

BNZ Katherine Mansfield Premier Award winner – Julian Novitz



Julian Novitz was born in Christchurch in 1980 and currently lives in Melbourne. He is a graduate of the Victoria University of Wellington's creative writing programme and is now in the final stages of completing a PhD in literary studies and creative writing at the University of Melbourne. Julian is the author of two books, a collection of short stories (*My Real life and other stories*) and a novel (*Holocaust Tours*), both published by Random House, Auckland. In 2006 he was the winner of the New Zealand Society of Authors Hubert Church Award for best first book of fiction. A second novel will hopefully see the light of day, sometime in the near future.

Three Couples

Heather and Ioane

Heather and Ioane are both twenty-nine. They have been a couple for five years, lived together for three. They are practically married. At least everyone says they're practically married. Heather is a secretary at the university. That is how she knows Stewart and Chris. Ioane is an electrical engineer and he is Peni's younger brother.

Peni and Chris

Peni is thirty-two, Chris is twenty-three. They have been a couple for seven months, though Chris still sleeps with other people. Peni has a house in the suburbs, two stories, on the side of a hill with a view of the harbour. Chris lives in a shared flat down in the valley. Peni would like Chris to move in with him. Chris knows that is never going to happen. Peni is a lawyer. He has an office and secretary who he sends out for coffee twice a day. Chris is completing a Masters degree and he shares an office with Stewart at the university. His thesis is on Chaucer's Pardoner's Tale. He is Catholic, for the moment, and sometimes dreams of becoming a monk.

Stewart and Noriko

Noriko is twenty-six, Stewart is twenty-five. They have been a couple for almost a year and a half. They have lived together for three months. The house they live in is owned by Noriko's parents who have resettled back in Japan. They do not know that Stewart is living there and would not approve. He is not allowed to answer the phone. Sometimes this bugs him, but most of the time it doesn't because he is not paying any rent. Noriko is between jobs. Stewart has just started a PhD. He is writing about political conservatism in computer role-playing games. Everyone he talks to about his thesis thinks he is joking, sometimes even his supervisor. He and Chris and Heather always have lunch together if they can. They sit around and gossip about the lecturing staff and other graduate students. At lunchtime, Noriko usually makes macaroni cheese and eats it by herself at the kitchen table, still in her dressing gown.

Heather and Ioane

Ioane thinks that Heather should go back and finish her MA. It would give them another gap, a few more years, but he doesn't put it quite like that. Heather doesn't think she has time for more study now. They need to get on with things, she tells Ioane. Heather is resigned to being a thirty-something mum and thinks that it is probably better that they have waited. Probably better, all things considered.

Chris and Stewart

Chris talks about his love life, who he is sleeping with, how often, where and how. Stewart sits at his desk, laughs, nods and winces in the appropriate places and congratulates himself for not feeling uncomfortable.

Peni

In his office, high up on the Terrace, Peni looks out his window and thinks about redecorating the living room. New furniture for the guest room as well. No one has stayed in it since Ioane and Heather crashed for a couple of nights while they were between flats, but Peni would still like to see a nicer dressing table in there, and maybe a darkly varnished chest of drawers. A walk-in closet for the master bedroom would be the next move after that. Peni loves his house, he loves the way it makes him feel. He loves how good it looks and how good he looks within it.

Chris and Stewart and Heather

They get their usual lunch at the university café. They eat outside, sitting at a wooden table in the sun.

“God, I hate George Bush,” Heather says.

“I know,” says Chris.

“No, I mean I really hate him.”

“I know,” says Chris.

“Noriko is thinking about having a dinner party,” says Stewart. “We were wondering if you would like to come.”

Both Heather and Chris look at him curiously. They have not met Noriko before and Stewart has only ever mentioned her in passing. It feels odd to hear about her as a person who thinks and wonders. A dinner party hostess requires another leap of thought.

Noriko

Sitting at the kitchen table she remembers university, friends, parties, being popular.

Heather and Ioane

“So Stewart asked us to dinner. I think Peni and Chris will be there...”

“What night?” asks Ioane. He rolls over, pressing against Heather’s back.

