IT comes as no surprise to learn that Melbourne writer Pierz Newton-John, author of the appropriately titled Fault Lines, a debut collection of short stories, was once a psychotherapist.

As an observer of the human condition he is compassionate, curious and insightful: these beautifully written stories about lives in trauma and transition might well have come straight from the couch.

Newton-John seems particularly occupied with the question of what it means to be male. There are stories here about men on the make, men suffering the disappointment of broken dreams, men passionately loving their children, small boys being cruel to other small boys, teenage boys and violence, teenage boys and sex, teenage boys and love.

There is tenderness, there is humour and there is barely contained rage. There is a lot of self-medication.

There is also a fantastically memorable scene in which a full-sized crocodile is freed from a glass tank in a suburban back yard in Melbourne, a classic sting-in-the-tail at the end of a remarkable piece of short writing. In this story, Croc, Newton-John executes an act of great empathy, writing from the point of view of a runaway girl (it's not an entirely male-oriented collection) whose rebellion takes her to a frightening place. The quiet terror of a girl-woman being so far in over her head is perfectly, heartbreakingly captured.

Elsewhere is the crushing banality of suburban life, students going off the rails, teenagers alienated from their families, relationships going wrong.

Only one story is a surprise in this landscape of Australian suburban stories: Comrade Vasili Goes to War encapsulates the absurd futility of war on the border between the fictional Ozakhstan and Uzbekistan, and the soldiers who command the outposts there.

As with the best short stories, indelible images are left on the brain: a teenage boy, convinced he is dying from melanoma, falls crying to the bathroom floor in the arms of a girl he barely knows; two Jewish boys and a Alsatian defend themselves against a racial attack; a little boy who loves birds is forced to kill a baby magpie; a father takes his young son on a holiday to break the news of divorce.

Newton-John treads along these fault lines like a guide, showing us the points where one may fall through the cracks. He does so with a professional listener's ear for dialogue and with a big heart.

If nobody knows what goes on behind closed doors in suburbia, then in this collection of stories Newton-John unflinchingly throws the doors open. The scenes he finds and describes are not always pretty, but they are startlingly illuminated by a promising new talent in Australian literature.