



TELL
YOU
WHAT:

GREAT NEW ZEALAND NONFICTION

2016

Edited by Susanna Andrew & Jolisa Gracewood

Tell you what: we've done it again. Our editors went out into New Zealand and rounded up a pile of blogs and travelogues, memoirs and journalism – some of the best true stories from the last year or so. We've got bullies and Barbie, chakra and shipwrecks, loose lips and AK47s. From Ōamaru to Xinjiang to New York, *Tell You What* introduces us to some extraordinary tales of coming out and going home, of living and dying, of tragedy and transformation. 'Marvellous', says John Campbell in his foreword. Read it and we know you'll agree.

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Foreword: John Campbell

When I was a student in English at Victoria University, we were asked, during a tutorial in one of those anaesthetisingly bland rooms in the von Zedlitz Building, what New Zealand culture consisted of.

An absence, it seemed.

I'm ashamed to say our answers were miserable. And wrong. In the years since, I've returned often (in my head, and on paper) to that room, and to our flaccid and ignorant sense that life was elsewhere. And when I try to understand my naivety, my cultural cringe, my pettiness, I put it down, in part, to received wisdom.

In a way, we'd appropriated Allen Curnow's famous couplet (so memorable, and so good) into a kind of tea-towel homily of national identity: 'Not I, some child, born in a marvellous year, / Will learn the trick of standing upright here.'

But Curnow had written that in 1943. And four decades later, by the time our tutorial fecklessly reheated it, as robotically as times-table rote, people had stood upright in the middle of the field at Rugby Park, Hamilton, or marched upright against the Springbok Tour on Molesworth Street, or on winter motorways, or directly into the batons of the Red Squad. And Norman Kirk had sent frigates to Mururoa. And Marilyn Waring was about to stand upright to cross the floor of Parliament. And Whina Cooper's hikoī had reached Parliament, 1000 kilometres of upright in their wake. And Bill

Manhire's sixth poetry collection was being published, words upright in new ways. And Janet Frame was miraculously upright. And Flying Nun was up and upright in op-shop pants. And people had been dragged from Bastion Point, flat upright. And our dissent was palpable. And our anger was palpable. And our bullies were vicious and larger than life. And people were upright, everywhere.

Perhaps what we didn't have yet were enough writers to decipher that? To explain it. To take the failing narrative of our uncertain infancy, our shallow-rooted identity, and assert the roots that dissent was planting. To observe that we had learned Curnow's trick. That anger, and a belief in the urgent need for something better, had made us stand.

I received this book as a manuscript. A4, which is never as good as a real book, evoking, as it does, bank statements, electricity bills, and those group letters from a distant relative whose children are all so spit-combed and exceptional that the annual Christmas missive provokes a terrible desire to climb into the oven beside the turkey.

But even in A4, it was fantastic in its stridency, its 'oi' confidence, its talent, and its pluralism. 'Hey Curnow! Hey, John Campbell and your shit-lazy Vic Uni Class! Tell You What!'

So, what?

That's the thing, of course, there isn't one single, defining 'what'. There is no prescribed us-ness. No tutorial delineation of a defining national voice. There are, instead, multitudinous voices. Defying prescription and formula. A true self-confidence, beyond hopefulness and latency, now deep in the bones. There is also something of Walt Whitman here: 'I celebrate myself, and sing myself', and the wonderful lines that come later in that great poem: 'Behold, I do not give lectures or a little charity, / When I give I give myself.'

Charles Anderson

Into the Black: The Easy Rider Story

He awakes alone in the black at 12.03 a.m. He does not look at the clock but he knows the time. He cannot see their faces but he knows who they are. The silhouettes surround him in silence. He is not afraid. He closes his eyes and remembers their story. It is his too.

He remembers the taste of salt, the smell of gasoline, the constant slap of water against his skin. He remembers what absolute loneliness feels like.

He will say he was ready to die. He will say his entire life led up to the moment when he decided not to.

There were nine, including him. They had set out together on a boat called the *Easy Rider*. The only difference in their story is that he is alive and they are not.

