

Launch of *Dissection*

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By Helen Garner

I haven't read anything quite like this novel.

From the opening page, Jacinta Halloran commands our attention and our respect.

On one level, *Dissection* shows the usual encounter between GP and patient, but from the other side of the desk.

Because of the power and all-knowingness that we project on to doctors, this switch of perspective is unnerving enough.

But when the GP is someone whose life is unravelling in the face of a medical negligence suit, we find ourselves in a territory of existential panic and despair that is rarely traversed with such authority in contemporary Australian fiction.

The stakes are very high — not just because Dr Anna McBride, a decent and meticulous woman who has made a mistake, might lose her professional reputation and her livelihood, but because she has the moral courage to live the experience to the full.

She asks herself, in manifold ways, the awful questions: *What exactly is required of me? What does it mean, to have made a mistake? What is 'a mistake'?*

One of the things that make Anna McBride and her story so gripping, and so unusual, is the fact that she doesn't whinge or become defensive or try to present herself in the glorious role of victim.

To put it in the terms of the moral training that underlies the behaviour of the main character, Dr McBride takes up her cross and carries it.

It's a deeply serious book, a story of emotional and moral trauma recounted by a voice with real authority.

Dr Anna McBride's story is an extended act of articulate, ruthless self-examination by a terribly believable and respect-worthy character.

She refuses to take consolation, or to go easy on herself.

Her nature is essentially serious. She is in this for the long haul. This is her dark night of the soul. She can't and she won't turn back. She is driven to see it right through to the end.

Yet alongside this self-analysis, with its pain and terror, runs the once sunlit stream of ordinary domestic life — cooking, driving in the car, waiting at the school gate and seeing her children run towards her.

The two little boys are beautifully drawn and so is the complex love that they call up in their mother.

Modern marriage being what it is, we are saddened but not surprised by the effect of Anna's professional trauma on her relationship with her husband.

What is wonderfully heartening, though, is Jacinta Halloran's resolution of the story.

Its trajectory seems relentlessly downward — but, in a classic narrative manoeuvre, she lifts it just before it hits the ground, and brings it back up into the light in a lovely curve.

She even makes us laugh, at that point, with a perfect little exchange between sisters.

Anna is lying in a hospital bed — I won't say what she's recovering from: you need to read the whole book to find out, and you will, because it's marvellous — but anyway, she's recovering from something life-threatening.

Her sister comes in and hands her a lukewarm hot chocolate.

As Anna sips at it feebly, her sister runs a cool eye over her and says, 'God, you look awful. Did you lose a lot of blood?'

There's nothing like the reliable brutality of a sister to drag a woman back into the world of the living.

In fact, the book is studded with tiny moments of drily witty observation.

Halloran has the natural command of the material world that a novelist needs.

She keeps her character's interior monologue firmly grounded by means of the skilful placing of physical details.

*Dissection* is also that rare thing in novels, a very rich account of *work*.

If I could meet Anna McBride, there's one little piece of consolation I'd like to offer her.

She excoriates herself, at one point, for her behaviour as a very young doctor:

'Those interminable nights on the wards as an intern: her lonely footsteps on the linoleum floors, a torch in her hand. She would pull back the bedside curtains and shine the torch into the patient's face. *A rabbit caught in the headlights*. What tortures she inflicted!' (p. 15)

This brought back a memory to me. When I was recovering from surgery, 15 years ago, in a Sydney hospital, a woman — nurse or doctor, I didn't know — used to creep in every night and shine a torch in my face. When I stirred and opened my eyes, she would smile at me and whisper, 'Hello, gorgeous!'

There is no way I can describe the comfort I drew from her cheerful greeting. The light of her torch never offended me. On the contrary, it seemed to me the concrete symbol of her vigilance.

A young Canadian doctor called Vincent Lam has recently published a book of short stories. What made me buy the book was Margaret Atwood's cover blurb.

She wrote, 'The good news is that doctors are human. The bad news is that doctors are human.'

Jacinta Halloran's bracing and beautiful novel is an Australian example of this double-headed news bulletin.

I recommend it to you as an unputdownable and richly rewarding read, an extended ethical work-out of the classiest kind

I congratulate Jacinta on her achievement, and her publishers, Scribe, for the lovely object that they've made of it.

And I'm delighted to be able to declare *Dissection* launched.