

Hi Tilly,

Kept missing you today, as I sort of thought I would. Would be really terrific if you could have a stab at these questions. Don't be daunted, there are only a few easy ones. Pretty light, but that's the readership. Of course, my deadline was a week ago. Thanks a bunch. In advance. Nervously.

Kiran

- Yesterday it struck me how so many Wellington people are always moaning about the weather here. It really irritates me, it's so desperately boring. You never hear stoic Southerners whinge about the weather. Then I co-incidentally read a short story 'Holloway Road' by Samara McDowell, where the shit weather here is sort of a theme. I was discussing this with Bill Manhire earlier,

- the writing that comes out of Wellington is quite different to other towns such as Auckland. Why do you think this is,
- and how does the landscape here influence writers?

I see *this* regionalism too, though not always, and it's not like Wellington is to writing as – say – Gimblett Gravels is to Syrah.

What I do recognise is that even if Wellington's kind days are the kindest imaginable, it still takes guts to love this fish-head bit of the island. I say this as a Paekakariki local. It's a condensed sort of town and it takes a bit of leaning-into. Not just because of the climate.

I always felt Lauris Edmond put her finger on it best in her poem 'The Active Voice'. You can read it on the Writer's Walk (down by the rowing lagoon), a plaque designed by local typographer Catherine Griffiths, or read it in full in *The Selected Poems of Lauris Edmond*, published by Bridget Williams Books, 2001.

IT'S TRUE YOU CAN'T LIVE HERE BY CHANCE,
YOU HAVE TO DO AND BE, NOT SIMPLY WATCH
OR EVEN DESCRIBE. THIS IS THE CITY OF ACTION,
THE WORLD HEADQUARTERS OF THE VERB –

Lately when I'm on foot in the city I try to mentally trace the streams that predated the roading of Willis Street. Thinking of the whole island, I wonder whether there actually *is* a kind of muscley cerebral luck, to find ourselves at the head of Maui's fish.

But do we really do more *thinking* here?

- For such a small place, there is a lot of literary talent that comes out of Wellington. It's a sort of literary hub. I mean, the modern letters programme must contribute to this, but what else is it about Wellington? You know, Christchurch and Dunedin have music as their thing, but Wellington is very much literary.

Our lyrics too. A great history in both.

I think Anne Mallinson took a good pulse when she published *Big Weather: Poems of Wellington* (edited by Greg O'Brien and Louise St John). And Anne Noble got a bulls-eye with the cover pic. The derivatives (anthologies on Auckland, Canterbury & Otago) couldn't match it.

The local literary landscape is quite vast for the small number of gullies and hills – but think of (this is alphabetical and excludes publishers already mentioned) Awa Press and its serious science,

- Moving here from Auckland, I personally found that this town is crawling with passionate booklovers. I noticed it a lot more here than in Auckland. You just have to look at Unity's clientele. They know what they like, are pretty well-read active readers. Do you think this is particularly unique to Wellington? If so, why?

That's such a fabulous description "crawling with passionate booklovers". I always find that same vigor takes place every day at Unity Books in Auckland too. We enjoy our lucky interface.

- So many writers are churned out of the modern letters programme. It's a great starting point/springboard. But what happens to these writers after they publish their first collection of short stories/poems, or first novel. how are they supported? Are they?

Churn is such a freighted-up word. I don't see 'churn'. From a bookseller's POV there's enough second (or more) work coming through from all the writing programmes. It's all about quality.

For my money I think the selected IIML authors mostly arrived there with pretty good piles for their houses. To give second or more book examples from May alone, take a look at Anna Livesey's and Ingrid Horrock's new poems – great individuality there.

- How are Wellington writers different to other writers in NZ? Are they? Why is this?

To be honest my diagnostic skills are not up to what creates these areas of voice, or the Wellington edge – I leave that for the working essayists & talking heads - but I like the debate and the local hum from those beyond and within the IIML/VUP continuum.

