



**Wake by Elizabeth Knox. Wellington: VUP (2013). RR: \$35. Pb, 443pp. ISBN: 9780864737700. Reviewed by Jane Orchard.**

If you're a little squeamish, don't read this in bed at night. The novel drives the reader straight into a town of haunting horror and terror. This image comes in the first section:

She looked back at the intersection in time to see a woman with a stroller walk, apparently calm and deliberate, toward the flames. She stopped at the edge of the puddle of burning petrol, and stood for a time in a considering way. Suddenly she began pushing the stroller in and out of it, back and forth, as mothers do to soothe a crying child. The stroller caught fire! (p 28).

Welcome to the world of the small town of Kahukura, near Nelson, one very ordinary spring morning when the world goes mad. Loving people have become murdering zombies devoid of all compassion or pain, until the air seems to go out of them and they collapse, dead.

This is a horror story.

There are survivors. Two people in the town at the time survive. Others who come into the town in the space between the horror setting in and a dome closing off all contact with the world are marooned, sane amongst the insanity. First they must stay alive until the horror ends with the deaths of all those affected, and then they must try to survive till they can be rescued.

This is a survivor story. Kahukura is as isolated as any desert island. First they must come to terms with the fact that it may be a long time till they can escape the dome, if ever. From working together to bury the 500 or so dead people, they forge relationships which can work long term. The story looks at what caring involves, at how people respond to the desperation of trying to understand the incomprehensible if they are to find a way through this. All the while, there is a monster in their midst, a monster they can neither see nor hear.

This is a work of science fiction. It has alternate realities, an inertia field, a man wrapped in a force

field, spaces between worlds to which people can retreat, people sharing one life. It is also a world where a message in a bottle can be more successful than the might of the army and air force.

This is a love story. It's a story of different loves: of romantic love, of how people show love, love for people or love for animals, of what happens to the vulnerable when love dies. In the first few pages we meet Curtis carrying his dead wife and refusing to be separated from her. Eventually he must let her be buried but there are consequences for those who grieve. There is love in the knitting of berets, love in feeding and cleaning the old and the sick, love in tolerating the intolerable.

This is a story of compassion, of the heroism of those who take on seemingly simple tasks which turn out to be impossibly demanding. There are heroic deeds, but there is also the heroism that comes from just keeping on doing what has to be done.

The novel is beautifully written and **Knox** holds the reader in suspense till the very last pages. The pace never slows. Through it spins the enigmatic Sam whose secrets are revealed very gradually. It's a novel that's even better on the second reading.