



HOT OFF THE PRESS

Catherine Chidgey has once again won the prestigious Jann Medlicott Acorn Prize, this time for her brilliant “classic in the making” novel *The Axeman’s Carnival*. Now her thrilling new psychodrama looks set to grab more awards and is launching in the UK as Book of the Month. This excerpt from *Pet* gives you a taste of an author who is smoking hot right now.

‘Today, people,’ said Mrs Price – she called us people instead of children, which made us feel responsible – ‘we’re learning about the eye.’

She asked Melissa to hand out a cyclostyled diagram, because Melissa was one of her pets. It

wasn’t fair, but what could anyone do? The tingly smell of the purple ink rose from the newsprint sheets, and we followed with our fingers as Mrs Price pointed out the cornea, the sclera, the retina, the optic nerve, and then we wrote the names in our neatest handwriting and

added arrows to show the right spots on the drawings that didn’t look much like eyes. I forced myself to concentrate; I was still groggy from the seizure.

‘Of course,’ said Mrs Price, as if she knew what we were thinking, ‘the best way to learn is to see the thing for ourselves, isn’t it?’

She smiled her special smile and walked to the back of the classroom, and there on the activity tables, hidden under a cloth so as not to ruin the surprise, were rows of scissors and scalpels and sharp little tools like the dental nurse used in our mouths. She took the lid off an ice-cream container, and Karl Parai said, ‘Strawberry ripple!’ in his deep new voice that had arrived over summer, but Mrs Price laughed and said no, definitely not strawberry ripple, and inside the container sat a pile of eyes. Cows’ eyes. Enough for one between two.

‘Mr Parry was kind enough to supply these,’ she said, ‘so make sure you thank him next time you’re in his shop.’

Leanne Parry beamed; she had kept the surprise to herself, the secret, and now Mrs Price was singling her out for it. Mr Parry was the local butcher who gave every child a slice of luncheon sausage whenever they went with their parents to buy their meat. ‘You look like you could do with some fattening up,’ he’d say, winking as he weighed chops or sharpened his big silver knife. He gave out pencils sometimes, too: metallic green, with Parry’s Meats High Street running down the side, but I’d never used my one – never even sharpened it – because it was too nice. Then I’d lost it.

‘All right, people, find a partner,’ said Mrs Price, and Amy grabbed my hand and held on tight, too tight.

‘I don’t think I want to do this,’ she whispered, but already Mrs Price was handing out the eyes with a soup spoon and the pairs of children were taking their places at the dissecting trays. I had the feeling I had seen this moment before: the trays, the rows of glittering tools. The dead eyes looking in all directions. My own hand reaching for something sharp.

Strange thoughts often followed a seizure; I tried to blink them away.

'First of all,' said Mrs Price, 'let's trim off what we don't need – all the scraggy bits from around the edges, yes? Use your scissors to snip them free, or your scalpel. These are the remains of the eyelid, and the muscles that move the eye.'

I offered the scissors to Amy, but she shook her head.

'Don't be afraid to handle it firmly,' said Mrs Price, walking around the tables. 'You'd be surprised how tough it is. Good, Melissa. Good, Leanne.' She rested a hand on Leanne's shoulder and watched as she neatly removed the trailing pieces of flesh.

Picking up our specimen, I began to cut. I still felt so heavy in my limbs.

'Careful to leave the optic nerve,' said Mrs Price. 'The little stump at the back. Your cow can't see without it.'

The eye was slippery under my fingers, like the grapes Amy and I peeled when we played Slaves. I thought I could make out some eyelashes. I pushed the scraps to the edge of the tray.

'Now, look at the cornea. Can everyone find the cornea? You'll see that it's cloudy blue – this is what happens in death. In life it's clear, like a plastic bag filled with water, to let the light through.'

'Death?' said Amy. 'Death?' She pushed her thick black plait over her shoulder as if it might touch something dreadful.

