

## Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Contemporary New Zealand Short Stories*

©Paula Morris, 2009

It's twenty years since the last *Penguin Book of Contemporary New Zealand Short Stories* was published, and my mandate with this volume was similarly defined – that is, to investigate a decade's worth of short fiction, not simply to gather new pieces from a list of usual suspects, or to compile an historical review of the short story in New Zealand.

The scope of this book was set at 1999–2008, though its actual range is larger than that. Stories published in collections in 1999 were eligible for consideration, even if they'd first appeared in a journal or magazine earlier in the 90s – like C. K. Stead's 'Race, Class, Gender: A Post-Colonial Yarn,' first published in *Metro* in 1995. And some of the stories chosen – those by Anna Taylor and Kirsty Gunn, among others – had not yet appeared in print, though they may turn up in collections within the next year or two, stretching the reach of this book into yet another decade.

I wanted to read as widely as possible: story collections, literary journals, anthologies, self-published work, new stories. I would not include people simply because they were important names in New Zealand literature, especially if they were really novelists only posing occasionally, and not always convincingly, as short-story writers. A number of people – publishers, editors, creative writing teachers, university lecturers, awards judges, writing group leaders, other authors – alerted me to new names, or nudged me about familiar names I knew only as novelists. It didn't matter if the writer was living overseas, or publishing elsewhere, or setting his or her work in another country; it didn't matter whether they were famous or obscure. The only active New Zealand short-story writer I excluded from the deliberations was myself.

I was interested in exploring many of the currents in the short fiction of the past decade, but had no particular thesis in mind to test, no agenda or school to promote, no determination to separate contemporary New Zealand fiction into modern-day Mansfields and sons of Sargeson – especially as Lorrie Moore, Alice Munro and George Saunders, among others, may be more influential with the current generation of writers. There was no particular version of New Zealand I wished to construct or dismantle, which was just as well: we may get glimpses of a society through its short fiction, but few short stories set out to give us a panoramic social overview, and fiction writers are not government workers, commissioned with compiling accurate, fact-finding reports.

The stories chosen would reflect the diversity of contemporary New Zealand, I hoped, but it quickly became apparent that the quality of a story – that small matter of the verve and fluency of the writing, of a given story's success on its own terms – was more important to me than the ethnicity, gender, social background, or regional affiliation of its author. This was not to be a sociological survey, careful to ensure every group was represented in some fair and proportional way. This means some absences: no writer of Indian or Chinese descent, for example, although those communities are an essential facet of contemporary multicultural New Zealand; and Samoa is (perhaps unsurprisingly) the dominant Pacific presence here – though the number of stories I read by writers of the Pacific diaspora, both published and unpublished, suggests a new wave of authors poised to take seats at the moveable feast of our national literature.

All the writers here speak of New Zealand, I think, in direct and indirect ways, even the ones who set their work elsewhere – for the expatriate experience and point of view, like the immigrant or indigenous experience, continues to inform our culture. When writing fiction, says the Irish novelist and master short-story writer William Trevor, ‘you cannot escape the person you are ... All fiction has its autobiographical roots in the sense that as a person you are your character’s litmus paper, their single link with reality.’ Born Irish, he writes, ‘I observe the world through Irish sensibilities, take for granted an Irish way of doing things, am marked by small idiosyncrasies of behaviour and accent, and am reminded of familiarities of early environment when I’m separated from them.’

The difficult task for a writer, Trevor contends, is separating the person and the writer, for the writer must be less partisan, given to scrutiny rather than sentiment. The writer ‘has to stand back – so far that he finds himself beyond the pale, outside the society he comments upon in order to get a better view of it.’ Trevor – a Protestant born into ‘de Valera’s new Catholic Ireland’ – considers himself particularly lucky as a writer, because his birth ‘actually placed me on the edge of things.’ On the edge of things: that’s the balancing act, our advantage, here in New Zealand as well.

Aliens falling to earth from the Planet Zog might, after reading these stories, make certain deductions about contemporary New Zealand. They might conclude that a Maori may live in very humble conditions on the coast (Grace), or in one of the most expensive suburbs of our largest city (Ihimaera); that rather than the pastoral idyll promoted overseas, New Zealand, too, is one of the dark places of the earth (Slaughter, Tawhai, Ihimaera); that our businesses happily employ arrogant managers (Randerson) and officious consultants (Smither); that our university graduates are often confused and under-employed (Laing, Eade); that many of our citizens like to travel (Grimshaw, Farrell, Stead, Wilkins); that dwelling among us are the unhappily married (Anderson, Novitz), and the smugly suburban (Jones); that our houses may be infested with rodents (Brandt, Nixon) and the waiting times in our hospital A&Es may be long (Sarkies); and that we like sport (Geary, Orr, Wilkins). Alert the media!