The harbour

The strait spat grey and cold as Rewai ‘Spud’ Karetai made his way across Fisherman’s Wharf. There were supplies to be organised and bait to be loaded but to some who saw him he

This story is based on hundreds of pages of documents including court files, Transport Accident Investigation Commission reports and coroner’s inquiries. Fairfax Media gained access to never before seen material including audio recordings made by the commission in the disaster’s aftermath and logbooks from the search. The reporter spoke with key members of the search team including joining them on their vessel when they trained in the Foveaux Strait. He extensively interviewed the only survivor, Dallas Reedy, and family members of the victims. Scenes and dialogue not observed by the reporter were taken from information and direct recollections from these sources. First published in 2014 as an interactive on the Stuff website: stuff.co.nz/interactives/2014/into-the-black

seemed preoccupied. His fishing boat, the *Easy Rider*, was tied up along with dozens of others that bobbed on Bluff Harbour's ebbing tide.

It is one of the few safe inlets in the Foveaux Strait but entering it is still a challenge. Its waters move swiftly and its winds blow strong. There are rocks that lurk beneath the surface. When boats finally reach the passage between the mainland and Stewart Island they are often faced with bruised clouds and white-capped waves. This is Southland – the bottom of New Zealand where State Highway 1 peters out. But according to signage on the roadside, Bluff and its population 1824 people, really mark the 'beginning of the journey'.

Karetai had bought the *Easy Rider* only six months earlier and he was proud of it. Most of his life had been on fishing vessels. The sea was his playground, friends said. It was in his bones. He had spent thirty years as a deckhand, helping run ships around the southern edge of the country but the *Easy Rider* was different. He and his wife Gloria wanted to be their own bosses and to run their own commercial fishing operation. The *Easy Rider* would be the first boat Karetai would ever captain.

On 14 March 2012 Karetai spent the morning loading up stores – 2.1 tonnes of ice and 360 kilograms of bait.

Maritime New Zealand safety inspector Gary Levy was on his way to audit a nearby vessel at Fisherman's Wharf when, just after lunch, he stopped by to inspect the *Easy Rider*.

Levy was there to make sure Karetai's boat met 'safe ship compliance'. The *Easy Rider* had been privately owned for many years and for Karetai to use it commercially several standards had to be met.

It needed a lot of work. But the most essential element was someone in control who held a skipper's certificate. Without

it the 42-year-old, 11-metre boat would not be permitted to carry any passengers.

While it was Gloria's name on the ownership forms, Karetai had run the *Easy Rider* largely by himself. Several deckhands helped out occasionally but in six months Karetai had already gone through seven different men. He had a reputation for being hard to work for and not someone you could easily tell what to do.

He also had not completed his own skipper's certificate which required him to pass courses in, among other things, boat stability. So since purchasing the boat he had used his only qualification – a deckhand certificate.

Levy asked to see a full copy of the licences. Karetai started to look around the boat. Then he rang his wife and put her on speaker phone. Was his skipper's ticket in a cupboard, he asked. It wasn't, Gloria said.

Then Karetai told Levy he would need to go home to look for it.

Levy tried to complete the inspection but he thought the whole thing was 'turning into a farce'. The weather was closing in, the forecast was not looking good and from what Karetai was telling him Levy thought there was no chance of the *Easy Rider* leaving the harbour.

MetService warned of 35 knot winds. The seas would become rough for a time with a swell rising to 4 metres.

If Levy had known Karetai was thinking about leaving, he later told a court, he would have detained the vessel.

As Levy left, a truck driven by two of Karetai's relatives, Paul Karetai and Peter Bloxham, pulled into the port. It was carrying stores and materials including plywood and corrugated iron sheets.

Wood was craned up and lowered onto the *Easy Rider*.

Megan Dunn

The Ballad of Western Barbie

Two things happen in Huntly: something and nothing. Sometimes it's hard to tell which is which.

At the age of seven I lived in the brick presbytery next to the brick church and the Catholic school on Main Street. I watched Olivia Newton John in *Grease* at the local cinema, but otherwise Huntly seemed untouched by glamour and I was not happy to be there. My mother and I had decamped from Auckland to the presbytery to live with my grandparents, who kept house for the priest.

