

CURRAWONGS



Martin Edmond

These days I wake up early. Pre-dawn, often, with the shapes of things in the room indistinct as half-formed thoughts, the grey half-light at the window and the eerie sound of currawongs calling through the air outside. At this hour they give forth a single, elongated, descending whistle; or else an echoic double note, a *ka-wab*; both of which somehow evoke the great age of the world and the practical infinity of previous mornings on this ancient landmass. I enjoy that sense of time past while a new day is beginning; even though, most likely, it will turn out to be, in essence, a repetition of other days. Or not—who can say? Not the currawongs, they don't know. Later they'll be swooping round the building, carolling operatically as is their wont; yesterday, one with a long straw bent in its beak almost collided with me out by the rubbish tins, taking precipitate, somehow derisive, evasive action at the last possible moment.

It's spring again. Another blue and gold day coming up. Mid-week, on a Tuesday, a Wednesday, or a Thursday, I'll leave home to drive an hour out west to Quakers Hill, there to teach classes in Australian Studies. If it sounds improbable for an expatriate New Zealander to be instructing locals in the detail of their own culture, well, it is; and the job did come to me in a serendipitous manner. I applied for work as an English teacher but when, in the interview, the panel learned I'd written a book about Ludwig Becker, the artist and naturalist on the Burke and Wills expedition, and was working on another about two twentieth century water-colour painters, one of whom was Aboriginal, they drafted me into teaching what is effectively a history course.

UWS College is part of an educational complex called Nirimba, which includes a TAFE, two High Schools, one of which is Catholic, and the HQ of Catholic Education in the diocese of Parramatta; the college is a wholly owned subsidiary of the University of Western Sydney and the students I see are doing a one year course that will, they hope, allow them enter Uni as undergraduates next year: most of them have, for one reason or another, failed to attain their High School Certificate or equivalent and are here for

BAREKNUCKLE POET JOURNAL OF LETTERS

another shot at qualifying. Why they did not pass the first time is a question I don't ask and nor is it the kind of information they would volunteer.

They are all in their late teens or early twenties and most are children of migrants. Haris is the son of Bosnian Muslims; Nuri is a Turk; Janelle's family is from the Philippines and May-Anne's are Vietnamese. Kathy is Tongan, Fahad is from Somalia and Rama, the Congo. Samantha's Sicilian and Michaela's father and mother, who are getting a divorce, are Brazilian and Greek, respectively. Corey and Huimin are Australian-born Chinese (ABCs), Laverna and Junior, recent arrivals from the People's Republic; sweet-natured, moon-faced, perpetually distracted Shafika is from Lebanon and wears the *hijab*. The inseparable Bollywood Twins, Sheeriza and Arti, are Findians (Fiji Indians) and one of them is Muslim and the other Hindu. And so on. Several students in each of my classes are bona fide white Australians and one, the blondest of all, Braeden, has Aboriginal blood.

Nevertheless, whatever their background, these kids present as Aussies and speak English with the characteristic flat vowels of the Western Sydney region. Some know fragments of their parental tongue but most don't; apart from the two newly-arrived Chinese, the African boys, who are refugees, and Adiba, from Bangladesh, few have been to their country of origin. They are, in the most visible and literal way, a product of the multicultural Australia that began to take shape after World War Two, was officially sanctioned during the Whitlam years and is now almost three score and ten years old. They are also, to a surprising, even distressing extent, ignorant both of their home country and of the places from which their parents, or some cases grand-parents, came. And yet none of them is stupid. This is a conundrum I struggle with every teaching day.

The problem is two-fold: on the one hand they are badly educated; on the other, they have short concentration spans; though whether the two are connected I cannot say. Having also taught university undergraduates this year, I know that poor literacy skills are not confined to high school drop-outs and recent immigrants: at least a third, maybe a half of the hundred or so first year students I tutored could not write a decent sentence in English; and their reading skills were likewise impaired. That course examined, in part, the effects of new technology on reading and writing, and there was a bizarre frisson to be had from reading more or less incoherent essays deploring the decline in literacy skills consequent upon our fascination with computers and their many derivatives; but I think the problem ultimately stems from the defective way writing and reading have been taught in schools. *We lost three whole generations*, an experienced teacher said to me drily the other day.

