

A Change of Key

Adrienne Jansen

Notes for book groups

A summary

Marko lives in a council flat, surrounded by stacks of books in many languages. In the three years since he's arrived in this country, he's been reclusive, boorish, and paranoid, dropping hints that he was a spy for the KGB, but giving away very little of his past. Over the last year his life has regained a little more normality, helped by other tenants, mostly migrants, and by the shared task of rebuilding a grand piano.

Unexpectedly he's confronted by a newspaper article with the headline *MP Claims KGB Spy Living Here*. The article doesn't name him but includes a poor but recognizable photo of himself.

Marko is forced to confide in Stefan, one-time illegal immigrant and master piano technician, about his past – both his international success, and terrible personal tragedy. He becomes obsessed with finding out who is behind this newspaper article. His fellow tenants do what they can to help him, but they have their own messy lives to deal with. Veronica, from Sudan, has problems with her small delinquent son; Nada, from Serbia, has deeply-held suspicions of Muslims, including Veronica; Helmi, from Iraq, is rumoured to be a terrorist; Phil, artist and bass player, is holding onto his fragile mental health; and Stefan is trying to hold onto a rare business opportunity. They're all fighting a threatened rent rise which may leave them homeless. They play music together and come up with bad plans to help Marko.

Finally, Marko is confronted with a very difficult decision. And the outcome is uncertain. He has to decide whether to take the risk.

A Change of Key is the story of a multicultural group of migrants living in an inner-city block of social housing flats in New Zealand. Through the lives of Marko, violinist in exile, and Stefan, piano technician trying to rebuild his life, Jansen explores themes of social change and the hardships associated with existing in isolation from one's family and culture. But friendship, music and a kind of craziness hold this odd community together.

A Change of Key is a sequel to *The Score* but can be read as a stand-alone.

The author

Adrienne Jansen writes fiction and non-fiction for both adults and children. For many years she taught ESOL and was involved in refugee resettlement and immigration issues, and this long interest in cross-cultural experience is reflected in her writing. She has written several books which record the experience of migrants coming to New Zealand and has edited a number of publications written by newcomers to this country.

In 2009, she teamed up with photographer Ans Westra in *The Crescent Moon: The Asian Face of Islam in New Zealand*, a book intended to present a more accurate 'snapshot' of this largest group of Muslims in New Zealand. *The Crescent Moon* is also a photographic exhibition touring New Zealand and Asia, and has taken Adrienne to Jakarta, Indonesia, and to Kuala Lumpur and Penang, Malaysia.

She also writes poetry and in 2018 published *All of Us*, poems around the themes of migrants and refugees, with Carina Gallegos. She is the co-editor of *More of Us*, poems by migrants and refugees, to be published in 2019. Both books are published by Landing Press.

In 1993, Adrienne founded the Whitireia Polytechnic Creative Writing Programme, and now teaches editing on the programme part-time. She has written several of the Creative Writing Programme's online courses. For 10 years she was part of the writing team at Te Papa, New Zealand's national museum. She lives in Titahi Bay, Porirua.

Q & A with Adrienne Jansen

This novel is about a violinist from Bulgaria. Why did you choose Bulgaria?

I don't know. Sometimes things just surface as you write, and you don't know where they come from, but later you find that they fit. In *The Score* there were rumours that Marko was from Bulgaria. There must have been something East European about him that a person like Nada, from Serbia, recognised. Or maybe there's a kind of mystery about Bulgaria that fits with the rumour that he was a KGB spy. But when I decided to write a sequel to *The Score*, and make it about Marko, naturally I wanted to pick up on those rumours and see if they were true. As it turned out, Bulgaria was exactly the right place for Marko, with his particular personal history.

You visited Bulgaria as part of the research for the novel? Did that make a big difference to the story?

I had already written several drafts of the novel before I went to Bulgaria, and I had done a lot of reading about it. But there's nothing like physically going to a place. With a wonderful guide, I visited suburbs of Sofia where Marko would have lived as a child, where he would have lived as an adult; in particular, I visited the National Academy of Music and met with Professor Josif Radionov, a very eminent violinist and teacher there, and together we created Marko's early life and career. That conversation refuted some details in the novel, confirmed some, but more importantly gave me a sense of that society at that time, both at the Academy and in the wider society.

I also visited a monastery, and that visit completely overturned some assumptions I had made. That's the exciting thing about research – it might turn up something quite unexpected.

What other research did you do for this novel?

I consulted a security specialist about the operations of the KGB, or FSB as it became; a journalist about certain journalism practices; a city council employee about aspects of social housing, and the housing dispute. Specialist information like that needs to be correct. But I also talked with people – well, I've talked with people all my life – people like Milena Stoyavljevic from Serbia (about Nada), Abdalla

Gabriel (Sudan), Helmi Al Khattat (Iraq) Rachel Simon-Kumar (India) etc etc. Sometimes I think my head is full of stories and I'm just retelling them!

Why do you write about people who are not from New Zealand originally?

I've often been asked that. But why is it a question at all? This is the reality of New Zealand now – a very diverse multicultural society. I'm simply writing about New Zealand now. But I do realise that it's not everyone's reality. After *The Score* was published, I had a comment from a person who lived in Merivale in Christchurch, who said, 'It's a very good story, but it's not New Zealand is it?' I've also had several comments from people who've said, 'I grew up with these people in London' or 'This could be about Melbourne.' Or Toronto. I like that.

What do you want readers to take away from this novel?

I want it to be a good story. A page turner. And what else? I often feel that people who come to New Zealand from other countries, especially as refugees, have big past lives, and we don't know that. So the person we see here is a shadow of the person they once were. I want readers to take away a sense of those other lives. If we are interested in those past lives, we can give back to that person more of a sense of who they really are. Of course, that isn't always true. Sometimes people want to escape their past lives, have nothing more to do with them. But another strand of this novel is how the past life can follow someone, even if they don't want it to. That's a big part of this novel.

Questions for discussion

1. Stefan seemingly desperately wants to pursue his new exciting business opportunity. However, as he lets deadline after deadline pass, does he really want it?
2. In what ways are Nada and Veronica alike? How do their different backgrounds contribute to their differences?
3. When the Council threatens to put the rent up, how do all the tenants come together? What motivates them?
4. How has the move to a new country influenced Singh's behaviour and actions? Does he engender sympathy?
5. Why does Marko eventually confront his past? What are the consequences?
6. Music is the unifying force for bringing a disparate group of people together. How does it unite them?

7. Do you think Joseph gets the better of Veronica at times? What role does Stefan play in Joseph's life?

8. Marko is suspicious of everyone, second-guessing their motives. How does this influence his relationship with the others?



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