Of course, an anthology like this gathers individual stories, not the whole story and, like any anthology, it reflects the taste and enthusiasms of its editor. At some point, early in my reading, I became conscious of each selected story adding to the conversation, rather than just repeating someone else. And a story had to grab me – move, provoke, excite, entertain, or challenge me, stay with me in some way – if it was to be included. ‘Stories conspire not to be forgotten,’ says American writer and editor Ben Marcus, suggesting that they ‘scheme to outlast their moment.’ The stories I kept returning to were the most successful schemers, perhaps. They insinuated themselves, and would not go away.

\*

So was the past decade a golden age or wilderness years for short fiction in New Zealand? It could be seen as a period of literary investment and opportunity. In 1998 the country had a National government; by the end of 2008, National had returned to power again. But in between lay nine years of Helen Clark’s Labour government, in which the Prime Minister herself took on the arts, culture and heritage ministerial portfolio, quickly implementing a cultural recovery package of tens of millions of dollars.

A merger of our two national book awards had already taken place in the mid-90s, but other lucrative prizes were created, including ones for emerging writers (the Prize in

Modern Letters in 2002, the Arts Foundation New Generation Awards in 2006), and for established writers (the Arts Foundation Laureate Awards in 2000, and the Prime Minister's Awards for Literary Achievement in 2003). New fellowships were offered – to Berlin in 2000, and in numerous locations around New Zealand. The Auckland Writers Festival, now the nation's largest, was founded by writers Peter Wells and Stephanie Johnson in 1999, following in the footsteps of Wellington and Christchurch.

The decade also saw the establishment of various postgraduate degree courses in creative writing. Victoria University had led the way in 1997 by adding an MA course to Bill Manhire's popular undergraduate course offerings in creating writing. Victoria was followed by the University of Auckland, under the direction of Witi Ihimaera, in 2005 and the University of Canterbury – which currently offers New Zealand's only MFA course – in 2006. The Aoraki Polytechnic course established by Owen Marshall moved in 2002 from Timaru to a larger centre, Dunedin, when Marshall began offering a master class in fiction at Canterbury. In 2000, with the support of American 'literary activist' Glenn Schaeffer, Victoria became the headquarters of the International Institute of Modern Letters, with links to creative writing centres in the US; its ten-person MA class soon developed into three separate courses in fiction, poetry and screenwriting. And, perhaps inspired by the Victoria programme's grand new name, AUT launched a masters' programme at its own Centre for Modern Writing, run by John Cranna, in 2008.

A number of literary journals endured, including *Landfall*, established at Otago University in Dunedin in 1947; *Sport*, a journal with close ties to the creative writing programme at Victoria University in Wellington, launched in 1988; and *Takabe* (1989), founded by a Christchurch-based collective; these titles have been joined by more recent ventures like *JAAM*, (1995), *Glottis* (1998), *Bravado* (2003), and the Victoria-sponsored e-zine *Turbine* (2001), where many emerging writers get their start. And Radio New Zealand, our single largest purchaser of short fiction, continues to buy around eighty stories a year, as well as act as a mentor. Two of the writers included here, Barbara Anderson and Justin Eade, got their start writing for the radio.

Long-standing short story contests like the high-profile, fifty-year-old BNZ Katherine Mansfield Awards, and the *Sunday Star-Times* Short Story Competition, which began in 1984, attracted an increasingly vast number of entries each year. In 2006, New Zealand Book Month was launched, introducing a literary contest voted on by the public and a judging panel of 'industry and celebrity experts.' The winning entries – poetry, fiction, non-fiction – are published in bargain-price sampler called *The Six Pack*, vaunted by the Book Month team as its flagship national promotion.

So far, so good – perhaps. Government support for the arts is not without implications, or complications: at times, the defining and exporting of something called the 'New Zealand identity' has seemed more desirable than a flourishing local creative scene, diverse and disparate and contradictory. (Until recently, Creative New Zealand demanded that applicants for writing grants account for the 'project's potential to reference New Zealand culture.') The proliferation of festivals and literary journals means stretching those Creative New Zealand resources increasingly thin. All the journals cited above, including *Landfall* and *Sport*, with their university-press affiliations, are financially supported by – and some largely dependent on – Creative New Zealand; many publishers apply for grants to subsidize the production of local books. So relied-upon is this government investment, that it seems as though without it our literary culture might collapse.