Nevertheless, my students are certainly addicted to their iPhones, their iPads and whatever else they bring with them to class (including sugar) and I

BAREKNUCKLE POET JOURNAL OF LETTERS

am always having to tell one or other of them to *put it away*; which he or she generally does without complaint or demur but then, inevitably, surreptitiously, will be back with again as soon as s/he thinks I'm not looking. Other teachers are more draconian than I am in their response to this common problem but then, I'm not really a teacher; or not a *trained* teacher; and I prefer to negotiate than to lay down the law. This because I believe a consensual arrangement is a stronger basis for good learning than is a set of inflexible rules; but I could be wrong.

These kids, with their incipient delinquency, their learning disabilities, their fecklessness, exasperate me but I am also fond of them. Furthermore, I find them in some ways impressive. I particularly admire their sophisticated social behaviour and the resulting respect, affection and concern they show for each other. Out here in the notoriously disadvantaged suburbs of Western Sydney these late-teens and early twenty-somethings have evolved a sub-culture that is acutely responsive and unfailingly tender in its manner of caring for its own members. They are also tolerant, worldly-wise, good-humoured and show an easy open-minded and unashamed approach to their own sexuality and to that of others. And they can be very funny too. Fahad, the Somalian, who is nineteen, said to me the other day, with great dignity and barely a hint of a glint of humour in his lazy eye: *I am a black man. I am supposed to smoke marijuana.*

So there is a lot to like about teaching as a way of earning a living; and it is a bonus that I must continue to educate myself in areas where my casually acquired general knowledge does not reach. Nevertheless, the job does not give me the mental space I need in order to write and is thus a distraction from what I conceive to be my main task in life. Which is why I sometimes tell myself on the way out to, or on the way back from, Quakers Hill, that if recent events had turned out differently, instead of teaching, I would now be writing my next book, which will be about an artist transported in 1814 for forging bank notes. How so?

II

One Monday evening in May of this year I received an email from the State Library of New South Wales, asking if I was prepared to sign a confidentiality agreement? This was perplexing because the email did not say what it was I had to agree not to confide; but after a fretful hour or so I understood that it could only relate to the then current Premier's Literary Awards, for which one of my books had been short-listed in the non-fiction category. I duly signed and returned the agreement and, as the email also promised, next morning received a phone call from a young woman telling me that *Dark Night: Walking with McCabon* had indeed been awarded the

BAREKNUCKLE POET JOURNAL OF LETTERS

Douglas Stewart prize for non-fiction. My first thought was that, with the \$40,000 prize money, I could give up my teaching job at the end of the semester—just a few weeks away—and return to full time writing.

The news meant more to me than just the cash, however; it represented a culmination of more than thirty years of struggle towards some kind of literary recognition in Australia. I'd come here as an obscure lighting roadie and would-be poet in 1981; it had taken me ten years to publish my first book of non-fiction, albeit in New Zealand, and more than a decade longer to achieve publication in Australia; that 2006 book, while well-received elsewhere, had been unkindly reviewed in the Saturday supplement a major daily newspaper and subsequently sank without trace in New South Wales. I'd followed it up with the Becker book, which had done rather better, but then my Adelaide-based publishers had gone into remission. *Dark Night* had not found an Australian publisher; it had come out, like five previous books of mine, from a university press in New Zealand. Now it had won a major literary award.

I spent the next few days in a state of dangerous exaltation. I was to get my just desserts at last. The mockers would have to revise their mockeries; the doubters be brought to belief. During the drive to and from work I started composing, in my head, an acceptance speech. Douglas Stewart was an expatriate New Zealander also. I received the news of the award on his birthday. He had a vaudevillian past: a peripatetic merry-go-round operator in the 1930s, the same decade in which McCahon had done stand-up comedy as the introduction to some kind of touring theatre show. I too, four decades later, had been a travelling player. And so on.

Nevertheless, my euphoria was shot through with a feeling of incipient doom which arose out of a sense of unworthiness mingled with disbelief that my luck had really turned at last. One night, the Wednesday I think, I had a premonitory dream in which the prize was taken away from me. Either that day, or the next, leaving Quakers Hill via a short-cut down Pacific Street, a ginger cat skedaddled across the road in front of my car and I am almost sure I hit it; but when I stopped and looked back, there was no feline body in the gutter, just a sullen-looking, ginger-headed girl tramping up the path towards the house under which the perhaps wounded animal had fled. I should have gone back to see but did not; though I am not ordinarily superstitious, I still wonder if things might have turned out differently if I had.