Don't worry. It's not one of those stories. The priest was polite and sweet, like the scones he ate after church. Inside the presbytery hallway a statue of Mary stood on a polished wooden table. Mary had cold feet. So did my mother. We were in Huntly because of Mum's cold feet. She had left Bruce, a truck driver, and the father of my half-brother. Mum had an epiphany after the birth of my half-brother. The epiphany was that she didn't love Bruce and she wasn't sure she loved my brother either.

Western Barbie accompanied us on our exodus to Huntly. Barbie brought her palomino, Dallas, along for the ride. We had left Auckland in a hurry and Western Barbie only had the outfit she came in: a white jumpsuit with tassels that upon reflection was quite Liberace. She took her accessories to Huntly too, a blue autograph stamp and a set of hairbrushes. Western Barbie

First published on 7 July 2014 in *The Pantograph Punch*: pantograph-punch.com

had a lever on her back. If I pushed it down, she'd wink. I like to think that because Barbie was a cowgirl she was in a better position to deal with Huntly. We attended Catholic school together as Barbie and I were close friends and she'd never leave a girl in a crisis. Only for a man and a good time.

At the presbytery, Mum and I slept in single beds in an open-plan bedroom next door to my grandparents. In the evenings, Western Barbie took long baths in her doll-sized turquoise tub and flushed her pink doll-sized loo. Dallas grazed on a patch of wild floral carpet. Barbie had loved and left a man too. When we lived with Bruce, Barbie had been seeing Action Man. Barbie and Action Man had known one another's bodies in the nude, but their plastic arms and legs weren't built right for cuddling. Sex was accompanied by the cold disjointed sound of clacking. Once they rode around Bruce's house in Action Man's tank. Later, they would drink doll-sized glasses of wine. Maybe they talked of war, but I doubt it. Action Man, like Bruce, kept to himself.

We were only in Huntly for six months, but I remember that time as having the long drawn-out qualities of a soap opera. Not so much as a tumbleweed ambled along Main Street. Huntly seemed inhabited by the second-hand clothes mannequins in the window of the Salvation Army store. One pub. One cinema: Olivia Newton John's wholesome smile on the fading poster by the door. At least church every Sunday was a social occasion. I slotted the autograph stamp on to Barbie's hand, just in case she met any of her fans.

'This is the body of Christ.'

I opened my mouth and the priest placed a pale wafer on my tongue.

The body of Christ dissolved.

'What does it taste like?' Barbie asked.

‘Nothing,’ I said.

‘Shhh.’ Nana put her finger to her lips.

The priest moved in front of the altar in his lapping white robes. Above his head was a brass Jesus nailed to a cross and above Jesus was a round window. Clouds chugged past.

The priest said, ‘Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.’

The congregation answered, ‘It is right to give him thanks and praise.’

The collection basket was passed backwards along the pews. People dropped coins into its wicker rim. Inside the basket spare change jingled and rang out like notes from a tambourine. After church, the congregation gathered outside on the steps. Many people stopped and talked to the priest as though he was a pop star. They shook his hand. ‘Thank you for the sermon today, Father.’

On Sunday afternoons, Mum took long walks. Barbie saddled up Dallas and we trailed along. We crossed the rusted railway bridge to the other side of town. The trains seemed infrequent, the business they were designed to do long overtaken. ‘Whoa!’ Barbie pulled on Dallas’s reins. We stopped mid-way across the bridge. Mum stared down at the slow-moving Waikato River. The water was silver where the light struck it, like Western Barbie’s tassels. But most of the time it was just brown and murky. Barbie and I surveyed the Huntly Power Station; its two red turrets poked up into the sky. The steeple of the church also reached into the sky. But the chimneys of the power station reached higher.

‘I don’t believe in God,’ Western Barbie said, and I had a lot of respect for her point of view. Barbie was made in a factory. The small of her back was embossed with a copyright logo and the message: ‘Mattel Inc.’ Barbie had met her maker, and she told me there had been nothing religious about

AUCKLAND
UNIVERSITY
PRESS



\$29.99

198 x 130 mm, 248pp, paperback

ISBN: 9781869408442

Published: November 2015



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