For individual writers, however, whether this decade of government cheerleading – and funding – has done more than enhance the lives of a few is hard to assess: are more of us encouraged to pick up our pens, more encouraged to persist? Are grant-giving agencies and foundations too focused on bestowing large cheques on the new and untried, and honouring the older and most established, while the actual career support most active, publishing writers need (including promotion at home and active representation in overseas markets) is neglected? Does the quality of work improve when more financial incentives, not to mention literary awards, are available? Should writers be more accountable when they're in possession of large sums of taxpayer's money? Has our literary culture been enriched in some meaningful, ongoing – and not just literal – way, or are its constituents now just so many beneficiaries, feeling entitled and/or aggrieved, competing for the attention of bureaucrats, committee members, and judging panels?

The siren call of contests, with their promise of media attention and publication, is not surprising. In a large country like the US, hundreds of small literary journals proliferate, some admittedly short-lived, and many produced by universities with a graduate creative writing programme: there's an obvious limit to this kind of growth in New Zealand.

But when contests dominate, so do their artistic limits. More 'difficult' work will never triumph; the genre-blurring prose-poem-like story will not meet approval. Writers will try to write for the contest, especially in competitions where the judge and his or her stylistic preferences are known, and they will shape their stories to meet word counts. For some time, I've been struck by the slightness of many contemporary New Zealand short stories, arguing that too many are stunted by the dictates of contests, not to mention Radio New Zealand guidelines: our biggest buyer of short fiction discourages submissions longer than 1900 words. Mainstream magazines like the *Listener* that occasionally admit short fiction – into a slow-news summer issue – have similarly draconian word-count demands. A budding Alice Munro would find it hard to place her work here.

Of course, New Zealand writers are not confined to New Zealand outlets: nationality doesn't bar us from the pages of *Stand* or the *Paris Review*, or any number of e-zines based elsewhere. But relying on overseas editors, publishers and audiences will not foster a healthy local literary scene, and may demand contortions of language, style, and subject matter.

*The Six Pack* takes a more expansive view of story length, but I'm no fan of New Zealand Book Month's short-sighted, simplistic marketing plan: spend a large amount of money on in-store and media visibility for a one-off lit-journal, rather than promote a diverse range of fine books already published by New Zealand writers. (Perhaps the word 'book' in New Zealand Book Month is intended to be singular.) Of course, in an anthology that aims to sample a decade, prejudices must be set aside: contests brought a number of these stories to light: the stories by Tracey Slaughter and David Geary first appeared in *The Six Pack*, and Julian Novitz's story won the 2008 BNZ Katherine Mansfield Contest.

The increase in the number of university programs can be good news for short fiction, which better suits the workshop format than novels-in-progress. C. Michael Curtis, fabled fiction editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, notes that in the past thirty years, as MFA programmes in the US multiplied, 'the short story became the currency of classroom discussion and interest, and more and more writers began to write them and send them

in.’ But workshop-bred fiction can have a hot-house feel, not sturdy enough for other less-cloistered environments. The judges at the 2002 Montana Awards described their choice for the fiction award, *Stonedogs* by Craig Marriner, as the ‘antithesis of the university novel’ – that is, some technically proficient but bloodless product of a graduate course, all craft and no heart. Doubtless some New Zealanders, wary of the encroachment of the academy, share the view of the American writer Stephen King: too much short fiction, he recently complained, appears to be ‘written for editors and teachers rather than for readers.’

I have a certain sympathy for this point of view, but banishing the university-affiliated would have resulted in a very skimpy anthology. Barbara Anderson, William Brandt, Eleanor Catton, Kate Duignan, David Geary, Kirsty Gunn, Julian Novitz, Sue Orr, Emily Perkins, Jo Randerson, and Anna Taylor all took creative writing classes at Victoria, albeit over the space of twenty-five years; Damien Wilkins teaches there. Vincent O’Sullivan, C. K. Stead and Selina Tusitala Marsh have all worked in university English departments; Perkins, Fiona Kidman, Owen Marshall, and Witi Ihimaera (who taught Tracey Slaughter) run, or have been associated with, various creative writing programmes.

Of course, I’m a graduate of two myself – at Victoria and the University of Iowa – and currently teach at a university in the US, so I’m a well-embedded reporter, only reliable to those who don’t suspect my agenda. I look to the story rather than its provenance but, some would argue, it’s too late: the academy has already formed my taste.

To return to Curtis’s observations on the writing workshop promoting the creation, circulation and awareness of short fiction, I wonder if this is true of New Zealand, where many fiction writers in creative writing programmes devote their time to work on a novel (for publishers everywhere seem adamant that the reading public prefers novels to short story collections). It could be argued that none of our active literary journals have the cultural cachet or prominence of, say, *Granta*, and that there’s no single place where publication confers tremendous prestige, like the *New Yorker*: winning a competition brings much more media attention. *Sport* recently reduced publication to once a year. *Landfall* has managed without an editor for several years, each issue overseen by a guest or two. It’s hard to imagine any journal editor today having the vision and chutzpah of the late Robin Dudding, who kept the groundbreaking journal *Islands* in print – on and off – for fifteen years in the 70s and 80s, and devoted one entire issue to a novella. (That work, *Dick Seddon’s Great Dive* by Ian Wedde, won the New Zealand Book Award in 1977.)