On the Friday morning, just as I was getting ready to go out to a talk a friend was giving about Roberto Bolaño, the telephone rang. I picked it up and heard the sepulchral voice of the Marketing Manager at the university press which published *Dark Night*. *I'm so sorry*, she said but didn't say why. I thought perhaps someone had died but couldn't imagine, given the identity

BAREKNUCKLE POET JOURNAL OF LETTERS

of the messenger, who it might have been. It was, of course, not someone but something: my dream of (local) fame and also my dream of resuming a writer's life. Though, to be fair, that was a postponement, not a death. Real writers always find a way.

What happened was this: out of the blue, the young woman at the State Library of NSW received a call suggesting that *Dark Night* should be awarded another prize, for biography I believe, a prize that consisted not of a pot of money but of a medal and a citation; the young woman from the State Library then called my publishers in New Zealand with this exciting news; in response to which the Marketing Manager said: *I don't think it qualifies*. Whereupon the young woman from the State Library replied: *If it doesn't qualify for that, it doesn't qualify for this either*. And everything unravelled from there. My book had been, it turned out, published outside the range of dates that would have made it eligible for the 2013 Awards; and was thus disqualified.

There are some unanswered questions here, the main one being: why then was the book entered in the first place? I had filled out the entry form myself, paid the \$100.00 fee with my credit card, assembled the requisite four copies of the book from various sources and hand-delivered the package to the State Library; but all of that had been done with the advice and consent of the publishers, who were officially entering the book. The same person who told the State Library *Dark Night* didn't qualify for the biography award had sent me the entry form in the first place, with detailed instructions as to how to fill it out. She'd also arranged for the distributor to forward copies of the book to me to make up the four; and for the hundred bucks entry fee to be reimbursed. So there was a major disconnect there.

You wouldn't have thought so from the way the publishers reacted. During the course of that long Black Friday (I didn't go to the Bolaño talk, though now I wish I had), I made several attempts to reach the Director but all I got was the answering machine. He and the Marketing Manager were *upstairs, getting all the ducks in a line*. I wanted to suggest to him that if he and the press supported me, the library might be persuaded to overlook the matter of dates; a mere technical issue, after all, not related to the merit of the book. There are precedents, an officiating body does have the power to declare a book eligible if it wishes so to do.

When he did finally return my call, late in the afternoon, he was stern, admonitory. The Marketing Manager was in tears, he said. So was the young woman at the State Library, who might be going to lose her job. My position was untenable; I had, by falsely entering my book, prevented some other writer from having his or hers legitimately short-listed and perhaps winning the prize. There was no question of *support*; I had put his publishing house in an impossible situation, one without remedy except via abject apology . . . he

BAREKNUCKLE POET JOURNAL OF LETTERS

was, by the end of the conversation, fairly spitting with rage. This was upsetting but not really surprising; he is a seemingly affable fellow who can quickly turn nasty. I'd had an abusive phone call from him once before; and he had never shown much enthusiasm for *Dark Night*. We have not spoken or otherwise communicated since that Friday in May.

As to why the State Library did not check the eligibility of the book, that I do not know. I had no further communication with them either. Nobody told me, officially or otherwise, that the prize was being withdrawn. I spent a week awaiting the phone call or the email that would confirm my disqualification but it never came. I had to ask my agent to ring up, late on the Friday afternoon, to find out whether or not I was expected to attend the celebratory dinner on the following Sunday. That was how I learned that my name had been removed from the Short List; that the entire program for the evening had been pulped and then reprinted without mention of me or my cursed book. It was to be as if it had never happened at all. Some time later I heard that *Dark Night* was at one point also going to be awarded The Book of the Year: that is, the one chosen by all of the judges as the best of the winners in the various categories. Sic transit gloria mundi.

III

In the aftermath of this bizarre sequence of events, I became paranoid. All my long-alleyed insecurities about being a New Zealander in Australia returned in augmented form. I felt fraudulent, besmirched, afraid; as if my hitherto for ghostly presence at the feast of Aust. Lit. was now to be definitively exorcised. Other consequences would follow: my doctorate would not be awarded, my incipient, if nebulous, publishing deal for my next book would fall through; and so on.

