

# The Literary City

BY KIRAN DASS. PHOTOGRAPHY BY EMMA ALLEN. ILLUSTRATIONS BY DANIEL LOORPARG



**W**riter Lauris Edmond really hit a bulls-eye with her poem about Wellington, *The Active Voice*. You can read it on a terrific plaque down by the rowing lagoon on the Wellington Writers' Walk.

Wellington is brimming with literary talent and crawling with passionate booklovers. Home of the International Institute of Modern Letters (IIML) – graduates include the fabulous writers Emily Perkins, Duncan Sarkies, Louise Wareham Leonard and Carl Shuker – as well as a swag of thriving bit-player publishers and independent

bookshops enjoying a roaring trade, Wellington is undeniably a distinctly literary city.

"Lately, when I'm on foot in the city, I try to mentally trace the streams that pre-dated the paving of Willis Street," says Tilly Lloyd, co-owner of Unity Books. "Thinking of the whole island, I wonder whether there actually is a kind of muscley, cerebral luck to finding ourselves at the head of Maui's fish."

Bill Manhire, director of the IIML, says there is something about Wellington's topography that feeds into the creativity of the town. "There aren't many straight lines in

*It's true you can't live here by chance,  
You have to do and be, not simply watch  
Or even describe, this city of action,  
The world headquarters of the verb...*

**book (book), n.** 1. a written or printed work of some length, as a treatise, novel, or other literary composition, **esp. on consecutive sheets of paper fastened or bound together in a volume.**



left: 'Lagarus Ovatus  
En Masse' by Catherine  
Anderton



COURTESY OF THE NELSON MAIL

line and preparing for her next project at Weta Workshop, where she's worked for the past three years. "They've all influenced and helped me. I also think that having drive and determination is also very

important, because you can have wonderful ideas but if you don't put them into practice then no one will see them."

Claire has been pushing the boundaries of creativity ever since she was a child. After making clothes for her Barbie dolls and pets while growing up in the creative hotspot that is Golden Bay, she began experimenting with chicken wire before honing her intricate and delicate wire techniques on copper, and later fine sterling silver.

After entering her first costume in WOW as an eight year old, she left school at 13 to concentrate on her passion. She was rewarded two years later with two WOW awards for her sculptural copper-wire creation, Perelandra. At 18, Claire became the youngest Montana Supreme WOW Award Winner to date after winning the Nelson City Council Reflective Surfaces Section with Eos (Evolution of Spirit) - a glistening and insect-like creation made from sterling silver wire, copper wire, Swarovski crystals, glass beads and silks.

"It was a wonderful feeling to receive the supreme award. It was like being in a dream, and I just had to tell myself to go with it."

Determined to learn as much as she could about costumes, art and fashion, Claire travelled to Singapore, Dubai, Scotland, England, Italy, Paris, New York, New Jersey, California and Oregon thanks to her WOW travel money. She spent time at a fashion house in Dubai called Arushi, learning textile design for wedding gowns. And whilst in London, she spent a few days in the workroom of the

late designer Alexander McQueen.

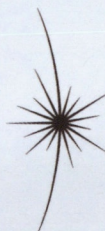
Upon her return down under, Claire's impressive portfolio caught the eye of Richard Taylor of WETA Workshop and she was offered the opportunity to create costumes and textures for the Na'vi characters in Avatar, which were later turned into digital costumes. A project she had to keep secret for 2½ years.

"It was an absolutely incredible experience, and a huge dream come true for me. It's a real feeling of satisfaction to see something so big come together that's taken so many years and so many people to create."

As this year's Montana WOW Awards draw near, Claire admits she won't be entering because another secretive project is occupying her time. However, the young visionary, who has attended every show since she was six, says she'll be in the audience and be on hand to encourage the next generation of artists.

"Follow your dreams and keep working on them," she enthuses. "Amazing things can happen if you focus on something you love or want."

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**below:** Unity's Tilly Lloyd shows off her dizzying collection of local authors

Wellington, which is good. Wellington writers are good at turning corners when they need to, and don't get caught in an intellectual grid."

"And it's not so much that it's cold or wet. It's that it changes all the time. You don't quite know what's going to happen. That's a great liberation for our writers; they're responsive to change. They're not complacent."