True, this issue of finding an audience is not peculiar to New Zealand. The UK, a much larger market than our own, is hardly brimming with outlets for writers of literary short fiction. In 2005, the *Atlantic Monthly*, founded in 1857 and publisher of short stories by Twain, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, among many others, announced that fiction would only appear once a year in a special summer issue, sold separately at the newsstand. Without high-profile venues, Stephen King predicts, the audience will continue to wane. ‘Once, in the days of the old *Saturday Evening Post*, short fiction was a stadium act; now it can barely fill a coffeehouse.’

Indeed, the subscription base for many literary journals, here and abroad, is smaller than the increasingly large number of hopeful contributors. For two years, when I was a graduate student in the US, I read short-fiction submissions for the *Iowa Review*; more

recently I served as guest editor for an issue of *Landfall*. In both instances, I was struck by the number of submissions that suggested the author had never picked up a copy of the journal to which he or she was submitting, and had no idea of its audience or positioning, no notion of the quality of work usually published in its pages. Like our American counterparts, apparently, we like to write short stories more than we want to read them.

\*

Many of these stories belong to characters Owen Marshall's protagonist describes as 'lesser professionals' – and small-time farmers, aspiring artists, factory workers, plumbers and electricians, indolent recent graduates, the unemployed – reflecting, perhaps, a certain self-deprecation in our national character. In the stories assembled here, the intrusions of multi-national pop culture – from Barbie to Playstation, via Lucky Strikes and *A Clockwork Orange* – rub shoulders with the resolutely local, like muttonbirds and the coastal crib, an iefaikagi worn by an office worker and a taiaha (really a hockey stick) brandished by a school boy, the obsession with the decile ranking of a school.

Social realism dominates this anthology as it continues to dominate the local fiction scene, but that doesn't mean our writers speak with one voice. Elizabeth Smither sounds more British in her tone and rhythms than, say, Julian Novitz, and the artful, deliberate circuits of Damien Wilkins' story suggest a debt to European writers Thomas Bernhard and W. G. Sebald rather than any local forebear. This reflects the range of our gaze, and our freedom to roam.

And we must roam, it seems, if we're not to end up restless, like Barbara Anderson's longing-filled Lorna, or the father in Fiona Kidman's story, who complains about the 'way people look at you because there's nothing else to look at'; or marginalised, like Geary's anti-hero Gary Manawatu, or Patricia Grace's old woman, stranded in the silence of old age. Characters head off in search of new lives – in West Auckland, London, Toronto, up North, and, in the case of Tim Jones's story, in another galaxy. Bernard Steeds' elderly diver floats through time and 'past the jagged pieces of a torn-up ticket to London, past a haul of rusting Holdens carrying families towards the city, past some shattered bones and flecks of soil from Monte Cassino, past a swagman on a dusty road.' Trips to the old country, urban drift, distant wars, adventuring in a new land: these are all the New Zealand experience, even now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

And the short story, a form New Zealand writers have claimed and returned to, persists, reinvigorated by the attention of a new generation of writers – Charlotte Grimshaw, Alice Tawhai, Carl Nixon, Anna Taylor. The story is a taut, sinewy form: it spurns the baggy expanse of novels, and demands a more focused lens, a pared-down cast, a reduced time-frame, a consistent mood. Truman Capote called it 'the most difficult and disciplining form of prose writing,' requiring ruthless precision. All fiction requires its author to select and omit in the process of shaping a narrative, but short fiction is especially exclusionary. A story, sleek and swift, turns on the telling moment, the crucial encounter. The sharpest of slivers, it can be bold, jolting us into recognition, or insinuating, hinting at something just beyond reach. Unlike a novel, it may be written – and read – in one white-hot sitting. Working on a novel, says Lorrie Moore, is labour, but 'a story can be like a mad, lovely visitor, with whom you spend a rather exciting weekend.'

So maybe this, rather than the number of literary journals or contests, is the key to the ongoing attachment of our writers to the short-story form; maybe the framers of New Zealand's 'adventure tourism' marketing campaigns understand more of the national psyche than we realized. We'll keep working at novels, diligently slogging away to build the sturdy walls of Our National Literature, but secretly, we long for the thrill of the story, and we'll turn to them, eager and ready, whenever someone gives us an excuse.