



TELL YOU WHAT:

GREAT NEW ZEALAND NONFICTION

2017

Edited by Susanna Andrew & Jolisa Gracewood

**A third great instalment of New Zealand nonfiction
curated by two of our sharpest readers.**

**Into the bush, out on the street and all the way to
the bottom of the sea, from marae to motorway to
mausoleum, this third collection of New Zealand's best
new nonfiction writing heads off in pursuit of home,
history and hard truths. Unfamiliar landscapes – Iceland,
Middle Earth, Westminster Abbey – mingle with familiar
sensations – an old song, the chlorine tang of a swimming
pool, the taste of koko alaisa. *Tell You What: 2017* bears
witness to the range and craft of our very best writers as
they show us how we live, where, and why.**

**Featuring the prose stylings of Greg Bruce, Dylan
Cleaver, Adam Dudding, Amber Esau, Sylvia Giles,
Tom Goulter, Charlotte Grimshaw, David Haywood,
Dylan Horrocks, Ali Ikram, Lynn Jenner, Nic Low, Maria
McMillan, Moana Maniapoto, Selina Tusitala Marsh,
Talia Marshall, Toni Nealie, Jane Phare, Jenni Quilter,
Sistar Six, Tracey Slaughter, Rosabel Tan, Giovanni Tiso,
Kennedy Warne, Rebekah White and Ashleigh Young.**

**Writer, reviewer and literary editor Jolisa Gracewood
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Andrew thinks and writes about books for *Metro*
magazine, as well as working part time for Unity Books**

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Her Outdoors

Other than it being night, I have no other reference to day, week or month. It is either mid-evening or mid-week, autumn or spring, judging by the light or lack thereof, the scant activity on the avenue and a balmy breeze from the west.

It could even be early dawn.

And by dawn I mean dusk.

Days melt into weeks, weeks to months, months to a lifetime. Day fades to night, night breaks into daylight and it all rolls over again and again. It is all the same, merely the players that change.

Base camp, outside Merge Cafe on Karangahape Road, had to be abandoned due to wet weather. It leaks like an old man under the awning outside said stoop. It is drier and better sheltered outside the dispensary further east. It is unfortunately a pedestrian highway which attracts anyone and everyone who wants to skulk, stagger or saunter.

Next door are two kebab stores, a bottle shop, a convenience store and twin nightclubs. The whole area has more cameras than the Playboy Mansion. It is a hotbed of hookers, drunks, deviants and the despicable. Police patrols and private security guards secure the streets and give me some degree of safety.

My only real problem is privacy. Because I'm sleeping in plain view, I can't discriminate. Anyone and everyone joins

me on the green nylon otherwise known as home. For better or worse, I buy most of my kit from the Army Surplus store. Ex-army gear is usually of a high quality, affordable and olive. I've had a New Zealand flag sewn on to my bivvy bag, an outer weather-resistant nylon skin. Hopefully this will stop drunks urinating on me.

Sometimes I think of myself as an urban commando.

I pack, repack, remove and refine.

All day, every day.

I'm wearing black Levi stovepipes, cherry-red 18-hole Doc Martens and a light singlet. It is a constant question: *Do I need this?* I weigh 80 kilograms and 5 kilos of that is hair, the pack weighs about 35 kilograms (give or take), and guitar and amp tip the scales at around 18 kilograms. Anything not used daily is discarded.

I am constantly arguing with myself about the guitar. But I figure it is only a matter of time before it is stolen so I might as well enjoy it. I'm a firm believer that music creates positive vibrations. Sometimes when you are homeless the hardest thing is to be positive. Music helps.

The only clothes I carry are the ones currently worn. Underwear is a luxury, and not part of the commando couture. It is a constant war against weight.

Being unable to secure personal belongings means you lose stuff. You have to either stash your belongings and risk their removal, or carry your load like a turtle or snail. The number of times I have seen grown men, and women in tears after losing their loot. Hard men and hardened wenches, men who've been working this rodeo some time, in complete despair. Women who wield weight in the underworld, stripped of whatever comforts can be carried. Sometimes it is other street people raiding another's plot, or council contractors clearing out

anything deemed undesirable. Opportunist thieves, scumbags, scags and slags scalping the bald. When you don't have a lot, it is easy to lose the lot.