Curiously, I began to be haunted by a figure I called the Head Librarian: the chief of *the men upstairs* someone had referred to as having the ultimate power at the State Library. He would have the final say over my destiny, especially when I began, as I would have to do, to research my next book in that august institution. He wasn't so much a figure out of Kafka as a denizen of one of the worlds of José Saramago; which is to say, there were glimmers of gallows humour attending his grim deportment as he went about the administration of the affairs of the state of which he is a functionary.

Perhaps I evoked this quasi-mythical figure because he helped explain a contradiction I have long felt there to be in the Australian character. For it is the case that the much vaunted larrikinism, the disrespect for authority, the cheerful insolence of many Australians, under pressure, subsides and an entirely different demeanour is revealed: anxiety in the face of the power of the law, a great fear of the consequences of the breaking of rules, a

BAREKNUCKLE POET JOURNAL OF LETTERS

disposition to knuckle under at the least sign of official disapproval. They will laugh behind their hands so long as they are not discovered doing so; and when they are, more often than not, they tug the forelock. Given this summation, the institutional timidity of the State Library, as an arm of government, was not really surprising. Any other response would have been exceptional.

My feelings towards my home country were just as complex, just as dark. The behaviour of my publisher seemed emblematic of certain national characteristics. My fellow-country-people's propensity towards self-abasement as a means of appeasement, our readiness to apologise, our desire for forgiveness for sins we haven't even committed, our way of expressing excessive gratitude for small gifts freely offered . . . while none of these traits seemed characteristic of my own actions I still felt suffused with a shame that might have had its source in my half-buried origins. Or, more plausibly, in a decades-long doubt as to my authenticity as a writer. Not that I'm alone there.

In an effort to find a positive in the situation, I decided to use the crisis as an opportunity to ease up on the smoking and the drinking; but what in fact happened, as so often before, was a brief period of agonized abstinence followed by renewed indulgence. I smoked, I drank, as if my life, or perhaps my death, depended upon it; and then further castigated myself for my weaknesses; which in turn led to ever more strenuous, and ultimately futile, pursuit of oblivion by means of intoxication. It was in the midst of this orgy of self-abuse that, like an etheric life-buoy, the invitation to write this essay arrived; and with it, the suggestion that I investigate the plight of certain other New Zealanders in Australia. It seemed as good a way as any of banishing self-pity and its analogues.

I essayed an internet search and came up with an article, by Steve Kilgallon, published in the *Taranaki Daily News* of April 4, 2013 beneath the headline *Homeless Kivis Live Under A Sydney Bridge*. Kilgallon had visited a community of New Zealanders in Woolloomooloo; it was largely made up of trans-Tasman migrants who arrived here after February 26, 2001, a cut off date beyond which certain benefits are not available: *they are ineligible for the sickness and disability benefit (unless 'severely disabled'), unemployment benefit, housing support or state housing. This extends to the children of these arrivals*. The only way they can qualify for social security is by applying for permanent residency and, eventually, citizenship; but the requirements for this are almost impossible to satisfy when you are homeless.

The article was scrupulously researched, sympathetic, affecting; the journalist's outrage muted by the evident need to present the dilemma in a dispassionate manner. He quoted Marie O'Halloran, director of the Welfare Rights Centre: *They often apply to the state for 'active grace', where claimants are*

BAREKNUCKLE POET JOURNAL OF LETTERS

allowed a short spell of claiming benefits in recognition of dire need. 'These are routinely rejected, although we only make them for extreme cases; we think that's completely inhumane. We've not had a successful one for a New Zealander in three years and that includes some very extreme cases of abuse, homelessness, violence, and some very sorry stories.'

The article doesn't say it, but the measure was introduced by the then Howard government (with the agreement of the then Clark government) in order to discourage trans-Tasman migration by those who lack the sort of skills and qualifications Australia needs, or wants, in its migrants. It is thus homologous with, though far less known, and also less controversial, than the policy that successive governments here have practiced against unauthorised arrivals on these shores by boat. In other words, if you make the conditions into which people come unpleasant enough, that might have the effect of persuading others not to try.