“Next Friday, I think.”

Ioane doesn’t say anything. When you’ve been with someone for five years, Heather thinks, you know what they sound like when they don’t say anything. “What?” she says. “What is it?”

“It’s nothing,” says Ioane.

“No, tell me.”

“I was going to watch the Pro-Wrestling League final with the guys from work. But I can cancel.”

“It’s with your own brother. We hardly ever see him.”

Ioane shifts himself in the bed. His right arm has gone to sleep underneath him, his fingertips are tingling. “I said I’d cancel.”

“It’s not too much to ask, that’s all I’m saying.” Pro-wrestling, Heather thinks. Slab-like men with stupid haircuts, performing a choreographed prance and posture in a ring. Would he rather watch all that than spend an evening with her and two other couples around a table, drinking wine, talking literature, politics, arts, whatever she remembers people doing at dinner parties? It has been a while since her last one, a long time spent on the couch in the evenings. Cosy nights in. Ioane hadn’t lied about that.

Ioane and Heather had met through a personals column. They never told anyone about that, they had made up a story about how they had met in a bar and exchanged phone numbers, gone for coffee after that, then lunch, then dinner, etc, etc. Ioane had advertised himself as a regular yet romantic guy who enjoyed movies, sport, nature, talking and, of course, cosy nights in. He was looking for someone special between the ages of 19-25 for good, fun times. Heather had been twenty-four, his age exactly, one year below the bar.

Peni and Chris

“Of course we have to go,” Chris is saying. “We absolutely must.”

“Yes,” Peni says, thinking that he does not particularly want to see his brother again before Christmas.

“And I’m just dying to meet Noriko. She must be fascinating. Stewart barely talks about her.” Chris yawns and huddles over onto his side.

“Will you come shopping tomorrow?” Peni asks. When Chris doesn’t answer he prods him playfully and says “You know, I’m starting to think that pastel blue curtains are a little obvious for the living room. A little too self-consciously in sync with the wallpaper, don’t you think?”

“Do you have to be banal?” Chris murmurs sleepily into his pillow. “Can’t you be anything else, even for an instant?”

Peni hadn’t been serious about the curtains. He had been hoping to sound a little wry and ironic, self-mockingly aware of his own foibles. He breathes in deeply, taking a moment to bite back any possible report, then nestles closer to Chris, kissing his shoulder. Chris mumbles something and twists away, tucking his arms and legs in tighter. It amazes Peni that Chris can sleep like that at all, and it disturbs him sometimes when he lies awake at night, next to a young man curled up in a foetal position, still and solid and unshiftable, like a rock between the sheets.

Stewart and Noriko

“This,” Noriko says, “is going to be fun.”

“You haven’t met any of them.”

“That’s the point.”

“What I mean,” says Stewart, “is that you don’t know it’s going to be fun. Not for certain.”

“They’re your friends. I want to meet them.” Noriko has been amazed to discover how many of her own friends had been linked to her work. It had all been lunches, coffees, make-up repairs in the bathroom mirrors. Birthday afternoon teas. Christmas parties. Friday night drinks. Training seminars and sales conferences. She had not realised that she’d had so many friends until she had left her job. And now where were they? Some job. Some friends.

“Well, Chris can be a little intense, that’s all.”

“Good,” says Noriko. “I like intense.” She takes down one of her cookbooks from the shelf above the stove, the Italian one. Italian food always makes her happy, despite its empty carbs and fatty sauces. Noriko still counts the month she spent in Florence as one of the best of her life. The sunlight, the bustle of the streets, the darkly gorgeous men shouting ciao bella! as she walked past them on her way to the market in the mornings. Sitting down at the table, she starts to flick between glossy pages.

“Aren’t you coming to bed?” asks Stewart.

“They all eat meat don’t they? And no one has a problem with dairy?”

“I don’t think so, I’ll check. Noriko, babe, it’s almost midnight...”

