

BOOKS

Giving up the ghost

THE GHOST WRITER
by John Harwood
(Jonathan Cape, pb \$34.95)
Reviewed by PAM HENSON

JOHN HARWOOD, tyro author of *The Ghost Writer*, adds a new, ironic dimension to the idea of light fiction. Fighting my way through the multiple narrators, the structural layers, the ghostly tales within tales, each with its own cast of characters, I realised quite early on that I was past caring what happened to the overloaded plot.

Aged 13, Gerard Freeman, resident of Mawson, Australia, breaks free from Phyllis, his viciously over-protective mother, by acquiring an English pen friend, Alice.

Both women have secrets: Phyllis hides a photograph of a beautiful young woman and the manuscript of a ghost story from her intensely interested son; and Alice, using an agency, withholds her address and photograph from the lovesick Gerard, while she recovers from a spinal injury. She writes coyly sexy letters during the 22 years of her recovery, while Gerard patiently waits for her: the longest tease in fiction?

After his mother's death, Gerard travels to England in search of his family history and Alice. His research in the British Museum and creepy Ferrer Close, the family mansion, alternate with ghost stories brimming with parallel motifs, doomed romances, and plots that often involve obsession with a painting.

The ghost writer is Viola, Gerard's grandmother, four of whose stories appear in the novel. One of them, *The Revenant*, is nearly 100 pages long. The stories echo events in the "real" world of the novel. Strange. They were written decades before.

V I Warshawski would have worked it out, but Gerard is a rather wet librarian and hasn't a clue what's going on. Then again, neither had I, but I was a lot more suspicious than Gerard, and a lot less interested. I would have gone back to Australia long before the denouement with its resonances of *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations*.

SHELF LIFE

You read it here first

In our series celebrating New Zealand's best bookshops, **Ruth Nichol** visits Unity.

WHEN Alan Preston first opened Unity Books on the site that is now occupied by the BNZ building in Willis St, his stock included books by the then little-known Pakistani writer Tariq Ali. Thirty-seven years later, Ali, who has forged an international reputation for his forthright political views, was a guest at New Zealand Post Writers and Readers Week.

"That really sums up Unity, and Alan," says store manager Tilly Lloyd of Mr Preston's prescience.

"We're trying to sell the serious, saleable book," says Mr Preston himself of the philosophy that has driven the store since it opened in 1967. "That doesn't mean we don't want to stock the John Grishams and the Catherine Cooksons, but other stores do it better. You have to have a saleable book, but for us it's more likely to be something like Michael King's biography of Janet Frame."

It's a philosophy that in its early days saw Unity stocking the hippy manual *The Whole Earth Catalogue* alongside so-called "right wing" works such as Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*.

"We stocked the *Whole Earth Catalogue* because no one else was," explains Mr Preston, whose involvement with the store these days is largely administrative. "We've tended to stock books that no one else wanted to bother with."

The approach has paid off. The store's moves up and down Willis St (it is now in its fourth Willis St location) have been driven by mundane things such as leases expiring, but each new site has been larger than the last.

Ms Lloyd joined the staff in 1989. She had previously run the Women's Place Bookshop in Upper Cuba St and now



Present:
Tilly Lloyd, front left, and staff at Unity Books.
Picture:
JEFF McEWAN

Writers and Readers Week bestsellers

1. **The Nimrod Flip-Out** by Etgar Keret (Picador)
2. **No Great Mischief** by Alistair MacLeod (Vintage)
3. **The Bus Driver Who Wanted to be God** by Etgar Keret (Picador)
4. **The Clash of Fundamentalisms** by Tariq Ali (Verso)
5. **Independence Day** by Richard Ford (Vintage)
6. **The Lunar Men** by Jenny Uglow (Faber and Faber)
7. **Ghost Dance** by Douglas Wright (Penguin)
8. **A View from the Bed** by Jenny Diski (Virago)
9. **Karmic Traces** by Eliot Weinberger (Norton)
10. **Stranger on a Train** by Jenny Diski (Virago)

■ *Unity was the official bookseller for New Zealand Post Writers and Readers Week.*

runs Unity with book buyer Anna Applin and 13 other staff members. But her association with the store dates back to the 1970s, when it was located at 42 Willis St.

"I used to meet my partner there on Friday nights. At that stage, it had established a strong presence in the alternative culture and multicultural Wellington milieu. It still had all the serious stuff

that any good bookshop should have, but it also had a huge range of books for the subcultures. It was the only shop that was feeding these subcultures."

Interests have changed over the years — many readers are now more intent on finding a book with a recipe for the perfect laska than 101 things to do with hessian — but Unity continues to provide an

eclectic mix of books, which, Ms Lloyd says, is increasingly customer driven.

"We enjoy a sophisticated and knowledgeable customer base. I can't believe how often people try and order books that haven't even been listed on our database yet. Often we see it as a good tip, and order a couple in."

It's part of providing the point of difference needed to ensure the shop's survival in the face of large chains and internet booksellers. Having well-informed, helpful staff is part of that, too. Each day starts with a "morning talk", and as you might expect, conversation often turns to what the staff have been reading; a love of books is the first requirement for staff.

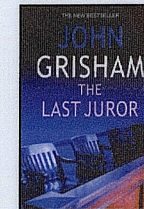
"The staff have always been very savvy, no matter what incarnation of the shop you are talking about," says Ms Lloyd. "The books have been sharp, and the staff have been familiar with them. You don't want to work at Unity Books if you're not interested in ideas."

■ *Unity Books, 57 Willis St.*

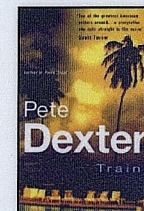
CRIME BRIEFLY

Bernard Carpinter

■ John Grisham ventures a little outside his usual territory in **The Last Juror** (Century, hb \$54.95). He delivers some interesting murders and a trial, but this is not really a novel about the law, except in as much as it discriminates against blacks in 1970s Mississippi. There's more than a touch of Southern Gothic as young Willie Traynor covers gruesome and bizarre developments while running his small-town newspaper, and an equal amount of humour in some of the events and in Grisham's wry narration of them. A very good book, with a lot in it.



■ Pete Dexter's **Train** (Heinemann, pb \$34.95) is a novel of rare impact. Appalling crimes, recounted in clear-eyed detail, are juxtaposed with moments of tenderness and sensitivity — all in a laconic, ungrammatical style that conveys the patterns of conversational language in postwar California. Miller Packard, a policeman with a "mile away" look in his eyes, gets involved with the beautiful survivor of a murder attack, and with Train, a young black with a remarkable gift for golf. Different damaged characters have different senses of morality, but they are all stuck in an amoral world.



■ Kerry Greenwood is best known for her 1920s mysteries starring the aristocratic Phryne Fisher. In **Earthly Delights** (Allen & Unwin, pb \$24.95), she brings us up to date and down to the level of the common folk. Baker Corinne Chapman, her witchy friend Merce and others receive treats along the lines of "The wages of sin is death", and indeed people start dying. Warm, witty, erotic and very readable, the book also tells you a lot of good stuff about bread.

