

# NEW ZEALAND WRITERS' EZINE

November 2007 – Part IIa

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## **BOOK REVIEWS compiled by Tina Shaw**

If you are interested in reviewing, or have a forthcoming publication you'd like us to consider, please email [programmes@nzauthors.org.nz](mailto:programmes@nzauthors.org.nz)

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### **God Must Be Crazy, by Kilian de Lacy**

**Deltil Publishing, \$35-95.**

**Reviewed by Sue Fitchett**

This book will appeal to those people interested in New Zealand religious communities, or who enjoyed Pauline Grogan's *Beyond the Veil*. Kilian de Lacy was a member of the Catholic order, Daughters of Our Lady of Compassion, for over thirty years, and her book recounts her experiences as a nun and ex-nun.

Plainly and frankly written, de Lacy makes 'no bones' about the things that irritated her in the order, and the adverse impact of some of the actions of those in authority in the Church. Refreshingly, the author in discussing 'the religious life' says, 'Women were considered dangerous to the salvation of men, particularly men of the cloth. Mind you, this perspective didn't always stop all men in holy orders from having liaisons with said women, but that's another story. For the most part, it was seen as desirable to have the religious women shut away as tightly as possible so they could not coax the men to eat the apple, as it were.'

Kilian de Lacy displays a sense of humour, sometimes ironic, in her narrative. She, also, openly discusses her feelings about events and her spiritual journey.

I was curious about the striking image of a nun on the cover, as this image is not referenced and yet I couldn't tally this image to photographs of the author in the book. There are a number of excellent photographs, black/white and colour, accompanying the text.

The author's personal anecdotes were more engaging for me; a non-catholic lay person, than text outlining religious belief or church history. These sections I experienced as somewhat 'preachy' and found myself skimming over them.

There have been a number of books written by women who have entered and left the religious life, and de Lacy could have added depth to her work by referencing this wider canon e.g. *Beyond the Veil*, and *Breaking the Silence*.

I believe autobiographical works are always works of courage, because of the imperative to disclose personal material, therefore, I commend the author for her courage in publishing.

**Available from DELTIL Publishing, PO Box 50607, Porirua 5240 at a cost of \$35.95 including postage.**

## ***Observations from the Poetry Factory*, by Miriam Barr**

The Back Shed Press, \$25

Reviewed by Sarah Johnson

Miriam Barr is well-known on the Auckland poetry scene as a performance poet. Creative director of performance poetry group The Literatti and an organiser of the long-running Poetry Live, she has won several poetry slams including, in 2007, Poetry Idol.

Miriam's first book, *Tangents*, combined poetry, photography and music, and her second, *Observations from the Poetry Factory*, offers more of the same, with a limited number accompanied by a CD of Miriam's poems set to music.

It is always a bonus to hear a poet read their work, and what Miriam's CD demonstrates is her virtuosity as a performance poet, with the poems that were both printed and spoken standing out as the strongest in the collection. Whether this is because Miriam recorded them for this reason or, as I suspect, because her poetry is written foremost to be performed is hard to tell. What I did find was that many of the poems that were only written failed to lift in the same way from the page.

There is a halting, interrupted quality to Miriam's poems that falls away when she reads them. This is accentuated by intrusive use of punctuation that, as far as I could see, added nothing to the poems' meaning or flow. The one exception was "Observation 29: Sand(e)scape", which cleverly arranges the shape of the poem on the page to reinforce its message of thinking outside the square.

There are also instances where Miriam uses metaphors that, while not exactly cliché, feel a bit too well trod – effervescing seas, minutes that tick by too slowly to be counted. But, having said that, there are poems that sing in their freshness – the sardonic "Mellow" and the yearning lilt of "Lemon Verbena". Both of which were, interestingly, also recorded.

**Can be ordered directly from Miriam, [mims\\_53@hotmail.com](mailto:mims_53@hotmail.com) or from The Women's Bookshop, Auckland.**

## ***Edwin & Matilda*, by Laurence Fearnley**

Penguin Books, \$28

Reviewed by Vivienne Lingard

Edwin first sights Matilda through his viewfinder. The background is Bannockburn; it is her wedding day. Edwin is about to add Matilda's pictures to his gallery of un-collected portraits (the 'wall of strays' in his studio), when he decides to seek her out instead. Edwin and Matilda, both seriously affected by the lack of a mother's love, are drawn together, and this is where their story begins.

The sub-title for *Edwin & Matilda* reads 'An unlikely love story'. The disparity of forty years between the main characters made the 'love story', not so much unlikely, as uncomfortable for this reader.

In essence theirs is an interior journey, which evolves during the car trip they take around central Otago on a quest to find Edwin's mother. This was prompted by Matilda; Edwin had done nothing since recognising his mother (whom he had believed dead) in a magazine article eight years earlier. Neither Edwin nor Matilda is prepared for the revelations that unfold and the developments that follow, which alter their lives irrevocably.

The body of the narrative is told in third person switching to first person when Edwin or Matilda steps in. This device can be difficult to employ successfully, but is assisted in this instance by a change of font.

Fearnley is an accomplished writer. As with previous novels, her style is clear and unaffected, her use of

language memorable, especially in the evocation of emotion and loss. For example, the way that Edwin views his clients. 'In their expression was the acknowledgement of failure: times that had passed, all that had left them long ago, days they could not recapture'. And when Edwin is recalling the hands of patients in the TB sanatorium – where his father was medical superintendent – '...he saw in their large immobile hands an indication of what had been lost...The hands that grieved for a former life: a useful life'.

And although I found there were aspects of the plot that pushed credibility, *Edwin & Matilda* is a novel of high quality. This book will satisfy anyone who enjoys an authentic New Zealand voice.