Stewart stands in the doorway, waiting for her, he looks hurt. Noriko sighs and snaps the book shut. She has not been sleeping well lately. An hour here, an hour there, she wakes up all the time. Stewart, by contrast, is asleep the moment he hits the mattress and stays that way. Whenever she blinks into consciousness there he is, mouth hanging half open, snoring peacefully into his pillow. She can lie there all night and never feel him stir, but if she gets out of the bed, to read in the living room or make a sandwich in the kitchen, then he never fails to rise after a few minutes, stumbling out into the light blinking and confused, wanting to know where she has gone.

Heather and Ioane

“God...” says Heather. “Oh God...”

“Yeah...” says Ioane, finally catching his breath, sweat cooling on his bare chest. “That was...”

“God...”

“Yeah...”

“God, I hate George Bush...”

Ioane props himself up on an elbow to look at Heather, lying next to him, staring up at the ceiling. “Uh, what?” he says.

“I mean, did you read that article I emailed you about Iraq? Could you believe it?”

“Do you have to talk about this now?” Ioane asks.

“Yeah, yeah. Sorry.” She reaches back to stroke his cheek briefly, then twists around to kiss him. She flops back over on her back.

“But anyway, about it was about the Green Zone and the policy on Iraqi translators working with the army...”

This is weird, Ioane thinks. Officially goddamn weird. But at least this will make a good story for work tomorrow.

Chris and Stewart

“Dinner tonight,” Chris says in the office that morning. “Peni wanted me to ask you about the wine. Will red go with the meal?”

“I think red wine goes with every meal,” Stewart says.

Chris nods and smiles, trying to conceal his growing sense of unease. He had been looking forward to the dinner, but now he has a vision of everyone sitting around a table, straight-backed virtual strangers, passing bowls back and forth with pleases and thank-yous. This is always what you risk when you try to take that extra step with casual acquaintances. Somehow everyone just assumes that it is a good idea to make more of an effort, like we are all supposed to, right from when our parents first prod us towards the playground, insisting that we make friends. Chris wonders if he has reached an age where he has stopped making friends, or no longer has any use for them. Chris has been looking at scholarships lately, overseas scholarships, at universities in Europe, the UK, the United States. He has not told Peni about this yet, he is not sure if he will.

Noriko

Noriko's mother gave her a pasta-maker last Christmas but she never really figured it out. She could try using it now, but she would probably just make a mess. Store-bought will be fine. How long has it been since she spent an hour with anyone who wasn't Stewart? A week? Two weeks? Four strangers and Stewart. And she is doing all the cooking. And cocktails. She wants to make cocktails, she has a book for that somewhere.

Peni and Chris

“He said red was fine.”

“I've been looking forward to drinking this bottle.” Peni opens the cupboard above the sink and stands on his tiptoes, reaching deep inside. “It was a gift from a client, he told me to save it for a special occasion.”

“And you think this is special enough?”

“I don't know. I mean, when's the last time we went to a dinner party? Do people even have dinner parties anymore?”

“Only old people,” Chris says, looking away. “Only the old and the infirm.”

Noriko and Stewart

“You picked up the dessert?”

“It's in the fridge. I got a couple of bottles of wine as well.”

“I thought we had enough.”

“More can't hurt.”

“But we're having cocktails as well...”

“Cocktails?” They don't usually drink cocktails. No one Stewart knows drinks cocktails. Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald drink cocktails. The doorbell rings.

Ioane and Heather and Stewart

“I’ll be out in a second!” Noriko calls from the kitchen.

“She’ll be out in a second,” Stewart says. He and Heather and Ioane all smile at each other in the living room.

“Can I use your pisser, mate?” says Ioane.

“It’s down the hall.”

“You guys have a fantastic place,” Heather says after he leaves. “How on earth can you afford the rent?”

“We got lucky, I guess...” says Stewart.

Noriko

Noriko mixes the drinks in the kitchen and quickly cuts up a lemon, squeezing thin slices onto the rim of each glass. She puts them on the tray in a semi-circle, around the cheese and crackers. She hopes the drinks will go with cheese okay, the cocktail book didn’t say anything about what food to serve and she hadn’t even thought about that until now. Perhaps she should have gone with chips and dip after all. Noriko wants to make a good impression.

