

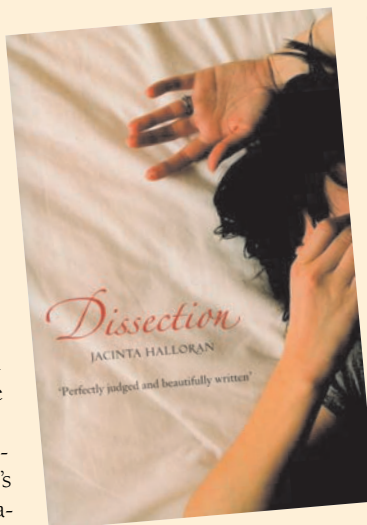
BOOK REVIEW

Litigant laid bare

Dissection. Jacinta Halloran. Melbourne: Scribe, 2008 (233 pp, \$27.95). ISBN 978 1 921372 12 4.

UNTIL 3 YEARS AGO, Dr Anna McBride was achieving her life's ambitions: partner in a suburban general practice where she felt she did well for her patients, marriage to a successful architect, two healthy sons, a network of friends and relatives ... Then 17-year-old Ben Feltham walked into her consulting room with a pain in his knee, a pain she failed for 7 months to diagnose as the osteosarcoma it proved to be. Now Anna awaits the mediation hearing in a negligence case brought by the young man's mother.

However, *Dissection* is no episode of the television series *MDA* in novel form. Halloran's intentions are more complex: she wants to analyse what happens to the doctor's persona following an accusation of professional negligence. Deftly she wields the sharpest of scalpels as she follows Anna's daily life, at home and in her practice, over several months before the hearing. Guilt, remorse, anxiety and self-doubt are all exposed as Anna questions her decision to study medicine, her clinical knowledge, and her ability to combine her roles as wife and mother with being a "good"



doctor. Halloran's portrayal of Anna is both forensic and sympathetic — all readers, but especially other women doctors, will identify and empathise with her. Some particularly good passages come from Anna's interactions with women undergoing pregnancy, miscarriage or menopause, which cause her to reflect on her own experiences of sex, motherhood and the gradual loss of fertility. Yet, Halloran's touch is always light — this is a good Christmas stocking-filler and holiday read.

A minor complaint: there is another, intriguing background story that I won't give away, in which the characters might have been more fleshed out.

Overall, though, a very good first novel, with hopefully more to come as Halloran, herself a general practitioner, explores other aspects of the medical life.

Caroline M De Costa

Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology
James Cook University and Cairns Base Hospital, Cairns, QLD

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