

From the collection



Best known as a writer, Greg O'Brien was born into an Irish Catholic family in Matamata and trained as a journalist in Auckland before becoming a cadet reporter for the *Northland Times* in the late 1970s.

He returned to study Art History and English as part of a BA at The University of Auckland, and published his first illustrations (done to accompany "Paris", a poem by C.K. Stead and published by Auckland University Press) in 1984. After graduation that year, he published his own poems in literary journals in Australia, including *Meanjin* and *Scripsi*, as well as in *Island*, *Sport and Landfall* in *New Zealand*. These poems were brought together with drawings in a single book, *Location of the Least Person*, which was published by Auckland University Press in 1987,

and led to him winning the Frank Sargeson Fellowship the next year. This award brought with it residency in the flat above the George Fraser Gallery, and occasioned his first meeting with the Hungarian photographer Mari Mahr, who exhibited there in 1988.

This drawing is from his 1989 picaresque novel *Diesel Mystic*, which was also published by Auckland University Press. Using the rapid changes that he was undergoing in his emotional and spiritual life in his late twenties as the stimulus for the creation of imaginary tableaux, O'Brien transformed the descriptions of topography of land surrounding the Kaipara Kumara capital, Dargaville, where he used to live, into a magic realist landscape. The publication of this book preceded his migration south to Wellington where he has lived since 1990.

Like his writing, Greg O'Brien's drawing style is very graphic, with abbreviated symbols and shapes which are shorthand for states of mind. In this image, it is possible to see the white horse of the imagination galloping away from a lone hand, which waves forlornly behind it. Other marks seem like runes, or are reminiscent of the patterns left carved into stones by wayfarers as they made their pilgrimage from France down into the top of Spain. Like a stained glass window in a medieval cathedral, the heavy outlining seems to divide the drawing into sections of land, narrative and sky, with koru-like spirals giving emphasis to the local character of the mark-making. Indeed, the tradition of pages of medieval illuminations which appeared alongside pages of text, to draw out the religious significance of the written word with pictorial and symbolic imagery, are inspirational for him.

Greg O'Brien's book on the work of another

illustrator, Graham Percy (coincidentally, the late husband of Mari Mahr) is shortlisted in the Illustrated Non-Fiction category for the New Zealand Post Book Awards. Ahead of the awards, Greg O'Brien will be reading from the book at Gus Fisher Gallery as part of an all-day event on Saturday 28 July at 12.30pm. The day is styled as BAM: a celebration of books, art and music, and includes performances by international jazz hero Roger Manins from the School of Music. Coffee and pastries will be available at 10am, with readings by poet Karl Stead at 10.30am, and a conversation between photographer Marti Friedlander and her husband Gerrard Friedlander and author Len Bell at 11.30am.

Copies of the Auckland University Press publications by these writers will be available for signature and sale.

In the afternoon, David Veart author of *Digging Up the Past: Archaeology for the Young and Curious* and *First Catch Your Weka: A Story of New Zealand Cooking*, will be available for a "speed date" at 1pm, followed at 1.30pm by a reading by Fiona Farrell, who is shortlisted in the General Non-Fiction category for *The Broken Book*, her book of essays and poems about the Christchurch earthquake and then at 2pm, it's Dame Anne Salmond, whose book *Bligh: William Bligh in the South Seas* is also a General Non-Fiction finalist in this year's book awards. At 2.30pm, Associate Professor Peter Simpson will appear, followed by architectural historian Dr Julia Gatley at 3pm.

For more details, visit the Gus Fisher Gallery website, www.gusfishergallery.auckland.ac.nz

Greg O'Brien, And this also is the Point of Saying Goodbye, 1988, ink on paper