Ioane and Pen

Ioane takes his time in the bathroom, there is a Gary Larson collection in there he hasn’t seen for a while, and when he returns Peni and Chris have arrived and everyone is sitting around the living room, sipping aquamarine cocktails and eating cheese. Ioane makes his hellos, says he’s pleased to meet the Japanese girl, Noriko, then sits down next to his brother.

“Bro,” he says, elbowing him in the ribs.

“How’ve y’been?” asks Peni.

“Can’t complain. How’s the house?”

“Great, actually.”

“It’s a very nice place. Heather and I have been thinking of buying but...”

“Interest rates.”

“Tell me about it. You’d think that on 65k...”

“Hey, I struggle on 80, so I don’t know how you manage...”

Ioane clears his throat. He sips the drink Noriko gave him when he sat down. It tastes sweet and blue.

Heather and Noriko

They have been chatting across the coffee table for a while now.

“Well, it’s sort of the family home,” Noriko says. “Though the family’s all gone now. My sister’s in the UK, Mum and Dad are back in Japan. They keep talking about selling the place, but never get round to it.”

“It’s nice of you to have us over,” says Heather.

“Oh, I just wanted to meet some of Stewart’s uni friends...”

Sitting in his home, talking to his girlfriend, Heather is no longer certain if she would have called Stewart a friend exactly. More of a friend of a friend, maybe. Chris had started inviting him along to their lunches about four months ago and she had always thought that he was nice enough, in his way. Worth getting to know a little better, outside of university. But she does not really like the way he tried to dodge her questions about the house, as if he was ashamed to be freeloading off his girlfriend. It’s no big deal for Heather, it just starts the evening off on the wrong foot. She had wanted this night to go right, to be fun. She thinks she quite likes Noriko though, even if the girl is a little too eager to please.

Chris and Stewart

“So how’s the work been going?”

“Good. How about yours?”

“Making some progress,” Stewart says and Chris nods, rather solemnly. This isn’t right, Stewart thinks. They almost never talk about their work in the office, Chris is usually too busy filling him in on who he picked up last night, or how much of a twat Peni has been lately with his curtains. Stewart glances sideways at Peni. It is nice to meet him finally. Nice, but not particularly interesting. Everyone in the living room is on best behaviour tonight. So this is what it has come to, Stewart thinks. At the age of twenty-five, I have discovered small talk and mingling. Both he and Chris finish their blue drinks at the same time.

“Should I open some wine?” Stewart asks.

“God, yes,” says Chris.

Peni and Noriko

“This is fantastic,” Peni says at the dinner table, raising a forkful of pasta and smiling before taking a bite.

“I’ve been dying to try out the recipe,” Noriko says, smiling back. “And thanks so much for the wine. It’s excellent.” Noriko isn’t actually all that fond of red wine. It sometimes gives her migraines, just like chocolate. She thought she’d better have a half a glass though, because Peni kind of made a big deal out of it when he gave it to her. Said it was a gift from a client after a particularly successful out-of-court settlement.

“It’s a lovely house you have here,” says Peni. “Did you decorate it yourself?”

“Actually, no,” says Noriko.

They both chew and swallow and smile again.

Ioane and Stewart

“So you study video games.”

“I write about political conservatism in computer role-playing games.”

“So do you just play games all day?”

“Actually, I don’t particularly enjoy playing computer games.” This is a lie, but Stewart doesn’t want Ioane to think he’s a geek.

“I just find certain trends in their development theoretically engaging. I think that the form of gameplay and the structure of progression necessarily aligns the player with classical conservative thought, either implicitly or explicitly.”

Ioane stabs at his plate of pasta. “Sounds interesting.” He sometimes plays Counterstrike on the computers after work. He wouldn’t have minded swapping a few tactics.

Heather and Chris

Heather and Chris talk about George W. Bush and how much they hate him. Glancing around him, Chris feels a flush of pride that his conversation is the only one at the dinner table that feels fluid and animated and unforced. The environment, the global economy, the unjust wars; George W. Bush is the topic that keeps on giving.

