collapse. Woleai stands alone as an island of superabundance, where the people do not want for fresh crops and animals.

Outside this location the world is rapidly dying. In the radio hut, young local man Mala tunes in surreptitiously to weak broadcasts from Guam, America and Australia, in the hope of some objective reports. He conducts his own experiments, measuring the motions of the waves and currents and the depth of the lagoon. From within come mysterious swellings of waves and underground shadows. However, the real threat arrives with two Western scientists, pale and sick, who seek the reason for the island's abundance.

Tensions increase as do new questions. Was the studying of

this island destabilising its perfection? What is going wrong with the wider world, and how can this be slowed? The island is a complete unknown, and so too the threats, as curious happenings stir.

Lower Hutt-based author Mark Blackham has spent time on this island and has drawn on the people's belief systems in this work. Furthermore, he weaves into his story references to war history; remnants of Japanese fighter planes remain, signs of earlier destruction and death. However, this time around the threat is larger, and the battle fiercer, for climate change is wreaking complete destruction. These environmental concerns are a strong undercurrent, while the main attention is on the supernatural and inexplicable.

This is a tale of strange dynamics, where more questions are asked than answered. Blackham paints a picture of a peaceful island about to tip over, and with its fantastical elements, this quiet and thoughtful work could be enjoyed by both adult readers and teens.

*Jessie Neilson is a University of Otago library assistant.*