

Beaten with the humility stick

CATHERINE ROBERTSON's new monthly roundup of contemporary fiction.

The cover copy for Mark Lamprell's **THE FULL RIDICULOUS** (Text, \$37) aptly summarises it as: "Middle class loser makes good." When Michael O'Dell is hit by a car, his life, already crumbling at the edges, begins to disintegrate at pace. O'Dell's quiet desperation becomes markedly higher-pitched as he has to deal with a daughter up for assault, a son who keeps a drug stash, his resounding lack of writing success and his fear the universe may never finish beating him with the humility stick. There are some very funny lines and observations that will ring true with everyone who believed that when they reached a certain stage in life all their problems would be over.

Adrienne Jansen's **THE SCORE** (Escalator Press/Whitereia Publishing, \$28) opens with a grand piano being smashed to bits outside a council flat largely tenanted

by immigrants. The piano is on loan to Stefan, who'd aimed to restore it and sell it to pay a debt in the hope it would save him from criminal charges. The ruined piano mirrors the wreckage in Stefan's fellow tenants' lives, spirits and minds, and the question is: are some things simply too broken to be fixed? Wellingtonian Jansen paints on a small canvas with skill and insight into the tough task of rebuilding a life with few resources past your own fortitude. A warm, unpretentious gem.

ARCHANGEL'S LEGION (Gollancz, \$24.99) is the sixth in Nalini Singh's paranormal romance series. Don't roll your eyes at the fact angels, vampires and humans co-exist in Singh's world; it is constructed with intelligence and her style is hard-edged and unsentimental. (Warning: high raunch level. Not for pre-teens or ageing parents.) The story, in which the Archangel Raphael and his consort, the once-human Elena, face a gathering storm of threats supernatural and biological, and progress to a showdown with the bad-ass female villain, is smartly plotted. The final battle scenes are blockbuster-worthy, and the angel sex smoking hot.

Wally Lamb's **WE ARE WATER** (HarperCollins, \$34.99) is told in turn from the points of view of Annie Oh, her ex-husband Orion and their grown children, Ariane, Andrew and Marissa. Annie left Orion for a woman and the imminent wedding is proving a catalyst for each of the characters to take a hard look at their past and present lives. What lies have they told and

The final battle scenes are blockbuster-worthy, and the angel sex smoking hot.

do they continue to tell themselves and others? Engaging but voluble: not every motivation needs explanation, not every storyline needs wrapping up. A little could be left for the readers to wonder about an interpret in their own way.

In Diane Setterfield's **BELLMAN AND BLACK** (Orion, \$37), the rooks have it in for William Bellman, who, aged 10, killed one with a catapult. Setterfield presents the birds as supernatural, with power over human lives, but never convincingly explains why they single out young William for a protracted revenge. Surely Victorian-era rooks were killed regularly by humans? By farmers, for example. We're given too little access into William's inner life to truly empathise and the rooks' reprisal is repetitive and predictable. Details of the Victorian death industry are a brief highlight, but this Gothic mystery fails to grip. ■

Catherine Robertson is author of the novels *The Sweet Second Life of Darrell Kincaid*, *The Not So Perfect Life of Mo Lawrence* and, most recently, *The Mismatched Affections of Charlotte Fforbes*.

