A LAND ALIVE WITH STORIES

BY JOLISA GRACEWOOD

In Dreamhunter, Elizabeth Knox finally comes home again, with enthralling results. Instead of pursuing vampires and angels across the reliably romantic turf of France and Scotland, she maps a fully realised fantasy world onto a recognisable slice of early 20th-century New Zealand. At the same time, she plants a flag in literary territory that, on reflection, was hers for the taking all along: young adult fantasy fiction. Dreamhunter will find a large and enthusiastic audience among those who've grown up with Margaret Mahy, grown out of Harry and Hermione, or run out of Lyra and Will, but older readers will also find it gripping.

The title neatly captures the book's potent combination of reverie and gritty adventure. We begin squarely in Mansfield territory, all sun-hats and frilly dresses at the bay. Dark-eyed, thoughtful Laura and her golden cousin Rose, both on the cusp of womanhood, are spending a happy summer with their families at Sisters Beach, a day's hain journey from the city of Founderston. (The accompanying map is shaped very much like the top of the South Island, with “So Long Spit” curving above “Coal Bay”.)

Between the city and the beach lies an uncanny zone known as the Place. For ordinary folk, it is home to pretty waterfalls and picnic spots. But for those known as dreamhunters - Laura’s father and Rose’s mother among them - to cross the invisible line into the Place is to enter a grim parallel landscape that is bleached, desiccated and silent, but rich with dream ore. With names like Red Sash, Brothers Divided, Beautiful Horse, If Only, these dreams are harvested by intrepid dreamhunters, and then “performed” nightly for somnolent audiences back in the city. It’s a regular nocturnal Festival of the Arts.

Laura and Rose are about to discover whether they, too, will join the glamorous ranks of the dreamhunters. But this rite of passage is only the first event in a narrative that simmers with intrigue. Who are the mysterious prisoners that clamour insistently at the edges of otherwise benign dreams? What are the dark designs of Cas Doran, the powerful head of the Regulatory Body that controls the dream industry? What grim fate hobbles Laura’s father - Tziga Hame, the original dreamhunter - just when she needs him most?

As Laura’s quest unfolds, so do the mysteries. Dreams are therapeutic and entertaining, but they can also be manipulative or even punitive. Is the Place a reservoir of history, or a well of futurity? What strange powers animate the ancient songs brought by the settlers of Founderston from their distant island home along with the bones of Lazarus (yes, that Lazarus)?

The novel twists and darkens towards a riveting cliffhanger that leaves our heroine in the arms of a spooky ally, fleeing the chaos she has unwittingly unleashed on her world. Stay tuned for part two!

Knox hits all the marks of adolescent fantasy fiction: gifted young people, powerful but absent parents, a mysterious place that both nurtures and threatens, a frightening conspiracy to be unravelled en route to maturity. Contemplating her future, Laura feels “as though she were hurtling down a slope that got steeper and steeper the further she fell”. The supercharged psyche of young adulthood is writ large on the landscape: nothing is as it seems, and every tiny item - a rock, a song, a glance - means more than it can possibly say.

The wholly original world of the novel has been smelted out of a mirmber of familiar elements, many of which are a particular treat for New Zealand readers. Alongside golems and ancient relics, lighthouses and shackled slaves, we find heavenly creatures, a cinema of unease, singers of loneliness, a navigator, hints of Erewhon, a legendary historian by the name of Dr Michael King and a land alive with stories.

If you’ve run shy of Knox’s well-upholstered fiction before, this may be the book to bring you back under her spell. She is still a very adjectival writer, quick to assert rather than demonshate, and thus reliant on basic verbs to prop up her voluptuously visual descriptions. Those who come to Dreamhunter from the realms of J K Rowling won’t notice the static, occasionally stilted tone. but others will yearn for more sinewy, dynamic verbs to drive the prose. Nonetheless, the writing is cleaner than ever, and the plotting more cunning and persuasive. This time next year, we’ll all be queuing for the sequel, Dreamquake.

DREAMHUNTER, by Elizabeth Knox (4th Estate; $24.99).

LISTENER - THE THINGS THAT MATTER