

AUTUMN
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White Water Publishing

An interview with Mary Varnham

Kate De Goldi

Mary Varnham is the commissioning editor and publisher at Awa Press, New Zealand's most recent small publishing enterprise. In just 12 months the Press has made a considerable mark in the country's book culture, producing 11 substantial publications, including the best-sellers, How to Gaze at the Southern Stars by Richard Hall and How to Listen to Pop Music by Nick Bollinger, both titles in the innovative Ginger Series.

Kate De Goldi spoke to Mary Varnham about her preparation for a publisher's life and early developments at Awa – which is the Māori word for river, stream, or valley.

KDG: Give me a thumbnail biography, Mary – your working life so far ...

MV: I began my career with a BA Hons in Foreign Affairs, but decided I didn't want to be a diplomat, and basically went off to New York for eight years where I did all kinds of things: freelance writing – I did everything, journalism, tourist brochures, speeches; for a while I worked in typesetting, night shifts to make money; I worked on McGovern's Presidential campaign – all this was in the 70s which, of course, was a very exciting time to be in New York – anti-Vietnam, feminism etc. We were constantly marching down Fifth Avenue for something. They were very formative years for me. I often think everybody should live in New York for eight years.

KDG: Because?

MV: Because of the huge energy there, the willingness to give peoples' ideas a go; that's the great strength of America – if you have talent and ability, you'll be given a go. Which I don't think is always the case here for

creative people. The other thing about New York is the real striving for excellence – because it's so competitive: you know, every waiter's an actor – I found that emphasis on excellence really inspiring. I didn't have a particularly stellar career there, but I was really energised and inspired.

KDG: And you worked in publishing?

MV: I worked for Simon and Schuster. I got a job in the publicity department, which I now realise was a dream job – I was working with authors, had a huge expense account (bigger than the actual salary). You weren't supposed to be seen in the office at lunchtime – you had to be out either entertaining authors or the media.

KDG: Was the book culture very different then, or was that New York book culture what we're seeing here now?

MV: I learnt everything I know about publishing there – but one of the important things I learnt was that many books fail and some succeed, so publishing is a huge balancing act; you want the big successes so they will carry the smaller, but important, books. The idea that every book should make money is really not such an issue there because they have such a huge market – not a feature in New Zealand, sadly. The other thing I learnt was that all publishers that survive in the American market have a basic book – in some cases, say, it's the *New English Bible*; in Simon and Schuster's case it was the *Do It Yourself Tax Guide*. And so, as a publisher here in New Zealand those are the sorts of things I've borne in mind. We haven't got our basic book, but we're trying to make our Ginger Series a bit of a basic that keeps on selling for years and years.

KDG: I guess that means that often the 'basic book' isn't necessarily an exemplar of the

publisher's general aims and ideals?

MV: No. Look at Bridget Williams Publishing – she has *The Pregnancy Book*. I'm not sure what Random and Penguin see as their 'basic book'. I guess Penguin has Michael King!

The other big lesson from American publishing was the power of publicity, which is where I think New Zealand publishing is lagging quite badly – not actually the publishers so much as booksellers who haven't at all maximised the power of publicity.

KDG: So how have you dealt with that in Awa? How have you 'maximised' publicity?

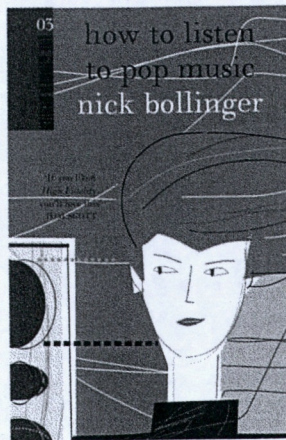
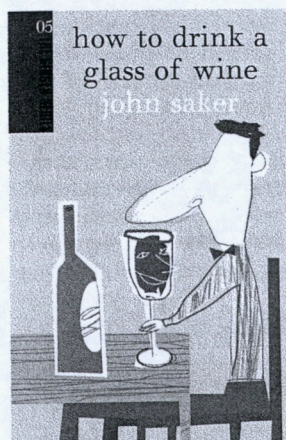
MV: We've found it the most frustrating part of all. Some booksellers are on to it – they know that if some author is on, say, the Kim Hill programme or there's been a *Sunday Star Times* article about them – then they are aware enough to display the author's book prominently, for example. It's mainly the established and good independents who'll act on publicity. The chain stores, by contrast, simply don't have the ability to respond in that way, which is a great pity. When I was in New York if you had an author on the Johnny Carson show, the next day you could not walk down a street past a bookstore without seeing that author's book. The bookstores there were directly plugged into the big national media programmes.

