

Enter a world of temptation

Myth and reality collide as three lost souls try to come to terms with change.

FICTION

The Sea Bed

By Marele Day

Allen & Unwin, 304pp, \$27.99

Reviewed by Claire Scobie

THE opening of *The Sea Bed* is like a contemplative journey into a Hokusai painting. A young Buddhist monk leaves his mountain retreat and embarks on a journey to scatter the ashes of his beloved master, Soshin. The monk, Yugen, is given no guidance on where to go. Once outside the cloistered walls of his monastery he becomes distracted. From inner stillness, Yugen is plunged into chaos.

Better known for crime fiction and the Claudia Valentine mystery series, Marele Day is also the award-winning author of *Lambs of God* (1997) and *Mrs Cook* (2002). Her latest work draws on some of the themes from *Lambs of God*, about three nuns living in seclusion whose lives are disrupted by the arrival of a priest and the perennial questions of spiritual struggle within a modern

context. But this novel is set in Japan and intersecting the monk's story are two other main characters, Chicken and Lilli. These two sisters come from a fishing village and a tradition of abalone divers – or sea women.

Faced with the extinction of a way of life, Chicken now does diving demonstrations at Oceanworld. Her mother has turned the ancestral home into a bed-and-breakfast, much to the disapproval of Chicken's grandmother. It is only Pearlie, the likeable and irascible grandmother in pyjamas, who is a link to the old world – “the glory days”. She still lives in a beach shack, a place “inhabited by the unseen presences of the past”.

Then there is Lilli, who has abandoned the island and her family for the city. She works as a travel agent and occasionally sleeps with men for cash in hotels that charge by the hour. Despite Chicken's requests to pay a visit, Lilli is unable to confront her painful past. Haunted by family secrets and the folk story of the sea princess, Lilli is “always passing through, never attached”.

This meditation on desire and longing, family and the power of myth brings together the



Deep with meaning ... Marele Day's prose is awash with images of the sea.

Photo: Narelle Autio

characters in surprising ways. On his unpredictable quest, awash with temptations, the monk's mind is “wandering from his task”. Yugen finds himself at Oceanworld and is captivated by a “sea-woman demonstration” where, dressed all in white with a hat and gloves, Chicken is feeding fish in an aquarium. In his mind's eye he sees “women swimming naked” and in atonement begs his master for forgiveness.

While the monk is forgetting his vows, Lilli is steeling herself to return to the island for the annual festival. Originally meant to honour the gods and to give thanks to the sea, the festival was

now “just a re-enactment” and “entertainment for the tourists”.

Although not a crime novel, *The Sea Bed* has plenty of moments of suspense: clues are given, then washed away; links are drawn, then dissolve. The prose is imbued with the sea: shifting fronds of seaweed, murky depths and sudden moments of hypnotic perfection. Occasionally, though, a little anchoring would help.

At times it is like fathoming a Japanese woodblock print where only the outlines are etched. Based on the author's time in Japan researching Japanese diving women, she is at her best when she evokes the paradoxes of

our lives. Does Yugen take the escalator or the stairs – “when both seemed of equal value, when both led to the same destination”.

This unique novel with its intriguing characters has a wonderful ending. As the strands are drawn together on to one canvas, there is an uncanny sense of ancestral healing between past and present that gives the book a satisfying arc.

For Day, it was not always an easy journey. At this month's launch of *The Sea Bed* at the Byron Bay Writers' Festival, she admitted in *The Byron Shire Echo* that writing it took four years: “It was like giving birth to an elephant.”