This punitive ideology is deeply engrained; a version of it was the theory behind the original transportation of felons here two centuries ago. And, then as now, it is riddled with contradictions. It has never been clear, for instance, that fear of the consequences at journey's end outweighs the need to escape an impossible situation at its beginning. Many of the New Zealanders Kilgallon spoke to had come to Australia to get away from violent or abusive situations at home; most could or would not return. In the same way, a Hazara Christian fleeing Afghanistan because of persecution at the hands of the Taliban is unlikely to be deterred by rumours that they will be sent to a detention centre in the Manus Islands or on Nauru; even if the information is accurate, which it is not likely to be.

If it is clearly irrational to punish those who have arrived here in order that unknown others might be persuaded against attempting to follow them—where's the fairness in that?—it's also troubling that a society which is largely made up of migrants of greater or lesser longevity should behave in such a cruel and self-righteous manner towards more recent arrivals. Survivor's guilt isn't really an adequate explanation and nor is the suggestion that White Australia's buried shame at its treatment of Aboriginal people is somehow expressed as hostility towards new arrivals. And anyway, how many of us truly do wish to turn back the boats? Or deny Kiwis social security? Or is it the case that a minority of swinging voters are, on this issue as on others, determining the vindictive and derisory nature of the public debate?

Here's another odd thing about Australians: while racial prejudice of one kind or another is often expressed as an opinion in conversation, very rarely do you meet actual examples of it. That is, someone who proclaims a dislike of Asians or Indians, say—or New Zealanders—as a people, is likely to be a model of unfeigned courtesy when interacting with an individual of the race

BAREKNUCKLE POET JOURNAL OF LETTERS

or culture they otherwise affect to despise. It is almost as if there is a requirement to express such views, a need to conform to some presumed and generally accepted public opinion, before you return to behaving in an exemplary fashion as a private person.

The destructive effects of this contradiction were clearly exhibited during the 2013 Federal election campaign, during which the two major parties, in what the Greens called *a race for the bottom*, competed with each other in the degree of brutality they were able to bring to their policies towards so-called asylum seekers; while the largely humane, bi-partisan approach towards refugees who do not come illegally to Australia by boat (boat people are a tiny proportion of the whole) continued unremarked.

There were a number of parallels between those Kiwis living under the bridge and the thematics of my book. It too concerned itself with questions of alcoholism and homelessness, identity and authenticity, pride and dereliction; the dark night of the soul. I had made a series of walks that took me through that part of town; there are some vignettes of street people therein; on occasion I'd paused to talk with men hanging round outside the Matthew Talbot hostel, which is an epicentre for the homeless in Woolloomooloo. One of the propositions I put forward in the book is that the line between the unhoused and the housed, the disreputable and the respectable, the damned and the saved, is much thinner than we think; that it can be crossed in a moment's inattention or as the result of what may seem at the time a minor twist of fate.

But my situation was not like that: to have had that holy grail shimmer into view before me and then to see, like a Knight in the Chapel Perilous, the vision dissolve into an airy nothing, was actually more provocation than disaster. There was even, I came to think after a bit of time had passed, a kind of ironic justice: just as my book concerned a New Zealand artist who became lost in the Sydney night, so the book itself had become lost in the miasma of whatever literary politics, institutional incompetence or plain bad faith might have surrounded the taking away of the prize. And, like the artist's work, the book would, if it was any good, survive the short-term vicissitudes of obscurity and renown.

I had, in fact, two choices: I could become obsessive and bitter and self-pitying about the perceived wrong that had been done to me; or I could, like Hemi, a leader of the homeless community in Woolloomooloo, try to find out what it meant. *Hemi doesn't drink, smoke or take drugs, runs every day, holds a double degree and was head of IT for a government department. His homelessness, he says, was caused by deep depression: I am still working on the reasons why I am on the streets. The impression of a homeless guy is a guy with a big beard, an alcoholic type of a guy, which is true, there are those guys, but there's also a larger number who aren't like that. They are square pegs trying to fit into a round hole. They don't fit society's mould.'*

BAREKNUCKLE POET JOURNAL OF LETTERS

The key insight for me was here; the convict artist I wanted to write about, transported for counterfeiting, was just that, a person who did not fit: and so, I thought, was I—not in any profound, existential sense but simply through a series of life choices, willingly made though mostly in ignorance of what the consequences might be. It’s a truism that, for a writer successfully to evoke a figure from the past, there needs to be some sort of identification with that person. In this respect my subject was unusual, indeed genuinely enigmatic: he seems to have attempted, wherever possible, to cover his tracks, to elude any attempts that might have been made to enter him into the record; and yet left a couple of hundred paintings behind, many of which look like commissions from the great and the good. In search of that elusiveness, that enigma, and especially that strange dynamic between true artist and false seamer, I decided I would try to find myself in him. Or himself in me.