Noriko and Peni

Over dessert, Noriko tells Peni about her stay in Italy and he tells her how much he wants to visit. Chris has been talking a lot about Europe lately. Peni has started saving for a trip. He thinks it will be a nice surprise.

Heather and Chris

They disagree over whether Bush is worse than Nixon. For Chris, bombing Cambodia will always trump Iraq. But at least Nixon opened up China, Heather maintains. Next to them, Stewart and Ioane are discussing the Pro-Wrestling League. This is all ending happily enough, she thinks.

Ioane and Heather and Chris and Peni and Noriko and Stewart

There are handshakes and hugs and cheek-kissing in the hallway. Noriko is pleased that things loosened up a little after dinner. Sitting at the table, with knives and forks and plates and wine glasses and nice clothes and salad and candles and the good table cloth felt like a kind of middle-class purgatory. She supposes that was because she was being the hostess. She hopes everyone else enjoyed it more.

Everyone collects their coats from the hooks by the door and Noriko and Stewart follow their guests out onto the porch to say goodnight. Chris, Ioane and Stewart are all a little drunk. Peni has bad indigestion but hides it. Heather and Noriko kiss each other on the cheek again. Perhaps they will have coffee some afternoon. Everyone agrees that the evening was a success.

Ioane and Heather

Heather reads her library book in bed, waiting for Ioane. In their living room, Ioane sits down to check that the Pro-Wrestling League final has recorded properly. He only intends to watch five minutes, but can't seem to drag himself away as Hooded Justice repeatedly elbow slams and throat-chops the Cage-Hunter, before he is betrayed at the last minute by his own team-mate, the Crimson Violator, who clobbers him from behind with a metal folding chair.

Chris and Peni

They stay up that night talking about Italy and Chris regrets not asking Noriko more about Florence. This has been good for them, Peni thinks. It is good to talk to other couples.

Noriko and Stewart

Noriko goes to bed early, leaving Stewart with the dishes. She is exhausted, but as usual she cannot sleep. She shouldn't have touched the red wine and can feel a cluster headache brewing in the back of her skull. She listens to Stewart clattering in the kitchen and thinks that she should feel pleased with how the evening went. It made a change, anyway. That was all she had been looking for.

Chris

When Chris's scholarship to Essex comes through, he doesn't tell Peni about it until three days before he is due to depart. There is a scene, but it is over soon enough and he is on his way. He only stays at the university for two months though, because he meets an architect on a trip to Paris and moves in with him. The architect is older than him, like Peni, and kind of house-proud, also like Peni, but he is French and so everything feels different, for a while.

Ioane

He and Heather are still practically married. Everyone says they are practically married so when will they set a date? Heather wants to finish her MA first, says Ioane.

Stewart

When Noriko kicks him out, Stewart moves into a shared flat in the valley. He lives there with a guy who can't ever stop talking about the progress he is making with his therapist and who won't eat any vegetables apart from frozen peas, a girl whose unemployed boyfriend stays over practically every night and always drinks their coffee and eats their cereal in the morning, and one other guy who would almost be okay, if only he could stop disparaging Stewart's music collection every chance he gets or clipping his toenails in the lounge.

Heather

Heather is thinking about finishing her MA. Ioane is encouraging her, she tells everyone, and everyone tells her that it is very good of him, very supportive. She misses Chris and writes to him sometimes, but he is bad at answering emails. She and Stewart no longer have lunch together. They smile and say 'hi,' when they pass each other in the corridors.

Peni

Peni is depressed for almost a month after Chris leaves, surly and snappish at work, drunk in the evenings. But he recovers in the end because what else can he do? For a while, he thinks about going to Italy by himself, but he rewallpapers his bedroom and buys an antique wardrobe instead. His friends at work tell him he needs a hobby and he starts canvassing the secondhand bookstores on the weekends. He likes the idea of collecting hardbacks, first editions, and has some new shelves built in the study.

Noriko

Noriko sits at the kitchen table in her dressing gown, eating macaroni cheese. She has been looking for a job in the newspaper, but finds herself reading the personals column instead. She thinks she would like to call someone, to take a risk, just for a change. She can't decide who to call though. All the messages are pretty much the same.