



TELL
YOU
WHAT:

GREAT NEW ZEALAND NONFICTION

2015

Edited by Jolisa Gracewood & Susanna Andrew

On blogs and Twitter, in magazines and journals, at prizegivings and pōwhiri, New Zealanders are talking and writing about the world right now. We've been producing essays and articles, speeches and submissions, tweets and travelogues – nonfiction, in other words. This book collects some of New Zealand's best true stories from the past year or so together into an anthology.

And tell you what: we are swimming in this great nonfiction. This anthology takes us to new places, introduces us to new people, asks new questions and brings us a little closer to the true and the real. We've got mountain climbing and family secrets, cannibal snails and dangerous swims. We've got births. Deaths. Marriages. House auctions. Steve Braunias and Lara Strongman, Eleanor Catton and Tina Makereti. We've got real, live stories, written to last.

Jolisa Gracewood is a writer, editor and reviewer. **Susanna Andrew** thinks and writes about books for *Metro* magazine and is also an organiser of literary events. They live in neighbouring Auckland suburbs and are always swapping book recommendations; you could call them very close readers.

Introduction

The words promise a revelation. ‘Tell you what,’ someone says, on impulse or on reflection – and we’re hooked. This book celebrates that call and response by gathering some of the strongest New Zealand nonfiction from the past few years. A buzz of voices that captures what we were thinking.

We’re surrounded by true stories these days: reportage, memoirs, essays, yarns, meditations, explorations, blog posts, tweets. So much to read, from so many places, so little time. But whether published in magazines, newspapers, small journals, online, or performed aloud to a one-off audience, much of this great storytelling remains ephemeral. It holds you in its spell for a moment, then disappears into the recycling pile or browser cache.

So we’ve summoned a timely selection of these fugitive pieces back into the light, to reveal the strength and variety of nonfiction in New Zealand right now. Together on the page, these writers illuminate a moment in time.

*

Our inspiration was twofold. First, it had never been done before. Why, we found ourselves wondering, doesn’t New Zealand have an equivalent of the *Best American Essays* or *Best Australian Essays* series? Surely we had enough great nonfiction to fill a book on a regular basis?

Second, we love a challenge, and one was posed by *Metro* magazine editor Simon Wilson in July 2013. In a review of a legendary exponent of long-form writing, he asked: ‘Where is our Janet Malcolm?’ His best guess: whoever she was, she was too busy tweeting.

The response – at least, as soon as the review was put up on the magazine’s website – was swift. ‘It’s easy to lament what we do not have in New Zealand,’ responded poet and essayist (and regular tweeter) Ashleigh Young on her blog. ‘Our voices necessarily come from a different place. I think we’re at the beginning of something; we’re witnessing a slow but sure surge of interest in the kinds of nonfiction that do illuminate things around us and *in us*.’

In fact, Wilson had it backwards, replied blogger and translator Giovanni Tiso on his own blog. ‘Poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction thrive on the New Zealand web,’ he argued. ‘These kinds of online writing are consistently bolder, hence more relevant, than what one reads in print.’ In other words, while Janet Malcolm may have a *New Yorker* budget and readership, we have broadband enough, and time. We also have an open, supportive, diverse writing community; and, while our literary marketplace is smaller, most editors are a friend of a friend of a friend or a retweet away.

It’s true that some of our freshest writing is found online – fully half the contents of this collection were originally published on the web. Wherever you find it – in the unruly richness of the blogosphere, on the radio, at a live event, on a magazine rack, or patiently edited into existence before being wrapped around your fish and chips – nonfiction is a vital part of our cultural landscape.

Steve Braunias, himself approaching the status of nonfiction national treasure, staked the claim in a speech in September

2013 that ‘our most accomplished literature is our history and biography’. And yet, perhaps by virtue of its name, which tells you what it isn’t, nonfiction implicitly occupies a second-class status. Braunias pointed out the paradox of novelist Emily Perkins’ blurb on the cover of his award-winning collection *Civilisation*, which compares it to ‘a series of great New Zealand novels bound up in one extraordinary book’. His perfectly reasonable riposte: ‘Will someone say on the cover of Emily’s next book, “It’s like a series of great books of New Zealand nonfiction bound up in one extraordinary novel”?’