III

At this time of year—late August—when I come home from work the sitting room is filled with a golden light, augmented by the patina of pollen dust congealed on the never-cleaned windows. The westering sun gilds the orange chimney pots on the old Summer Hill Post Office and turns the ceramic roof tiles of the house opposite into glistening ingots of orichalcum. The steeple of St Andrews Anglican church, in black silhouette, adds to a sense that this might be a fragment of some medieval European town; but then the currawongs, swooping and carolling on their late afternoon excursions, change all that; and I know that this is a new world, unheralded except in the fictions of elsewhere.

Currawongs, in size, inhabit a niche between crows and magpies and have some resemblances to both, as well as to other shrike-like birds; but ornithologists will tell you they are more akin to the magpie than to the crow; and that other close relatives include the sweet-singing butcher bird with its macabre habit of impaling captured prey on thorns and hanging them up for later delectation. Currawongs store food too, there is one that inserts small lizards or bits of baby birds in amongst the shivered timber at the top of the telephone pole opposite my balcony and returns on occasion to tear off morsels using the pronounced hook at the end of its large, black, toucan-like beak; all the while keeping a yellow eye out for those who might attempt to purloin the contents of its extempore larder.

Currawongs, with magpies and butcher birds, belong to the family Cracticidae; cracticines are *highly intelligent and have extraordinarily beautiful songs of great subtlety*. Like magpies, currawongs will sing just before it rains and at such times it is impossible not to believe their song is in praise of that

BAREKNUCKLE POET JOURNAL OF LETTERS

life-giving water about to fall from the sky. They are communal too: at Pearl Beach, in the evening, they would carol, one to the other, in succession across the entire tree-covered width of the valley, as if relaying a goodnight message through the extended family. Here I often feel that they are my true landlords, and I just one of their tenants. I'm sure they know me: there's one that enjoys, in my moments of inattention out on the balcony, swooping by so close that I feel the wind from the feathers of its wings on my face and am startled again into wakefulness.

They are humorists too, *distinguishable by their comical flight style in amongst foliage, appearing almost to fall about from branch to branch as if they were inept flyers*. They do this sometimes in the leafy crown of the big gum tree growing in the street outside my front windows; and sometimes they chase each other round this red-brick apartment block, clacking their beaks alarmingly as they go. Over longer distances, however, currawongs fly in a series of rising arcs, making it seem as if they are surfing scalloped waves of air; and at the culmination of any one of these arcs the bird may close its wings, turning momentarily into a black arrow fletched with white; and seeming, in that stillness, to be meditating upon flight itself.

Sometimes the one that likes to startle me will perch very close by and look speculatively at me with its bright yellow eye, as if planning future hilarities or depredations; and then another name, bandit bird, comes to mind; though that properly belongs to the black-faced cuckoo-shrike. Yet in the end it is their eerie, solemn, antediluvian morning chorus that I love most about them; as if, through their agency, the land itself was telling us that beyond our day-to-day concerns is something else; and that something is, to all intents and purposes, eternal.

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Martin Edmond (born Ohakune, 1952) is a New Zealand author and screenplay writer. He is the son of writer Lauris Edmond. He studied Anthropology and English, graduating MA in English from Victoria University of Wellington. He spent a year working as a junior lecturer before joining avant garde theatre group Red Mole, with whom he spent five years as a writer and actor. He moved to Australia in 1981.

Edmond has written screenplays for several New Zealand feature films, including *Illustrious Energy* (1987); *The Footstep Man* (1991) and *Terra Nova* (1996).

Martin's books include *Streets of Music* (1980), *Houses, Days, Skies* (1988), *The Autobiography of My Father* (1992), and *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont* (1999). *The Autobiography of My Father* was nominated for a 1993 Wattie's Book Award, and *The Resurrection of Philip Clairmont* was a finalist in the 2000 Montana New Zealand Book Awards.