

# UNDER *the* SUN

Shortlisted Montana fiction finalist Nigel Cox talks about pop music, aliens, cancer, childhood, writing, being happy and being saved.

BY DENIS WELCH / PORTRAIT BY PAUL MCCREDIE



Nigel Cox with his wife, Susanna and children, Kate, Frank and Andrew-Jack.

When Nigel Cox was nine he almost died. It happened at Double Bridges, a popular river swimming-hole north of Masterton. His family were picnicking there with another family. Tea was being made, sausages cooked. The thermette was in use. This would have been about 1960.

"I was playing with the Henderson boys," says Cox, "and they could all swim; I couldn't. And I was standing on a tongue of papa sticking out from the edge of the bank, and tossing a ball back and forth. The ball came not quite close enough for me to get it and I went right to the edge of the tongue of papa and I flicked the ball back; that effectively took the whole focus away from me and I slipped off the tongue of papa into quite deep water.

"Down I went and up I came, down I went and up I came. I could see the ceiling [of the water], I could see it all, I could see the bubbles around me: I was sort of hyper-aware, too, I was aware I was in danger. Yes, I could see that ceiling and I was fighting to get to it, but every time I got there I couldn't stay there long enough.

But as I went down for the third time a hand came out of the sky and pulled me out by the wrist.

"Unbelievable. I can still see that hand. I knew who it was, but I didn't say anything. I ran off along the shore of the river choking as if something shameful had happened. It took me a very long time to acknowledge and thank the person who had saved

me. I would have drowned."

What are we saved for? Don't ask. Just know that the waters can close over you at any moment and make the most of your oxygen supply. In Cox's case, however, it was another brush with death nearly 40 years later that really made him appreciate his mortality. At that point, after publishing two novels that hadn't exactly set the literary world on fire, he had been labouring on and off for 13 years on a massive manuscript called *Atlas Walker* (still unpublished). But in 1997, when he was first diagnosed with cancer, a nurse told him: if there's anything you really want to do with your life, I'd get on with it now if I were you. The next day he bought a laptop and started work on *Skylark Lounge*, a liberating novel that seemed to come from a completely different place than the earlier ones.

Two brilliant novels – *Tarzan Presley* and *Responsibility* – followed, plus a career change that took him from Te Papa to Berlin, while the cancer seemed to recede. But now it has come back with a venge-

ance, and no helping hand, it seems, can save Cox now. I ring him for an interview, full of apologies for intruding at such a time, but he doesn't demur. "That's all right," he says gently. "These things are really happening."

In the cab to Seatoun, Guy Mitchell is singing the blues. It's a blustery day. We go past Rent-a-Dent; past news updates and

secure storage; past just landed and cleared for takeoff. The Cox house, right by the beach, is a cheerful jumble; wife Susanna welcomes us in. The sea wind thrashes around outside like a wilful child determined to do some damage. Wide-eyed kids bunched up on a sofa watch TV.

Cox is in the sun porch, his favourite spot these days. Cancer treatment has narrowed and hollowed his face; his hair has gone completely grey. His hands are almost bloodless. Cancer of the liver has swollen his stomach to three times its normal size. Chemotherapy doesn't work. He has been on morphine for the past 10 days. There is possibly only one thing to be said for dying

like this, and that is that it gives you a little time to look back in full consciousness over your life before you leave it – an opportunity denied Cox's father Jack, who died a few months ago with his mind in disarray.

When Cox was born in 1951, Jack was the sole-charge teacher of Marima School

west of Pahiatua.

"I've got pictures of him with the school flag being carried out," says Cox, in a reedy, cracking voice, "but what I was mostly struck by when I went back – because we didn't live there forever, we shifted around a bit, you do your rural service in different places, and then we settled in Masterton when I was five – was how unbelievably

familiar it was to me: the sounds, the shapes of the hills and something intangible that's between shape and sound, that really is the feel of the place. And I was really astounded by how strongly I remembered that and how strongly it affected me."

These things really happened. The school was across the road from the house.

"It was a gravel road and in my nappies, real nappies, not Treasures, I used to crawl across the road to school. And the girls would say, 'Oh, Mr Cox, let him stay, we'll look after him, Mr Cox.' So I used to sit around and pee on the floor and so forth. So I played with those kids, and I played

with Rodney Hughes up the road; but there was a great shortage of people to play with, no question."

In Masterton, "Mum and Dad had a library of these little books that they gave you as prizes – the classics, light classics. We had all those: *Treasure Island*, *Tom*

*Sawyer*, *Two Years Before the Mast*, *The Man in the Iron Mask* ... and I read all those indiscriminately." He is such an indiscriminate reader, he says, that he will even read soap-powder packets, "though perhaps not quite to the degree of Janet Frame". He read thousands of comics, too: he wasn't supposed to, but a kid up the road called Colin Price had a box of them under his bed.