'Duh,' said Karl, and he waggled his cow's eye at her and made a mooing sound.

Mrs Price showed us how to snip right around the eyeball to cut it in half, though we mustn't push the scissors in too deep because that would damage the lens. I had worried I might feel disgusted, might even have another seizure, but it was no different from chopping up chicken for a casserole or touching the muscular foot of a snail, and the jelly inside the eye no worse than egg white. And how easily it all came apart, one hemisphere detaching from the other, a severed world. Mrs Price pointed out the blind spot, where

the optic nerve attached to the back of the eye and there were no light receptors. We couldn't see anything at that point, she said, but our brains filled in the gaps for us without our even noticing, and wasn't that amazing? Wasn't God amazing?

Amy was leaning in now, poking the lens with the probe.

'Make sure you're taking note of all this, people,' said Mrs Price. 'Make sure you're remembering. It's important.'

Next we cut out the cornea and studied the pupil, which she told us meant orphan – a child looked after by an adult, taught by an adult – but it also meant little doll, because of the tiny reflections of ourselves we saw in another person's eyes. I checked: and yes, there I was in Amy's pupils, a shadow girl caught in the curve of black.

'Do you see that the pupil is just a hole?' said Mrs Price. 'We think it's something solid, that black dot, don't we, but in reality there's nothing there.'

Next to me Melissa had turned pale, all the blood gone from her lips and cheeks. When she started to gag I leapt away, and the vomit just missed my foot. The puddle glistened on the floorboards between us, full of bad and bitter things.

'Oh sweetheart,' said Mrs Price. 'Come away. Come and sit down.' She led Melissa to the front of the classroom and settled her in the story chair, brought her a glass of water.

'I'm really sorry,' said Melissa. 'Nonsense,' said Mrs Price, stroking her hair. 'God made some of us more sensitive than others, and that's a beautiful thing – yes? Never apologise for it.'

Melissa nodded, her face as white and lovely as a saint's, while the rest of us watched and wished we were sitting in the story chair, and that Mrs Price was stroking our hair and talking to us in her kind and quiet voice, and if only we'd thought to vomit.

'Hey Justine,' whispered Karl, and when I turned to him he lunged for my chest, shoved his hand inside my blouse. Something slithered

down my skin, a cool wet mass that came to rest at the waistband of my tunic. I knew he wanted me to scream.

'Is that a cow's eye?' I said.

He was laughing too hard to answer.

I untucked my blouse and the thing plopped to the floor like some kind of clot, some awful part of me expelled from my body.

'You're such a moron, Karl,' said Amy, but I didn't think she meant it, because we had both agreed he looked like a Māori John Travolta, and we'd written his name in biro on our shoulders and thighs where nobody could see. I tucked myself in again and returned to my work, picking up my probe and starting to ease the retina away from the blind spot behind it.

'All right, people, I need a volunteer,' said Mrs Price. 'Who's going to clean this up for us?' She waved at the vomit.

No one raised their hand.

'You know we're a team,' she said. 'A family. We help one another.'

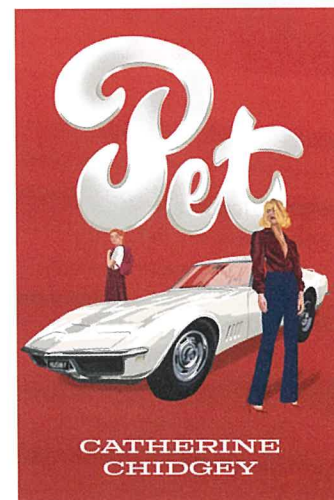
Silence.

'Do I need to choose someone myself?'

'I'll do it,' said a voice next to me.

And there was the smile we all lived for, spilling across Mrs Price's beautiful face.

'Amy! Thank you, my darling. Go and see Mr Armstrong for a cloth and bucket.' ■



Pet by Catherine Chidgey, Te Herenga Waka University Press, published 8 June, \$50 HB, \$38 PB.