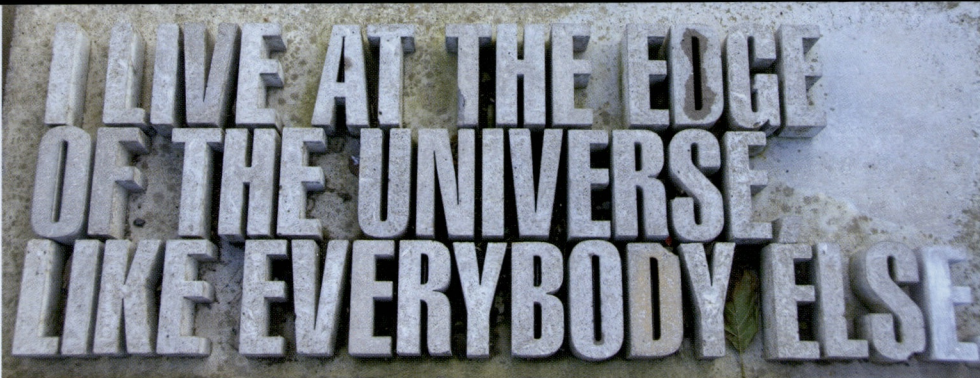
Manhire also points out that the geography of Wellington means people are drawn into the lively downtown area, and that this encourages a kind of community spirit amongst the writers here. Two completely different authors, such as Fiona Kidman and Ian Wedde, can both front up at the same book launch or on the street and still have a natter.

"I was attending a book launch at Unity when Steve Braunias said he was amazed at how many people were there. I don't know if he was just being friendly, but he said, 'People don't show up to things like this in Auckland.'"

"Writers here aren't strangers to each other; there's a mutual respect and they support each other a lot. They're not tragic, isolated, starving artists. Well... they might starve a bit, but in good company," laughs Manhire.

The prestigious IIML programme is key for writers to gravitate to Wellington too. With its outpouring of such diverse and strong voices, its solid history attracts people who want to be a part of that tradition.

Since completing an MA in creative writing in 2007, IIML graduate



Eleanor Catton has won a bundle of awards for her spunky first novel, *The Rehearsal*. Named best first book of fiction in the Montana New Zealand Book Awards in 2009, it has also gone on to win the UK Society of Authors' Betty Trask Award (worth £8,000), and was long-listed for the Guardian First Book Award. Catton has since moved her studies to the US, attending the highly-regarded Iowa Writers' Workshop.

But what happens to these writers after they graduate and publish their first collection of poetry or short stories, or first novel? And how do they sustain a satisfying career and living from writing? Most find alternative ways of making a living, such as teaching or working as posties, which allows them to continue their work.

"I think it's toughest on people who go into theatre, like Duncan Sarkies or Jo Randerson. It's harder for them because it's almost possible to do it full time. It's easier for poets; they know they're not going to make any money," says Manhire.

Learning Media, an award-winning publisher and provider of educational services, is one local source for job opportunities. And while small local publishers face the threat of being eaten up by the big guys (Mallinson Rendall was recently purchased by Penguin), there is still a host of interesting smaller publishers in Wellington that still take risks and publish works that larger publishers would be too







verb (vûrb), *n.* a word used to describe an action, state, or occurrence, and forming a main part of the predicate of a sentence.

frightened to touch. Unity's Tilly Lloyd rattles off a dizzying list, including "in strict alphabetical order": Awa Press, Bridget Williams Books, Dunmore, Earl of Seacliff Art Workshop, Gecko, Headworx, Huia, Lawrence & Gibson, Phantom Press, Te Papa Press, Victoria University Press and Wedge Press.

"Until the 1980s, nearly all the big New Zealand publishers and distributors were based here before high rents, high international freight rates and opportunism led them north. But there's still a heck of a lot of articulate people around, so the local literary landscape is still quite vast. (I hope I listed everyone... there'll be hell to pay if I've left someone out!)," she says.

There are perhaps a dozen more small publishers in Wellington another tier down, and then hundreds of bit-players who are self-publishing their work; a fraction of which stand the test of time.

Powerful in terms of the writers on its list, Victoria University Press

(VUP) has been publishing quality fiction, poetry, New Zealand history, biography and essays since the 1970s. It first published award-winning author Elizabeth Knox when she was in her mid-20s and Barbara Anderson when she was in her mid-60s.

"And we're still publishing Elizabeth 20 years on," says publisher Fergus Barrowman who started at VUP part time in 1984. He ended up abandoning his masters to work there full time because he loved publishing so much.

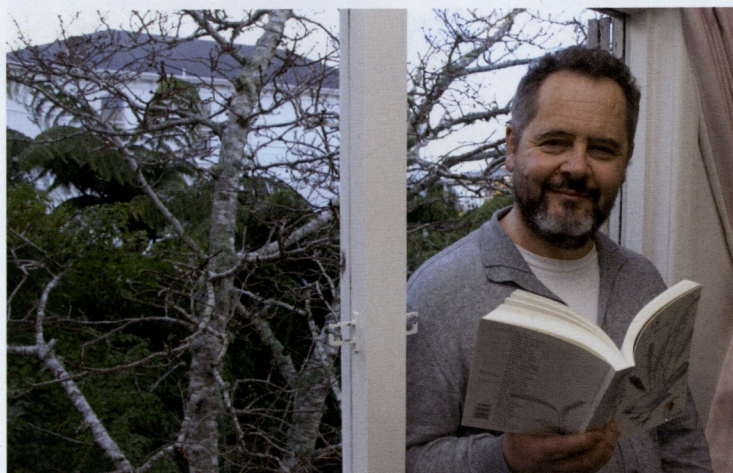
Barrowman says it's the unique combination of the semi-creative but deadline-driven practice of publishing that appeals to him. Always working with new local writers keeps up a good momentum of freshness and interest, which he says fosters a community spirit that in turn encourages writers to do their best.

