

# Making waves

by HAZEL PHILLIPS



Tracy Farr's debut novel pulls in an odd instrument, the theremin, as a motif. An electronic instrument created in the 1920s, the theremin

produces music without being touched by the player; you'd be excused for furiously googling it to verify its existence. It's possibly best known for its use in the theme tune for *Midsomer Murders*.

The novel is essentially a fictional biography of Dame Lena Gaunt, described as "musician, octogenarian, junkie". It takes the reader from Malacca to Perth, to Sydney, Wellington and Dunedin, and later to New York and London. She's well-travelled is our Lena.

Gaunt learns the piano at a boarding school in Perth. She is a prodigy, although nobody ever lets on: "Vanity was almost as dangerous as talent."

Later, she is introduced to the theremin, gaining notoriety for mastering the difficult apparatus.

The story is told in two threads: the first is in the present, where film-maker Maureen "Mo" Patterson is chasing Lena to hand over her life's story for a documentary; the second follows Lena as she narrates her life's events.

The second thread features a series of vignettes related in rich language. "We moved ... our bodies slick and curving, slipping upon and into one another, until we erupted from the eiderdowns," Farr writes of Lena's affair with painter Trix.

The plot includes something of a mystery, with early foreshadowing in the present-day thread, but although it makes for compelling reading, it falls short of being utterly gripping.

**THE LIFE AND LOVES OF LENA GAUNT,** by Tracy Farr (Fremantle Press, \$35).

