



***An Unreal House Filled with Real Storms* by Elizabeth Knox, the inaugural Margaret Mahy Lecture. Wellington: VUP (2014). RRP: \$10. Pb, 32pp. ISBN: 9780864739803**
and
***After Z-Hour* by Elizabeth Knox, new edition. Wellington: VUP (2014). RRP: \$30. Pb, 96pp. ISBN: 9780864739803. Reviewed by Laura Borrowdale.**

Elizabeth Knox has become one of our most prolific and well-known authors in Aotearoa New Zealand. Over the last few years her work in fantasy for both adults and younger readers, has grown and developed into a genre of its own and neatly encapsulated in her Inaugural Margaret Mahy Lecture, *An Unreal House filled with Real Storms* (VUP, 2014).¹

In the lecture, Knox explains why she writes as she does and pays homage to Mahy for the space in genre and New Zealand writing which she believes her predecessor has made available to others – ‘a room to hang out in.’ Knox states that her own writing belongs ‘hand in hand’ with genre fiction, ‘rather than within genre.’ She constructs ‘unreal houses’, her metaphor for fantastical settings, and fills them with people who suffer from ‘real storms’. The publication of this lecture, coincidental with a re-release of Knox’s first novel, *After Z-Hour* (1987), makes for an intimate and constructive pairing.

In *After Z-Hour* a group of travellers become stranded by the same storm and seek shelter in an abandoned house. Traumas from their pasts drive each character’s persona and narrative: abandonments, rejections, deaths. Their stories unfold in the present, but are overlaid by the voice of a spirit, narrating his harrowing experiences of World War One and thereby adding yet another

‘time’ and dimension. Although it is never clear whether the spirit, Mark, is reliving his past, or is narrating his present, his trench warfare accounts are vivid and brutal. He warns us, “However long it takes the world will teach us our places, by preaching itself against ourselves...,” and this is what we see with each character’s revelations from their pasts, as well as their experiences in the house. Mark, in particular, grows from a naïve young man to a traumatised soldier. This transformation establishes him in such a sympathetic way that it becomes difficult to believe that he has anything to do with the living characters’ sense of fear and malice experienced in the house.

The central concept of *After Z-Hour* is one that Knox has revisited recently. In *Wake* (2013), she returns to a group of strangers, isolated by circumstance and struggling to deal with each other and the situation they find themselves in.

After Z-Hour is a strong first novel. However, when it is set beside Knox’s later work, hinging upon the same themes of isolation and struggle, certain flaws become apparent. In *After Z*, for the most part, the two narrative elements, the present struggles of the live characters and that of the spirit Mark’s past, remain somewhat separate. There is nothing to connect the horrific past to the upsetting present. Because Mark’s story pertains only to the war, and makes no reference to the haunting or to the living characters, his relationship to them appears problematic.

Nevertheless, true to the cue given in the Mahy lecture, with *After Z-Hour*, Elizabeth Knox has filled a surreal place with characters so real and genuine that I find myself still thinking about them long after I’ve closed the book.

1 Victoria University of Wellington, Te Whare Wānanga o te Ūpoko o te Ika a Māui, is one of the country’s most productive creative writing centres, and, judging from this opening lecture, this series (published by VUP) promises to be of great interest.