"There's also the lasting imprint of Bill's teaching," he adds.

Terrific 'Wellington' writers from the VUP list might not necessarily be Wellington born and bred, and they often drift to other shores. Sometimes they return to New Zealand, and sometimes they don't. Emily Perkins (author of the award-winning and glacial-cool Novel *About My Wife*), Catherine Chidgey and Eleanor Catton spring to mind.

While Catton is originally from Christchurch, the time she spent studying and living in Wellington, and soaking up its ambience, has been influential on her as a writer. And Barrowman says her career will be extraordinary to watch. Wellington seems to be the kind of place that grabs you by the scruff of the neck and forces you to knuckle down and commit to the often solitary act of writing.

"Maybe the weather makes writers stay inside and just get on with their work. None of those early evenings in the garden with a meal, like in Auckland," muses Barrowman.



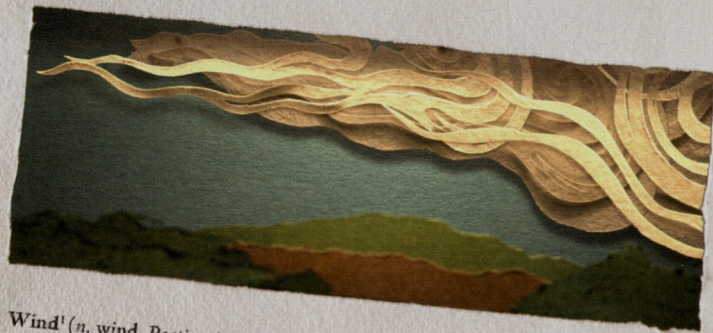




**left:** Unity Books an oasis for Wellington writers

**below left:** Fergus Barrowman of Victoria University Press

**below right:** Bill Manhire Director of the International Institute of Modern Letters



*Wind*<sup>1</sup> (*n.* wind, *Poetic* wind; *v.* wind), *n.* 1. Air in motion; a state of movement in the air; a current of air, of any degree of force perceptible to the senses, occurring naturally in the atmosphere, usually parallel to the surface of the ground.

Back at the Unity coalface, Lloyd says that even if Wellington's 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: Wellington is a condensed sort of town that takes a bit of leaning into, and not just because of the climate."

Unity Books has long been a pivotal hub in Wellington's literary landscape. Past and present 'shop girls' include notable writers who now appear on the shelves. It's where writers work part time while studying. These writers then have their book launches at Unity, after which their books glide off the shelves. It's a special network that supports itself.

"There's no point in having a bookshop if it's not part of a network. To add to what you said earlier, Wellington's swarming with booklovers, writers, booksellers and publishers; people who bridge it all. The shop rides so many waves, and those are privileges worth taking care of," says Lloyd, who reckons there are several factors that contribute to Unity's thriving position in the book trade.

"There are lots of layers: interpersonal relationships, history, mutual regard, being handy. Unity thrives essentially because people need us and we need them. We know many readers of this magazine will have recently hit 'send' to their online supplier, and that's their prerogative. Ours is to keep an oasis on the street."

The bestselling collection *Big Weather: Poems of Wellington* (Mallinson Rendel, 2000) selected by Gregory O'Brien and Louise White takes poems illustrating the inner city, harbour, suburbs, parks and even Lower Hutt, Porirua and Plimmerton to create an evocative portrait of Wellington; celebrating all that makes this a unique place. Even Anne Noble's lusciously moody cover photography gives you the gist of what this town is about. Poems by Wellington's most famous

daughter, Katherine Mansfield, are collected alongside Sam Hunt, Robyn Hyde, Vincent O'Sullivan and Jenny Bornholdt.

"Anne Mallinson took a good pulse when she published *Big Weather*. The derivatives – anthologies on Auckland, Canterbury and Otago – couldn't match it," says Lloyd.

And while I acknowledge the vaguely naff and borderline cheesy sentiment expressed in the introduction to *Wellington: The city in literature* (the 2003 anthology edited by local poet Kate Camp), I still reckon there is much truth and resonance in her words:

*Like a beautiful and moody lover, Wellington doesn't need to treat you kindly. Your friends sometimes wonder what you see in it, but when the city is good to you, and with its days of almost painful gorgeousness and clarity, you can forgive its bluster, its temper tantrums and cold shoulder. You may be clutching a lamppost, but at least you know you're alive...*

