

James McNeish is a veteran of the New Zealand literary scene, with nine novels to his credit, along with plays and biographies. The Crime of Huey Dunstan is a triumph of ‘late style’: it is reflective, intimate and nostalgic, while capturing and retaining the reader’s attention in a subtle and unassuming way.

Huey Dunstan is a young man of partly Maori descent who, in the 1990s, is being tried in the fictional north island town of Cornford for a particularly brutal murder. Professor Chesney (Ches for short), a blind, retired psychologist, is asked by the defence counsel at short notice to give a psychological assessment of the accused. He meets Huey in his cell for a few minutes but isn’t able to get much out of him, except the sense that he doesn’t seem the type to have murdered a man in cold blood. But there is no denying that he wielded the poker and then the axe and did a man to death, and Huey is sentenced to life imprisonment.

Ches goes back to Wellington to his wife and his routine: what he calls ‘the usual excitements familiar to all decaying mammals who stray into God’s waiting room’ (59). The deep intimacy of their marriage is described with gentle, affectionate irony. His wife, Lisbeth, who berates him for letting the case get to him, and threatens to leave if he gets involved in an appeal, then becomes intrigued herself and proceeds to nag him to visit Huey’s parents, his schoolteachers and then Huey himself in gaol in Auckland. Eventually Ches breaks through Huey’s defences and diagnoses the psychological root of his crime, and there is an appeal. When the appeals court quashes the original conviction and orders a retrial, Lisbeth says, ‘Yippee.’

The Crime of Huey Dunstan is an absorbing book. Though not pretentious in any way, it slides around among questions of law and justice, criminal culpability and psychological responsibility, repressed memories, real and constructed, and blindness and vision. Ches boasts about the compensations of blindness: ‘Being blind far from being a loss is for me a big gain. Everything is enhanced. I live through my senses, smelling, hearing, touching, tasting, and one other which is important in my trade and enables me sometimes to see into the future, your sixth sense (my fifth). Call it intuition, but it’s more than that; it belongs to the paranormal. … Seeing in my view is vastly overrated’ (11). But the irony is far from simple: Ches is not infallible and can get lost and disoriented even in places he knows well.

This is poles apart from a standard crime novel, definitely not a thriller: he says as much: ‘Were I a novelist sitting down to invent a tale of intrigue and mystery, I can’t imagine picking a character like Huey Dunstan or devising a plot that relied so much on intuition, not to say guesswork, where logic and a priori reasoning were submerged in so much cottonwool and where the process of deduction from empirical facts led, precisely, nowhere’ (110). It’s not even really a court-room drama: though the technicalities of the law are important in the story, Ches tends to daydream during the legal arguments. At the time of writing, fifteen years after the first trial, Ches is as concerned with his own memories and dreams as with Huey’s case, still in his early eighties working out the significance of things that happened in his childhood. But despite its thoughtfulness and lack of high drama, it is easy and quick to read. Ches is a charming and genial narrator, and something enigmatic about the story lingers teasingly for a while after the book is finished.