Why be homeless?

Accommodation options for the Auckland discarded, disenfranchised and disheartened are limited and secure locker space prohibitively expensive, unavailable or untenable. Not many, if any, leaseholders want to take on an unemployed, dysfunctional or otherwise undesirable flatmate. Numerous street people have mental health issues, drug and alcohol addictions, poor literacy and a lack of basic social skills. Many others don't.

Some streeties are postgraduate students, former professionals, academics, artists and idealists. One K Road character has more than half a million dollars in the bank. Yet, living with terminal illness, he chooses to sleep rough so as not to waste money on rent and to experience as much as life has to offer, all day, every day.

If homelessness is a choice, it is a choice of few options.

According to the Lifewise and Auckland City Mission report on homelessness of 2015,* almost 400 people are sleeping rough within a 5-kilometre radius of SkyCity – a higher density of doorway dwellers than New York or London. The reality for many low and no income earners is a room the size of a hen house for up to 90 per cent of your benefit or daily hustle. An accomplished panhandler can hustle more than \$400 a day;

* 'An Insight into the Experience of Rough Sleeping in Central Auckland', January 2015: aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/EN/newsevents/culture/OurAuckland/mediareleases/Documents/insightsleepingroughcentralakl.pdf

Ashleigh Young

Anemone

On a long-haul flight, time stretches, warps, balloons. As we fly across time zones, in and out of days and nights, time becomes a tangible substance that we move through, like dense fog, or like water. It seems to exist only in the space outside the plane. Inside the plane there is no real time, and there is no real sleep and no real waking. The air conditioning circulates the same brittle air. People communicate in nudges and murmurs. We try to sleep, lopsided in our seats, like crushed cans. It's a strange static dimension – at first enjoyable, because there's nothing to do but read, eat, drink, sit, and it feels like a little holiday, but soon those actions begin to wear and we long to walk into another room and talk to somebody or open a door and walk outside. On this flight, between Auckland and Los Angeles before flying on to London, I was sitting next to two young rugby players in their uniforms, and I was reading Alan Lightman's book *The Accidental Universe*. It's a collection of essays in which – very broadly – Lightman, a physicist, explores discoveries about the universe from a philosophical and emotional perspective as well as a scientific one. It's a book I've read before, but I was reading it differently this time, paying closer attention, hoping that my semi-wakefulness might lower my defences and help me notice more. Lightman is an unusual physicist in that he's

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eyelashroaming.com

intensely interested in religion – particularly Buddhism – and literature and art, and in how these things widen a scientific perspective, and vice versa. He has that kind of restless, search-beaming mind that, as you follow it, seems to open up possibilities for understanding the universe, and the tiny accidental blip of human life within it, even as he arrives at more questions rather than answers. Reading this book reminds me of my first memories of flying in a plane, with my parents and my brothers JP and Neil – looking out the window and down at the town below, seeing the cars on the tiny roads, the rivers, the sheep. I was thrilled and haunted by how small all our busy-ness had become.

On my flight I read one of the essays, ‘The Temporary Universe’, a number of times. There was something in it I wanted to grasp but couldn’t. It opens with Lightman describing his daughter’s wedding, and his feeling that it’s a sort of tragedy – he wishes that she could have stayed the same, that he could have his younger daughter back, as she was at ten or twenty. (She’s only thirty in this essay, but, all right, fair enough, Lightman.) He has this irrational wish, he explains, for permanence, despite his scientific understanding that everything around us – the universe, the earth, our own bodies – is relentlessly shifting and evaporating. Nature shows us that time is constantly wearing away at what we know in this moment, and that to hope for lasting stability is futile. But in a profound contradiction, people still cling: to knackered old shoes, to photographs, to products that might make us look more like our younger selves, to a house perched on a cliff top that’s falling into the sea. This clinging is ridiculous in the face of the second law of thermodynamics – otherwise known as the arrow of time – and yet many of us can’t relinquish a desire for the people and the things that we love to never change and

Ali Ikram

On the Hoof: The Redundancy Diaries*

27 June 2015

For the third time in my illustrious career I find myself unemployed.

