

Waikato Institute of Technology, New Zealand

Gail Pittaway

Writing in Aotearoa right now: a bricolage

Ten New Zealand writers respond to an invitation to write about their experience of writing

Abstract:

Ten writers in New Zealand were invited to write about their experience of writing. In alphabetical order of surname, here are their responses. Responses, including the editor, by: Maxine Alterio, Julie Brocket, Laurice Gilbert, Witi Ihimaera, Joan Rosier Jones, Christine Leunens, Tina Makeriti, Rex McGregor, Carol E Paterson, Gail Pittaway and Judith White.

Biographical note:

Gail Pittaway is currently lecturing in creative writing, drama and storytelling to Master's level at Waikato Institute of Technology. The only New Zealand executive member of the AAWP, she regularly contributes papers to their and other conferences in the areas of writing and communication, having also been a member of the New Zealand Communication Association since 1997, and of the Tertiary Writing Network of New Zealand since 1998. More recently, she has been investigating more popular genres of writing, namely food and crime writing, and has had academic articles and chapters accepted by the UK based journal of creative writing, *New writing*. She writes poetry and short stories as well as reviewing theatre for New Zealand newspapers and theatre websites and reviewing books for National Radio NZ's *Nine to Noon* show.

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Ten writers in New Zealand were invited to write about their experience of writing. In alphabetical order of surname, here are their responses. This also includes the editor of this collection.

Maxine Alterio

Fiction and non-fiction writer

PhD

Dunedin, New Zealand

<http://www.maxinealterio.co.nz>

In my academic role I mentor colleagues and students to make meaning of their professional lives using reflective storytelling processes, an approach outlined in my co-authored text *Learning through Storytelling: Using Reflection and Experience to Improve Learning* (RoutledgeFalmer 2003, UK & USA). I believe when we work with stories in formalised ways we enhance our understandings of topics and events through drawing on and extending our critical and reflective thinking skills. Formalised storytelling also accommodates diverse cultural and emotional realities, offers multiple ways into a story, deepens our awareness of self, others and the world we inhabit, and considers the role of empathy in everyday interactions.

I have also developed, coordinated and for seven years taught on creative writing courses at Otago Polytechnic as an adjunct to my academic role. In my experience creative writing students flourish when exposed to a finely tuned mix of support and challenge, invigorating conversations about writing and reading, and stimulating verbal and written exercises and activities, augmented with free-writing periods. Likewise, co-negotiated lecturer, self and peer feedback processes encourage students to learn from and with others. Involving those in the class in learning and assessment decisions helps develop a collaborative and creative learning culture where every voice is listened to and valued.

As the author of three works of fiction: *Lives News and Other Stories* (Steele Roberts, NZ, 2002); *Ribbons of Grace* (Penguin, NZ, 2007); and *Lives We Leave Behind* (Penguin, NZ, 2012 & Editions PRISMA, France, 2013) I work with experience, observation and imagination to explore themes of interest to me, primarily risk and consequence, identity, love, loss and letting go. When beginning a short story I usually have the first sentence or the name of a character or the setting but seldom all three and rarely the theme. Before starting a novel I write a one-page synopsis outlining the primary storyline, the themes I want to explore, where the book is set and something about the characters. To represent the main characters in my recent novel I gathered stones of different shapes, sizes and textures from a beach that had significance to the central storyline. I kept these stones on my desk throughout the writing process, sometimes picking one up when I needed a flash of inspiration.

This novel, together with a bridging essay and a research project about First World War nurses' memoirs, resulted in a PhD in Creative Writing, which I completed in May 2013, from the International Institute of Modern Letters, Victoria University of Wellington. Unlike many of my contemporaries in the programme this was my first formal qualification in creative writing as my previous degrees were in education. During my PhD journey I was writing full-time, a liberating experience that enabled me to further hone my creative writing abilities. Belonging to this supportive and committed writing community also helped extend my capacity to critically critique my own drafts and those of others.

Recently I embarked on a third novel and a second collection of short stories. Both genres carry the potential to transport me to times and places different to my own, where I can explore themes that intrigue and challenge me. I keep working with words because a day without writing, reading or storytelling feels to me as though it has not been well lived.

Julie Brocket

New writer
Dunedin

I took a Creative Writing Course through Massey University in 2008, but with the constraints of a demanding career and a growing family, after the course finished, so did my writing. At the beginning of this year, finding myself unable to work due to ill health, I discovered the Creative Writing Otago website, and with it, Diane Brown. After briefly looking at the courses that Diane offered, I signed up on the spot to a couple of her online courses as well as many day sessions studying different aspects of writing, and it has been an immense joy to immerse myself into another world, full of words, one which allows freedom from the normal humdrum of laundry, cooking and other banalities of real life!

As a novice, what excites me about writing is having a reader react to a story I've written. I feel a huge sense of achievement to know that what I've put down on paper has been enjoyed and more importantly, understood from the readers' reaction. The aspect which excites me the most however is creating characters that have the ability to do things that I may be not able to do or to travel to places where I've never been, or not know how they will behave, or what they will do next, until I am typing the actual words. I love the way that once these characters are fleshed out, how I go on a journey with them to find out who they really are, and what their story will be.