We've been gradually chipping away at the bigger chain-stores and I think we're making progress – but there are odd problems: for instance, Whitcoulls won't display our Ginger Series books together in one place – they're dotted about the shops under sport or music or whatever theme – which of course lessens their impact.

One thing I must say positively, though, is that we are so lucky in New Zealand publishing to have the independent sector. Awa Press simply would not be here today without Unity Books – and what Unity has proved over and over is that people really do want New Zealand books and if you have confidence in them and stock them in big numbers they sell like hot-cakes.

KDG: When you returned to New Zealand you did quite a bit of reviewing – that's where I first heard your name.

MV: I reviewed books on National Radio, in the days with Maggie Barry – five books at a time ... madness. And then I did a couple of books myself – one with Sue Kedgley: *Heading Nowhere in a Navy Blue Suit* – and a school history. But then I got involved in the politics of the waterfront in Wellington and



stood for the City Council and went down what I think of now as a completely bizarre blind alley – they were the most miserable years of my life. I've described it as having spent three years in the trenches of World War I.

KDG: *Were you gestating Awa Press all this time – as one immersed in book culture: reading, writing, editing, publishing.*

MV: It took me a year to recover from the City Council but then I decided I'd like to do a book about the many people around Wellington – whom I'd become aware of while on the Council – who've worked so hard to save things. When you look around Wellington now the things you really like have all been saved by major public campaigns. I thought it was a really interesting story that needed to be documented in a book; a book of magnificent obsessions, really. I got about half way through and do hope to finish it eventually.

But, when I started it, I knew it was really a Wellington book and that there was no point in going to a major publisher; I'd just publish it myself. And then Jane Tolerton (author of *60s Chicks Hit the Nineties*) were sitting round one day moaning about big publishers –

KDG: *– a time-honoured practice –*

MV: – yes! Everyone has their big publisher sob story ... but we talked about how good it would be to have a Wellington-based publishing company to do the things we really liked. I'm a non-fiction reader – that's my big love – and I've always felt there was a bit of a gap in our non-fiction publishing. There's history of course but, as Lloyd Jones has pointed out, there's been no consistent history of essay publishing or writing that's leisurely and informational and literary. The kind of writing that the *New Yorker* does so well: articles or essays about things that you often don't care about (or so you thought) but which come alive through the writing of a passionate participant or observer. It sounds pretentious but I want to cultivate a stable of those *New Yorker* kind of writers.

So Jane and I basically brainstormed a whole lot of topics we wanted to know more about; she came up with the rugby idea – she reckoned that most New Zealand women wouldn't know the rules of rugby. So I started approaching people and asking: 'would you be interested in writing 20,000 words about such and such?' I wanted them to be very personal – because I'm fascinated by *why* people are so passionate about certain things. *Why is someone completely obsessed with pop music? Why does someone want to spend most of their life gazing at the stars?* So, it was the combination of passion and information I was after.

The astonishing thing was that everyone I approached said yes. And I think that's partly because the word-length was manageable, and even more so once it was broken down into chapters

KDG: *Do you have a lot of input in the shaping of the books?*

MV: Only really at the beginning. With Nick Bollinger, for instance, I said – this is the sort of thing I want to know about pop music, but feel free to write whatever you like. Similarly, I said to Spiro Zavos: *why* do people go and sit in freezing stadiums to watch a game like rugby? I think it's a successful approach, talking like that with the author at the beginning. They're so close to the subject they don't realise how much we *don't* know about it. I suppose my approach has been that by the end of reading those books I want my life experience to be enhanced, I want to feel I *know* more. And that's worked for me – I drive along in the car, for example, and some music will come on and I'll remember what Nick said about it. It's the same when I look at the night sky.

KDG: *How have the booksellers responded?*

MV: Slowly. I discovered that the books were probably not for the general market I'd anticipated – their market is more of a niche. But the independent sellers came on board really enthusiastically and 12 months on we feel that we've really permeated. I think readers are coming to see the series as work by reasonably well-known, established writers or experts in their area. I actually get offers from quite a number of younger, unknown hopefuls, but I'm clear that the series needs either terrific writers or people who have a huge passion – or, at best, both. Interestingly, *How to Gaze at the Southern Stars* has been my biggest seller. I knew when I first suggested it and got orders from Michael King and Bryce Courtenay that it would grab people. It was one of those nice publishing moments when a hunch was absolutely correct.