Nigel Cox in 1978



Didn't every child who ever grew up in New Zealand know a kid up the road called Colin Price? I never got to ask Cox that. His father wound up as head of curriculum development in Wellington; his mother Delphine, now 80, trained as a kindergarten teacher and after raising her children worked in a variety of medical practices.

Though his family moved to the Hutt Valley when he was a teenager, Cox's main childhood memories seem to be of Masterton, where he grew up on the edge of town. Or maybe I only ask him about Masterton because that's where I grew up, too, on the opposite edge of town.

"Over the fence we had sheep," he recalls, "and what Toss Woollaston called the distant faraway hills. I used to stand out in our backyard and see the distant faraway hills and wonder about them. That's where we had our adventures. It was a different childhood in those days, when Mum used to stand on the back doorstep and shout 'NIGELLLL!' and we would come running from however many miles away you were."

He was a bit of a loner. He lay awake late at night listening to the radio with the volume on very low. "I had friends, but read a lot, and was the kind of person who could be called a bedroom obsessive – very happy studying magazines about New Zealand hockey and learning the names of all the players and their birthdates and those kinds of things. And pop music. Everybody was interested in pop music but I was *really* interested in pop music. I knew things that no person in their right mind would know."

**D**ecades later, it was the love of pop music, coupled with an interest in aliens, that opened the door to Cox's transformation as a writer.

"*Dirty Work* and *Waiting for Einstein* [the two early novels] were both written thinking, you have to write serious books ... but when I hit upon *Skylark Lounge* and decided I was going to write about aliens – it was 'Right, you're gone for all money now, so you can write what you like. Once you're writing about aliens, anything's okay: it's all rubbish now, so away you go!'"

Similarly with pop music – Dusty Springfield figures prominently in *Skylark Lounge*. The trick was to stop feeling ashamed of such things as the subjects of fiction.

Having just read *Responsibility*, I praise the demotic vigour of his writing, tell him he's our Saul Bellow. "I'd love to feel that was true," he replies. "I should hang that in my room! It's true that I do want to try to find the demotic vigour that is serious. And that, I think, is the challenge.

"I want to write books filled with the way that we talk, that we really talk."

Into the sun porch comes four-year-old Frank concentrating hard on maintaining the balance of a plate of biscuits. Freshly baked ginger snaps. It doesn't get much better than this. "He's our Berlin baby," says Cox with pride. They also have Kate, 11, and Andrew-Jack, 8. In these times, says Cox, "The real tough stuff comes when you think about your children and not seeing them and not being there to help them and teach them and learn from them. That's the really, really hard stuff, and I do get upset about that."

Is he bitter about what has happened to him? He almost shouts his answer in disbelief.

"I don't feel bitter. I don't feel bitter at all. No. Somebody said to me, did you stamp your foot and get angry? And I stared at her and thought: last thing on

my mind! Last thing. I mean, look at that kid, Grahame Thorne's kid, who's got his neck broken and can't ...

"Terrible things happen to people all the time. Saul Bellow talks about a pain schedule in *Mr Sammler's Planet*. If you talk about a happiness schedule my life has got happy as I've got older. I've got more out of it. I've just simply got happier. And then to find this out: well, it wasn't the best news I ever had. But you think, well, it could have been worse."

Looking back now, what does he reflect on? "I think and reflect on the surprising amount of ground I've covered, because I'm not an adventurous person, but I've finished up living in more countries and doing more things than I would have thought, and that has surprised me. I do think – I suppose this is a statement – I have made a distinctive new territory in New Zealand fiction. I don't mean that it's necessarily the world's most important new section or that it will change things forever; it's just that it does have the sense that you've made your own little territory, and that's very good."

Some things that used to matter don't matter now? "That's very true. It was always hard to watch television in this country, but it's impossible now." So there are blessings? "Exactly."

**N**otwithstanding the state of his health, Cox has another novel in the works, two-thirds written, and an idea for another beyond that. He can't fully keep up his usual writing routine, but got up at five this morning and worked till about 6.45am.

"I can walk to the dairy no problem. Not too good on running. A bit careful on uneven ground. Got to watch myself a bit. Doing physical things tires me out. Obviously."

He loves Wellington, would live in no other city, will live now in no other place but here, in Seatoun by the sea.

"You couldn't pick a nicer place on Earth. There's so much happening with the birds and the clouds and the skyline and the hill-line there, and this boat is anchored here today because of the rough weather. The big boats go past ... and then you know the playground has its own ecology: kids flow in, kids flow out ..."

And it's not dark yet, though it may be getting there.

"No, I feel too well for that. Since the last dose of chemo wore off and the morphine kicked in, I'm very uncomfortable – horrible big thing to drag around – and I'm very weak, too. But I don't feel I'm going to fall down dead tomorrow. It's too soon for last things."