

# Poet's first novel lives on sparkle

**MARTIN Johnston has followed other Australian poets into a first, and successful, novel.**

The poet glows through most of it. He plays happily with rich and rare words. You can hear an echo of T. S. Eliot in a stray phrase, see Coleridge mirrored in a rainbow image. He picks up the changing metrical forms in a train's rattling progress ("mostly trochees at the station").

His fancy flowers in imaginative scenes. Rills that flow through penthouses hold dwarf trout bred by disenfranchised bonsai masters, and are decorated so skilfully that neither the fish nor hovering anglers can distinguish the real from the symbol.

## Arresting

So much of it is style. An arresting first chapter provides a pawn's-eye view of a desolate chessboard. He moves from a retarded youth's reflections on colour and pattern to a Leichhardt housewife's vernacular story of her bereavement.

James Joyce recurs as a model, Joyce whose language, a character says, "seemed somehow to have got beyond the mere game

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**Cicada Gambit**, by Martin Johnston. Hale and Iremonger, \$19.95 hardcover, \$9.95 paperback. Reviewed by L. V. Kepert.

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of denotation and connotation, . . . to have achieved something of the sort of leap that must exist between, say, crystals - growing, reproducing, polymorphic - and the first forms of life."

It is not for nothing that one of the comic chapters (there are plenty) portrays the desperate hopes of Dr Skogg, an academic, to act out in a Sydney newspaper office, pub and whorehouse the meanderings of Joyce's characters in the Dublin of Ulysses.

Yes, well, but what is *Cicada Gambit* about? Mostly it is about Vlastos, a young Greek whose chess abilities earn him a precarious existence in Sydney, living in cramped lodgings, playing simultaneous exhibitions in drizzling rain, oppressed to the point of paranoia by mysterious happenings.

If, he reasons, the pieces are not conscious of being manipulated, can the players know whether they in turn are manipulated by other minds? Fate can easily turn him into a chess piece.

Chess is important to the book in other ways (cicadas less so). Its terminology provides wry chapter headings. Musings of the concluding chapter are wrapped around the moves of an 1872 game.

## Not difficult

But timid readers need not turn away. If to some extent experimental in form, it is not a difficult book. David Ireland and David Foster, widely read, can be more impenetrable. This lives on its sparkle, on the mystery of Vlastos's existence and personality and on the life of its settings - the bohemian quayside pub, the sadness of a newspaper police rounds room, the remembered folk of a Greek village.

Martin Johnston has wasted none of his early experiences that he distils here.