KDG: *Given what you said earlier about many books failing – are you prepared then to lose out with some publications?*

MV: Despite what I said, a small publisher like us does need every book to make money. I can see that as we become more established we can take more risks – though in a sense we're risk-taking all the time because it's all new. This whole venture is built on a great deal of debt. Tragic!

KDG: *When you say 'we'?*

MV: It's really me – and my hugely supportive husband. I thought right from the beginning that it might work better if it was an individual vision. Early on, Sarah Bennett came on board: she's fantastic. She knows everything about production – about which I knew nothing – and we do talk the books over a lot. And we have Andrea Tandy who's a great publicist, so we do have a bit of a dialogue. I had an advisory group initially, and I do still talk to Jane Tolerton. I feel that you must have a strong idea of what you want to achieve.

KDG: *Much like being a writer – it can't be done by committee.*

MV: I've actually ended up doing much of the editing myself in The Ginger Series partly for the same reason – I've felt it very important to have the consistency that results from the same person ... overseeing, if you like.

KDG: *What about distribution and sales?*

MV: I got Craig Potton on board early on – I didn't want to go with a multi-national publisher and I really liked their reputation – I thought they'd share my philosophy of publishing. And I met Sarah through Craig Potton – she'd published a little book herself called, *Best of Wellington*. And an in-house publicist was the second person I appointed because I *knew* that publicity was the key – especially with selling non-fiction. The potential's huge – and we have had some fantastic publicity: radio and television – because people want to hear about these obsessives! But the weak link, as I said before, is that the booksellers aren't always picking up on the publicity. But we're getting better at making those links: emailing booksellers ahead of time, keeping on communicating.

KDG: *Tell me about your other publications aside from The Ginger Series.*

MV: We've done the two travel books, Polly Greeks' *Embracing the Dragon* and *The Miss Tutti Frutti Contest* by Graeme Lay. Graeme approached me about that one – he'd done a series of pieces on the Pacific. And Harvey McQueen's charming book about life and gardening, *This Piece of Earth*. There's a cookbook coming – *Mouthful: Simple & Stunning Party Food* by Danielle Bowater – stylish finger food from the world's great cuisines. We've done this by co-publishing, which is the only way we've been able to afford it because cookbooks are rather expensive to produce.

And we have an amazing photographic book coming, *In Extreme Danger; The Story of Geoff Mackley, The World's Most Daring Photographer* – co-written with John McCrystal. This will be a big production for us, so we're trying to get a co-publisher on board here, too.

KDG: *So, presumably you spend quite a bit of your time working on that kind of thing – wooing co-publishers etc.*

MV: Bob Ross (Tandem Press) has always said that you have to be an international publisher based in New Zealand, rather than just a New Zealand publisher; if that was our sole position we wouldn't do The Ginger Series and we *love* those. I think it's actually good to do a bit of both – books that are for here and books that will have an overseas life. I took on *Embracing the Dragon* and *Miss Tutti Frutti* quite conscious that the authors wouldn't be going on and on about New Zealand – they were New Zealanders engaging with the wider world – and so their stories would speak to an international audience. They're out there now with agents.

KDG: *What are your biggest battles as a small publisher?*

MV: I'd say the biggest difficulty is to get the really good authors to come to us. The prestige of big publishers weighs heavy with established writers, I think. I had a manuscript early on that I would love to have published and that I knew would do very well but the author finally gave it to one of the big publishers – in fact the publisher courted

Notice of Meeting

The Annual General Meeting New Zealand Book Council Wednesday 20 April 5.15pm National Library Auditorium

Notice is given that amendments prepared by the Council to the Rules of the New Zealand Book Council will be presented for adoption at this meeting. The amendments finalise the final changes providing for the implementation of the new governance structure.

Any nominations for the Council need to be lodged with Sir Kenneth Keith the Chair by Wednesday 6 April.