- There's that great David Geary line, "stay in Wellington long enough and you'll end up sleeping with yourself." It's a bit of a family scene here. All the writers are sort of different but often know each other. You know, you'll get Ian Wedde and Fiona Kidman - who are sort of chalk and cheese - having a natter at a book launch. Everybody knows each other. And critically, do you think there is too much love in this town? How is this helpful/unhelpful to writers?

I'm not sure that it's 'love'. Think of the political bunfights and general fallings-out after some of the honest and dishonest reviews. I think it might be 'regard'; it might be competitiveness, it might be the luck of the Creative NZ applications (don't get me started).

- How does an independent bookshop such as Unity thrive?

I may have to move from long blacks to laphroaigs for this one. There are lots of layers – interpersonalities (such a word?), history, mutual regard, being handy. Unity thrives essentially because people need us and we need them. We know there will be innumerable readers of this magazine who have just hit "send" to their online supplier and that's their prerogative. Ours is to keep a staunch oasis on the street.

- What do you think makes Unity so unique and special? What does it provide that other bookshops do not?

We were adopted.

- Writers in Wellington are often part of /have been part of the Unity 'family'. It's where writers work part-time while they do their masters, they launch their poetry collections etc there, their books are sold there. That's a pretty special sort of network. What is Unity's place in the literary world of Wellington? How has this changed/grown over the years?

There's no point having a bookshop if it's not – to add to what you said earlier – swarming with booklovers, and writers, and booksellers who bridge both. Nigel (Cox) was a genius on so many levels, and the shop rides those waves. It's not all peachy. But thankfully it's not mired in insincerity or marketing.

- How healthy is the independent publishing scene in Wellington? So they all eventually get swallowed up by the majors (eg Mallinson Rendall by Penguin)? you've got Steele Roberts who touch things other people won't. There's Learning Media. And of course, VUP.

The local literary landscape is quite vast for the small number of gullies and hills. Until the 80s nearly all the big NZ publishers & distributors were based here until rents and freight pushed them north.

Then we saw a growth in local indie publishers. Just consider the intellectual and cultural wealth from (in alphabetical order!) Awa Press, Bridget Williams Books, Dunmore, Earl of Seacliff Art Workshop, Gecko, Headworx, Learning Media, Mallinson Rendel, Phantom Press, Steele Roberts, Te Papa Press, Victoria University Press, Wedge Press. Will's publisher.

And there are maybe a dozen more another layer over, and then hundreds more authors who are self-publishing, a small number of which stand the tests of time. Further to all that there's the embryonic digital scene making it's noise. Don't get me started on issues of quality. I've made my monologues about the good and bad aspects of gorse. Frankly we run the risk of over supply.

- Can you answer honestly, who are your absolutely favourite Wellington writers, and why? What is it about them that makes them so special, and are they distinctly Wellington?

No I can't answer that honestly. But people in the Wellington trade and literary scene will understand this. And perhaps that's part of why it's distinctive here and why it matters to us that we continue to be so.

I would pay to read the shopping lists of quite a few. My current favourite is Martin Edmond, even if his last book had a small perished bit of elastic, and even though his voice is Pymont pre-gentrification.

Unity Books - For TL: IV, quotes from you I'm not using

From: Kiran Dass <thesilverage@hotmail.com>
To: <books@unitybooks.co.nz>
Date: 15/06/2010 12:45 p.m.
Subject: For TL: IV, quotes from you I'm not using

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I'm not sure that it's 'love'. Think of the bunfights and general fallings-out after some of the honest and dishonest reviews.

I think it might be competitive respect, the sands of time, the optimism felt by getting a seat on the train, or that both had a lucky moment with their Creative NZ applications.

It's not all peachy. For instance we are still dissed by some distributors for the kind of parallel importing we do. Fortunately we have enough wine for our Ethics Subcommittee. But let those warehouses get *their* supply chain in order.
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