Undeniably, great books of New Zealand nonfiction hold their own as the complement to our great novels – they dominate sales, and do well at awards. But shorter pieces still struggle to find the light. Which is why we set out to celebrate the genuine article, sufficient in itself.

Our temporal starting point for this collection was the Canterbury earthquake of September 2010, an event that shook loose our beliefs about what could happen when and where; buildings broke and words came tumbling out. Among other dates we might have chosen, this one felt somehow definitive. And then we began hunting for stories that had stuck with us, that invited re-reading, that begged to be passed on.

Our scope was nonfiction in the broadest sense, perhaps because the word ‘essay’ sounds to New Zealand ears like homework. We threw a wide net: newspapers, magazines, journals, personal blogs, from here and overseas. We asked around for stories that told us something we didn’t know, or upended something we thought we knew.

With Emily Dickinson’s line in mind – ‘Tell all the truth but tell it slant’ – we looked for sincerity with style. We prized a distinctive voice, whether artful or blunt, exploratory or argumentative. We sought writing with a real feeling for prose;

with seriousness, flourish, humour, swagger; with a sense of authority – or of gathering doubt. Writing that catches the reader by surprise is memorable; a writer taking herself by surprise is even more disarming.

Having assembled a longlist, we discovered connections. We found writers pondering the cost of living, both metaphorical and literal: the trade-offs of modern life and dangerous work. We found writers on the move, tracing the travels, ancient and modern, of people, of notions, of practices and objects. We found writers pursuing the idea of home, an old theme with increasingly worldly twists. And we found ‘New Zealand’ all over the map: examined through a telescope and under a microscope, from inside small towns, from distant metropolises and from the highest mountain in the world.

Larger-than-life figures stride through the book, young and old: some well known, others perfectly ordinary and yet extraordinary in their own way. There are public tragedies and private disasters; quests and questions; the odd yarn. And on every page there’s an awareness of the strange, slippery magic of stories – the way we pass them on or hold them close; how much of our history is hidden from view; how much of it is hiding in plain sight.

*Susanna Andrew
Jolisa Gracewood
July 2014*

Ashleigh Young

Small Revolutions, or: On My Bike in London

I.

Yesterday I saw a man striding along Kennington Road in normal civilian clothing, except for the motorcycle helmet he was wearing. Out of curiosity I looked around for his motorbike. No sign of it anywhere. Immediately the man seemed insane. Why is it that as soon as you step away from the thing for which a helmet is required, you look ridiculous? (I'm reminded of my great-uncle James – renowned for falling off a succession of scooters – who is known to have worn his full-face motorcycle helmet when at the movies. I think this was to protect himself from Jaffas launched by kids in the rows behind him, or maybe it was to create a sense of total head-cushioned seclusion. I'll never know. Possible clue: he always held his head at an angle in photos.) I wish it were more socially acceptable to wear a helmet around so that you didn't have to go to the trouble of putting it on and taking it off when you got on/off your bike. (Could it be that this is what Uncle James was protesting?)

Maybe the reason it looks funny to wear a helmet sans vehicle or sportsfield is that it's become kind of unusual to wear a hat, except for a beanie in winter, or if you're in uniform or religious dress or are going to a party. The western world lives

A selection of posts first published on Ashleigh Young's blog *Eyelash Roaming*, 2011 and 2012 (eyelashroaming.com).

in a largely hatless age. So to wear non-contextual headgear reads as some kind of affectation. An extreme example: a friend recalls seeing a woman walking along wearing a phone strapped around her head with a scarf. Like a bandage, wrapped around her head, securing the phone in place.

