

NOVEL FOCUSES ON LIFE AS AN EXPAT SPOUSE

‘When in Vanuatu’ follows a woman struggling to become pregnant

Even life in a tropical paradise has its ups and downs. Author Nicki Chen, of Edmonds, Washington, addresses pain and sunshine in her new novel, “When in Vanuatu.”

Drawing on two decades of experience as an expat wife who lived in the Philippines and the South Pacific, Chen recreates that world of privilege, globalism and culture clash for the novel’s story of a woman dealing with fertility issues as her husband pursues his dream job in international aid.

Diana is in her mid-30s. She gave up her accounting job in Seattle to follow Jay to Manila with the expectation that they would begin their family and she would devote her time to raising their children. But after years of trying, she has not gotten pregnant. Her obstetrician advises her to do a better job of relaxing.

This is beyond frustrating — it’s infu-

riating. Diana doesn’t have the pressures of a job and, in the expected expat fashion, she already has a live-in maid. What more can she possibly do to relax?

Perhaps it has something to do with her surroundings. It is the late 1980s, the Philippines emerged from Ferdinand Marcos’ brutal kleptocracy. Now, the new president, Cory Aquino, is dealing with multiple coup attempts. Manila is frequently wracked by violence. Adding to the tension are frequent power blackouts that occur in the capital city.

Diana learns that one of her friends, also an expat wife, will be leaving soon because her husband’s job is being relocated to the sleepy island nation of Vanuatu. Diana gets the idea that maybe Jay can get a transfer too.

She becomes single-minded in advocating for this — but when Jay eventually acquiesces and Diana gets her wish, there are still the stressful details of packing up, finding new housing and settling into new routines in a very different setting.

So when does the relaxation begin?

Chen ably captures the complicated range of emotions that accompany infertility — humiliation, frustration and even devastation. And while each partner in the relationship may experience infertility differently, the necessarily assiduous atten-

This week’s book

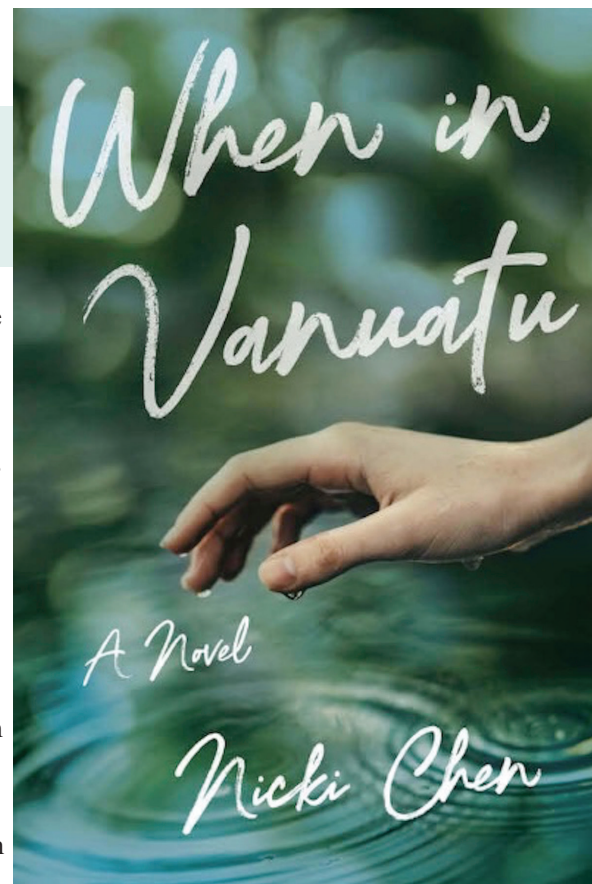
‘When in Vanuatu’ by Nicki Chen
She Writes Press — 316 pages —

tion to both the calendar and the mechanics of lovemaking do tend to take a toll.

Chen recreates in pungent detail the settings that Diana and Jay navigate, from Manila’s clogged city streets to the pristine beaches of Vanuatu. She introduces readers to exotic foods, tropical flowers and the expat community’s go-to hangouts.

However, it may be disconcerting how nonchalantly the “servant class” is regarded, with the main characters only occasionally contemplating what their live-in maid might be feeling or thinking. This is a foreign concept that could have used more exploration.

While “When in Vanuatu” occurs in some fascinating locations and includes some harrowing incidents, this novel’s focus clearly is on Diana’s more personal, internal journey.



The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at baralmmcm@gmail.com.

The Franklin Apartments



Providing Elegance & Efficiency to
Downtown Astoria for Over 100 Years

1432 Franklin Avenue
Community Property Management



503-325-5678

Continued from Page 10

be hosting two talented glass artists: Beth Anders, who creates fused glass, and Margaret Joyce Van Duine, whose focus is reverse-painted glass.

In June, Kerstin Mckee Art will bring a pottery collection. The gallery will host Erika Laureano Design, a high-end jeweler from North Bend, for a trunk show over Fourth of July weekend.

Another goal of Salemann’s, as she continues to work in property management as a side business, is to purchase real estate for affordable housing for retail, hospitality and restaurant employees. In a sense, it would be her way of giving back to the community.

“That would really be the icing on the cake,” Salemann said.



Salemann, left, and gallery manager Julie Lord-Jessum stand outside Miska Studio Gallery.

Katherine Lacaze