Do not fear for me, reader: of all the echelons of New Zealand broadcasting, the one in which you are paid not to do it is by far the most esteemed.

So here I sit on the couch, eating the Honey Puffs of oblivion, and watching the glittering world of which I was recently a denizen passing by without me. If you can handle the twinge of shame that accompanies your three-year-old bounding into kindy and announcing in a voice that could signal ships in foggy weather, ‘Daddy doesn’t have a job any more, *Campbell Live* finished!’ the rest of the day is yours.

Strange superstitions always accompany these uncertain times. To foster them, I recently purchased with my redundancy money a small telescope – I planned to survey the night sky. The rising of the Pleiades in the northwest has been taken since ancient times as a portent of new life and amazing happenings. So it was when I awoke the next day to Prime Minister John Key announcing to the nation the impregnation of TVNZ’s *Breakfast* host Alison Pugh. My heart danced, but it did so within the body of only a bystander to this moment of great history, like an ox at the Nativity.

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The day worsened when again I found myself a mere spectator – this time to the betrothal of TVNZ presenter Nadine Chalmers-Ross. The feeling of being an extra in one's own life is crushing. I now sympathised with the charioteer in *Ben Hur* who was so let down by his role in the classic film that he couldn't be arsed taking his watch off for the climactic scene.

But this is what life is like when you don't have a proper job. My career began with a long period of joblessness during the Asian Economic Crisis. It was horrible each time a journalism school classmate got a job. After offering them warm congratulations, I took to my bed and wept.

The second time 'between jobs' was lovely, perhaps because I spent a chunk of it in Italy with my wife's family. Mornings began with Uncle Gelindo, riding around the Parco delle Groane where Mussolini used to shoot pheasant. Gelindo didn't speak English and I had no Italian, but his habit of drinking prosecco at sunrise transcended these differences.

In Milan, there is a place called the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II, one of the world's oldest shopping arcades. The whole thing is ornate and rather grand, but the man who designed it, architect Giuseppe Mengoni, never got to see his creation finished. He fell from the roof the night before the building was officially opened.

His terrible luck led to the tradition of 'spinning on the bull'. To avoid being similarly cursed, wayfarers place their heels on the testicles of a bull mosaic on the floor of the arcade, turning three times while making a wish. After thousands of people doing this for more than 140 years, the poor creature's nether regions are quite the worse for wear.

For me, turning on the bull led to seven and a half years of wonderful luck. The spell may have broken now. But what more could anyone have asked for?

1 August 2015

‘You’re Ali from *Campbell Live*, aren’t you?’ asked the naked man, his penis swinging in its thick, dark pubic nest. His name was Matthew and he revealed himself as something of a fan.

‘I used to be,’ I replied, continuing to stuff tiny children’s shoes into a backpack in the swimming pool changing room. I hoped that on turning around I might discover he’d put some clothes on, so I could better enjoy his hearty acclaim. No luck, sadly: his appendage bobbed at the edge of my peripheral vision, a silent party in the conversation, cylindrical and chilling, like the nuclear deterrent.

Often when a complete stranger meets ‘someone on TV’, the normal laws of social interaction are abandoned. A woman at the mall once hit me with her shopping by way of greeting. But when one is no longer actually on the box, a future opens up like a bottomless chasm: fame’s downsides with none of the perks.

A few months ago I was a celebrity. I have deduced this because a few months ago I played in a celebrity cricket match at Hawke’s Bay’s Clifton Cricket Club. The ground is heaven for lovers of the game – one local farmer’s ‘field of dreams’ at the end of a dusty road where the gentle hills part. Chris Harris, Marc Ellis and legendary Australian quick Jeff Thomson were my teammates, and children – some of whom may have even known who I was – formed an orderly queue for our autographs.

But only a short time later the fates decreed that I should find myself a jobless suburban father at a Brownie camp, sitting on the porch of one of the cabins sewing together a small stuffed monster that my daughter had christened ‘Mr Fartable’. Men have come a long way since the caves: they bake cookies, arrange flowers and rock babies to their rest. Even so, within us all lurks a Neanderthal who may rear his head in the middle

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