It's been claimed that forcing people to wear helmets, as is the case in New Zealand where it's the law, will put them off cycling. I guess because they fear looking silly. Helmet wearing has always been controversial among cyclists, and now another study has found that cycle helmets don't offer much protection at all against head injuries.* I haven't made up my mind on this one. The problem is I'm too suggestible. 'Oh, so the no-helmet brigade is anti-capitalist nonsense and if you hit me over the head with a baseball bat, would I rather have a helmet on or off? Well, then . . .' 'Oh, so my helmet could leave me *worse off* than not wearing one in some situations and that helmets are a sign of a failed cycle culture? Well, then . . .' The problem is also instinct: my instinct to wear a helmet is as strong as my instinct to wear underwear. It was embedded in early childhood. I can't see much further beyond the – some would say delusional – sense of safety that a helmet gives me, and the stark vulnerability I feel if I'm not wearing one.

I've noticed something interesting, though: whenever I wear a pink helmet, most drivers give me more space when they overtake. But when I wear my ordinary old sporty black one, I get a lot more punishment passes. The 'punishment pass' is a move that my brother Neil, also a keen London cyclist, describes as being 'strafed by a passing car or

* Jonathon Harker, 'Cycle helmets offer little protection against head injuries', *BikeBiz*, 9 March 2012 (www.bikebiz.com/news/read/cycle-helmets-offer-little-protection-against-head-injuries).

motorbike while on a bike: the sudden onrush of terror as a vehicle slices past mere centimetres from your body, engine revving, driver gesticulating and/or yelling abuse, followed by the sense of outrage, heightened by the fact that you have no recourse in such situations'.* Something about the appearance of the pink helmet seems to invite a more gentle response from the driver. He or she must make a snap judgement about the kind of cyclist you are, and that reaction is: 'Pink: let her live.' This makes me uncomfortable. But not uncomfortable enough to stop wearing the pink helmet as a safety strategy.

2.

Nothing makes me feel less special than riding my bike to work in the mornings. In a spidery mass of commuting cyclists, you're just one more pair of legs to get in the way of someone else's. Because it's spring, the bike lanes have been seething. As soon as blossom fills the trees, bikes fill the bike lanes, bugs fill the cyclists' mouths, and the cyclists sing, or they whistle. I don't like it when people sing as they cycle. Whistling is even worse. There's something self-congratulatory about that jollity. 'Look at me,' the singer/whistler is saying. 'I'm carefree and joyous as I ride my bicycle.' Suddenly everyone else seems conspicuously silent – joyless, even. Even if the singer/whistler noticed other cyclists glaring, it wouldn't upset them. Because they are so joyous. I'm all for joie de vivre, but it's not a competition.

The thing is, I find it difficult to entertain any smuggerly about cycling. I can't congratulate myself on being 'one less car' or 'running on fat, not money'. And I can't wholeheartedly

* Neil Young, 'So That's What That Is', *Wolfie Stories*, 21 January 2012 (<https://wolfiestories.wordpress.com/2012/01/23/so-thats-what-that-is/>).

believe, as the cycle activism group Zero Per Gallon argues, that cycling is like

*eating a super-duper delicious burrito every day with guacamole and cheese and sauce on top at the most fabulous taqueria mankind has ever seen, and discovering that it makes your butt look good AND it makes you feel good AND it's extending your life AND it's saving you money. Oh, yeah – and it's also helping solve huge international crises, like healthcare and global warming and energy.**

Of course cycling is broadly preferable to other forms of transport. On a good day I love cycling and feel proud of it. The benefits for me are mostly anti-social ones: the independence, the avoidance of public transport and the exercise. But it's not a silver bullet. It doesn't make you Captain Planet, or even a fine upstanding citizen.

I wish it did, but you can ride a bike and also be a bastard. You can run red lights at such speed that you almost take out parents with toddlers crossing at the green man. You can cycle 100 miles a day and yet contribute to any number of international crises. I'll concede that cycling saves me money (but even on that front, considering the thefts and repairs and insurance I've paid for, the margins are slim). Whether it makes my bum look any better is still up for debate but evidence tells me let's not talk about it. And my secret cycling shame is this: sometimes, *cycling does not make me feel good*. On a bad day it makes me feel like rubbish. It fills me with ill-feeling for my fellow man.

* Zero Per Gallon, 'About' (<http://www.zeropergallon.com/about/>).

AUCKLAND
UNIVERSITY
PRESS



\$29.99

198 x 130 mm, 256pp, paperback

ISBN: 9781869408244

Published: November 2014



9 781869 408244