

Fresh as a slice of chilled watermelon

THIS quirky novel grabs you by the ticklish spots and paints you with smiles. *Strange Nervous Laughter* proclaims itself to be "a book about love" but it is actually a web of three interlocking love stories.

It is not at all contrived, deeply serious nor psychologically probing. But it also isn't just froth. It is magical and sparkly, and truly original.

Set in the sauna-like heat of muggy summertime Durban, Bridget McNulty spins a beautiful tale around six odd-bods, and her floating and simple language ensnares the reader in a warm spell.

The story is narrated by six people, each of whom is symbolised by an emblem. Beth, whose emblem is a heart, is a cashier in the Handy Green Grocers and is desperate to fall in love. She makes a wedding scrapbook after only a few dates with Pravesh, who is

STRANGE NERVOUS LAUGHTER

Bridget McNulty
Oshun Books

symbolised by a tiny coffin. He is an undertaker who can sense death, not only in humans but also in "dead animals... dead silences, dead ... relationships, dead air, deadbeats, deadlines and death wishes..."

These are just two of McNulty's strangely addictive characters. Mdu, Aisha, Harry and Meryl are equally dysfunctional but oddly warm and familiar. They rummage their ways through their idiosyncratic lives, talking to whales, daydreaming, eating only green food, or scorning the world with laser beams of cynicism. Against all odds they pair up and fall in love - sometimes into cozy, comfortable relationships and other times,

into awkward, teetering ones.

The true charm of *Strange Nervous Laughter* is in its magical, winding words and ideas. Beth has a "condition" she has lived with since birth. When she is happy she floats, "[not] high up in the air...but definitely with her feet above the ground". Whenever she is in a relationship she follows this "rainbow-like arc, with no pot of gold at the end" because, when it ends, she comes "back to earth with a thud".

McNulty has had fun with her characters and her writing and her pleasure melts through to the reader. She describes Meryl's voice as "smooth and cold and poisonous as mercury" but can flash to a love scene which is scented with sweet honeysuckle. Her book is as fresh as a slice of chilled watermelon and you will want to pass it on.

- Phil Murray