### ***Duet*, by David Hill**

**Mallinson Rendel, \$17**

**Reviewed by Carolyn Langenhoven**

Here is another winner from David Hill, and *Duet* strikes the right tone to appeal to both boys and girls alike in the young adult market. The guys will think it's about sex and cool music, the girls will see a tale of first love.

Framed within a musical background, Kallum moves from playing his guitar in the band Septic Tank to a role in the local Youth Orchestra. At first sceptical, he is soon wowed by the sounds the orchestra produces.

He must play a classical duet with the gorgeous Paige and they are drawn closer and closer together until school, mates and everything else fade into the background and all Kallum can do is play his guitar and think about her. The relationship escalates. There is a fear of pregnancy, STDs, the consequences of underage sex and the issue of abortion.

Kallum's voice is spot-on as we gain an insight into how he feels both physically and emotionally and deals with all of these issues. Hill succeeds in describing Kallum's teenage angst to perfection without preaching or moralising. A great read. A must for every teenager. I only wish it had a cooler cover to entice the teens to pick it up.

### ***Wild Latitudes*, by Barbara Else**

**Random House, \$27-99**

**Reviewed by Belinda Drake**

Barbara Else's seventh novel is her first historical fiction, and what a world she conjures. Dunedin in the 1860s is primarily the setting for a rip-snorting tale, narrated by one very feisty teenage heroine, Adele Overend, who is a more than capable match for the tough frontier town. Else has created an impressively managed cast of misfits and oddballs, villains and urchins, skilfully playing out many-branched plot-lines which careen between laugh-out-loud funny to nail-bitingly tense.

But it is Adele who is the heart and soul of the book, which is no mere plot-driven caper. She is a thoroughly enjoyable character, brimming with confidence and pragmatic compassion, shrewd intelligence, and both a wry sense of humour and a mischievous sense of melodrama. Although Else has superbly mastered the timbre of a 19<sup>th</sup> century voice, at times Adele almost verges on anachronistic in terms of what her voice is saying, although this is enjoyable rather than irritating.

On the other hand, she has had an unusual upbringing for her time, having been raised primarily by a father with enlightened views on gender, religion and education. Just as Dunedin is a "brave new world...(trembling) on the brink of possibilities" so Adele is a character who presages many of the developments of the twentieth century.

Perhaps her various views - on everything from gender and social inequalities to sexual mores, to religion and treatment of the mentally ill, to relationships between parents and children and between siblings, as well as on an increasingly industrialised world - aren't anachronisms after all but variations from what is considered the standard and accepted Victorian line. In fact one of the great pleasures of reading this book is enjoying the ironies in the musings of a forward-thinking young woman of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century from our early 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective.

Highly recommended.

### ***Drybread*, by Owen Marshall**

Random, \$27.99

Reviewed by Pat Rosier

Owen Marshall is best known as doyen of New Zealand contemporary short story writers. *Drybread* is his third novel.

Chunks of the story are set in remote Central Otago, which is described with the writer's usual accuracy; the hills are 'like a gargantuan crumpled blanket,' and you can practically hear the air crackle in its dryness. This barrenness is reflected in some aspects of the characters; protagonist Theo, divorced investigative journalist and his colleague and friend Nicholas, are both disappointed, and, the reader is led to suspect, disappointing, in love. Nicholas's recurring question for Theo is, 'You're not screwing her are you?' Penny, who has run away into hiding from her rich American husband with their son Ben, has her own emotional distance. She begins as subject of Theo's journalism and becomes much more.

Emotional warmth is perhaps most clearly demonstrated between Penny and Ben. Theo, while he refers to himself as selfish, is not entirely so, and there is some genuine friendship underneath the bloke-ish exchanges between Theo and Nicholas.

An authorial voice, that may be intended to be an introspecting Theo's, intrudes awkwardly and redundantly now and then, as in: 'The barrenness of some people's lives is appalling.' Well, yes, we had just been shown that. Likewise: 'What passes between a man and a woman is a fluctuating charge, and never fully decipherable.' 'Fluctuating charge,' is nice, but Theo's internal questions preceding the statement have made the point.

But there is much to enjoy. Theo, when thinking about Penny's situation and his own increasing attachment to the outcome, goes back and back to his own divorce. This results in a welcome and unsentimental exploration of some of the strains and pains of contemporary relationships between women and men, that fluctuating charge. The ending works, too. It's not 'happy' in any conventional sense but is cast in the light of reality and contains that essential ingredient, hope.

### **New and Noted books**

***Crossing Mali***, by Brent Couotts with illustrations by Gavin Hurley. Poem and images of a 1997 journey through Mali, walking to the Bandiagara Escarpment where the Dogon people live. Available from Parson's Bookshop, Auckland, or from Brent Couotts at [brent\\_couotts@hotmail.com](mailto:brent_couotts@hotmail.com)

***CoverUp: The Art of the Book Cover in New Zealand***, by Hamish Thompson (Godwit). A look at book covers from an art perspective.

***Icebergs: the Antarctic Comes to Town***, by Dave Cull (Longacre). Designed for young people, the story of how icebergs came to be drifting off the coast of Southern New Zealand.

***Lucky Bastard***, by Peter Wells (Random). In post-war Japan, Eric Keeling must investigate an alleged war crime, but do his actions constitute a further crime? Half a century later, this is the question that confronts his two children.

***Wetlands of New Zealand***, by Janet Hunt (Random).

***The Big Picture: a history of New Zealand art from 1642, by Hamish Keith*** (Godwit). Based on the TV series which will screen on TV One from 18 November.

***Stephania's Dancing Slippers***, by Jennifer Beck, illustrated by Lindy Fisher (Scholastic). Children's picture book about a child who makes a journey during WW1 from Poland to New Zealand.