Sir Kenneth Keith
Chair

Programme

- 5.15pm Annual General Meeting
- 5.30pm Refreshments
- 6.00pm Event
- 6.45pm Partner Acknowledgements
- 7.00pm Evening concludes

The New Zealand Book Council Statement of Financial Performance for the year ended 31 December 2004

Income	2004	2003
Creative		
New Zealand	145000	140000
Project Income	128448	78941
Contracts	69662	49290
Grants	180379	31087
Subscriptions	75439	70205
Sundry	9187	2769
	608115	372292
Expenditure		
Project Expenditure	281097	181785
Administration and Member Services	297877	163971
Depreciation	10165	9112
	589139	354868
Excess Income over Expenditure	18976	17424

this author with a \$5,000 advance ... what hope did we have? And of course the author was thrilled at the prestige attached to the publishing imprint. So we just have to do a great job, maintain our high standards, and make an impact in both readers and writers' minds. It'll take time.

KDG: *So, for the immediate future?*

MV: We'll keep on with four Ginger Series titles a year – Justin Paton (art curator and editor of *Landfall*) is doing *How to Look at a Painting* this year; also John Saker, *How to Drink a Glass of Wine*; and there's one yet to be commissioned. We have the cookbook, the Mackley/McCrystal photographic book: *Selling New Zealand Movies* by Lindsey Shelton. Also a book about writing by Gerry Evans, *Killing Your Darlings*. We're aiming for about ten books a year.

KDG: *And you'll stay with non-fiction?*

MV: God yes. I don't know anything about fiction at all.

KDG: *Any profit yet?*

MV: Not a cent. A business plan – if there were one – would be saying that in five years we have to be making a profit. Let's hope. I do believe that the book publishing industry in New Zealand is at a turning point – it's where music and film were 15 years ago. There's no longer the anxiety and the cringe – people really believe it can be done and *should* be done. Moreover, the big publishers are often too timid to take on the sort of things we're bringing out ... there's a gap in the reading market that we've been able to take up.

You know, the most important thing for a small publisher? Confidence. You *have* to believe in your books and that you'll find a market. The money worries could send you under ... confidence keeps you buoyant.

Awa Press titles to date:

Stonehenge Aotearoa: The Complete Guide

Richard Hall, Kay Leather, Geoffrey Dobson, \$19.95

This Piece of Earth: A Life in my New Zealand Garden

Harvey McQueen, \$34.95

Embracing the Dragon: A woman's journey along the Great Wall of China

Polly Greeks, \$29.95

The Miss Tutti Frutti Contest: Travel Tales of the South Pacific

Graeme Lay, \$29.95

Best: A New Zealand Compendium

Compiled by Ella Griffiths, \$29.95

Upcoming:

The Selling of New Zealand Movies

Lindsay Shelton, \$39.95, to be released July

In Extreme Danger: The Extraordinary Story of Geoff Mackley, The World's Most Daring Photographer

Geoff Mackley with John McCrystal, \$49.95 to be released in July

The Ginger Series

How to Listen to Pop Music

Nick Bollinger, \$24.94

How to Gaze at the Southern Stars

Richard Hall, \$24.95

How to Pick a Winner

Mary Mountier, \$24.94

How to Watch a Game of Rugby

Spiro Zavos, \$19.94

Upcoming:

How to Catch a Fish

Kevin Ireland, \$24.94 to be released early April

How to Drink a Glass of Wine

John Saker, \$24.95 to be released in May

Win a Literary Weekend in Auckland

Join the New Zealand Book Council, or gift a membership to a friend, by 29 April, and go into a draw to win a literary weekend for two in Auckland. The prize will take you and a friend to the May 2005 Auckland Writers & Readers Festival.

Spend a weekend in the City of Sails attending Auckland's Premier Literary Event. Join international and local writers in conversation about fiction, poetry, history, biography and food. The prize includes a selection of 10 double tickets for sessions running on from Friday 20 to Sunday 22 May.

The lucky winner will enjoy two return airfares from any airport in New Zealand to Auckland, two nights' accommodation at the Hilton Auckland on Friday 20 and Saturday 21 May 2005, and weekend use of a rental car. They will also receive a gift of books and Book Council merchandise.

Enter by 29 April. The prize will be drawn on Monday, 2 May 2005, and the winner notified by phone. The results will be posted on the Book Council's website and in the Winter 2005 issue of *Booknotes*.

For more information, including conditions, visit our website at www.bookcouncil.org.nz or contact the New Zealand Book Council on 04 499 1569.