For me, my little corner of the world has taken on new meaning; for instance, when I go out, I find that I'm constantly watching people, taking note of aspects of their character, appearance and personality, or if I happen to overhear a conversation, it may allow a flicker of an idea for a piece of writing.

I have noticed since taking the courses offered by Diane, is that I have grown in confidence in the pieces of writing that I produce. As writers know, writing can be too solitary a profession at times, especially for a novice, who has no idea of how their work is progressing without feedback from peer support. I cannot stress enough that through Diane's excellent teaching style, my experience has not been a solitary one. The peer support that Diane offers through her courses, both online and face to face is exemplary and through constant constructive feedback and encouragement, she has allowed me to gain the confidence I need to take the next step and submit my work.

Laurice Gilbert

Poet, Wellington

Laurice Gilbert is President of the New Zealand Poetry Society, with poems published in many New Zealand and international journals and anthologies, both in print and online. She is the current Featured Poet International at Muse-Pie Press (USA), and published her first collection, *My Family & Other Strangers*, in December 2012. She is currently working on a joint collection with Portuguese poet Hugo Kauri Justo. <http://www.poetrysociety.org.nz/aboutlaurice>

I would rather...

- cut my toenails in the dark with a machete
- slash my wrists and lie bleeding in a puddle of leeches
- self-diagnose a suspicious lump by looking it up on the internet
- roll cheese at Coopers Hill, run with the bulls at Pamplona, swim with the sharks in Shark Alley
- trek across Central Australia in bare feet and a black crushed velvet Goth dress
- answer an online dating ad for an outgoing, intelligent and well-travelled professional man with his own successful business
- visit Liberia without anti-malarial tablets, climb Everest without oxygen, hitch-hike in Afghanistan in a mini-skirt
- recite poetry naked in Manners Mall on a Friday night in July
- drink water from the Ganges during a cholera epidemic
- go back to university to study accounting
- have the soles of my feet tattooed

than write another funding application to Creative New Zealand

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Witi Ihimaera

Novellist, short story writer,
Professor, Auckland
(Currently Stout Centre Research Fellow, Wellington)

I have no idea why I started writing but, once I got the hang of it there was no stopping me. Mind you, 'getting the hang of it' took a long time and I have subsequently decided that writing is a life long pursuit and even though I have now achieved a career every book is different and I am still getting the hang of it - writing I mean. This is what I teach my students at Manukau, that they are writing a career not a book or a couple of books.

This life long pursuit, as I call it above, began when I was a young Waituhi boy and, as a friend once said, 'You can take the boy out of Waituhi, but you can't take the Waituhi out of the boy.' So getting the hang of writing is only one part of a complex equation. The other, most important part of the equation is having something to tell or say or write about. I found that 'something' in Waituhi: a place to write about, a people and history to whom I belong, and stories – oh so many wonderful stories - that come from the Maori mythical, spiritual, geographical and cultural hinterland. In particular the stories have come from the many grandmothers in my life, always whispering in my ear and telling me to put the past in front of me or to walk backwards into the future. Lately I have begun to do this more often by writing historical fiction, and I have also widened what I am looking at to other stories outside Waituhi like Whanganui or Parihaka.

Actually, as I am writing this (in the Stout Research Centre, Victoria University of Wellington, there's a poster on the wall which advertises a 2008 conference as follows: Flogging a Dead Horse: Are National Literatures Finished? Yup, that's me. Flogging my horse but in my case it ain't dead. It's called Maori Literature and I will keep on riding that horse until I fall off. Don't forget that Maori writers have only been writing creative fiction since the 1960s so this 'nationality' race might be an old thing for Pakeha writers but for us it's relatively new.

For me, every time I start a new book, it's like trying to find that new book's source – the spring, the clear water which will flow through the words and invigorate and energise the text. As long as that spring water keeps on bubbling up from the ground I'll keep writing.

Joan Rosier Jones

Novelist, Whanganui

<http://www.learntowrite.co.nz/index.php?func=about>

I call myself a writer, but had not written for months. F Scott Fitzgerald once said that a writer not writing is practically a maniac within him(her)self. So it was with me. I was a maniac. I was twitchy, frustrated and annoyed with myself for not being one of those people who can get up at five am, write for two hours, then go about their business. I like to be asleep at five am. But I had to do something.

Seventeen syllables, perhaps every day or two. I could manage that. So I began a haiku diary. I followed the haiku structure but that was all and most weeks managed about 85 syllables. Better than nothing.

My usual method is to write 2,000 words a day. When they are done I can do what I like with the rest of the day – garden, meet friends, read, research. Sometimes I am done by midday; other times it's like drawing teeth and evening comes and I still have five words to find. I will not let myself stop until I reach the 2,000 words. If I manage to do more, I do not allow myself to count those extra words towards the next day's work. This is my way of working, but it is certainly not the only way. Writers have to find their own way – and that can change over the years as well. Whatever method is used the self-employed writer has to give themselves deadlines – and meet them. That is how books get started and finished.

When my first novel, *Cast Two Shadows*, was published in 1985, by Hodder & Stoughton, managing editor, the wonderful Bert Hingley said to me, 'Don't make your next book too different from your first.' Because *Cast Two Shadows* was partly based on a true story several people approached me after reading it and said, 'I've had an interesting life you know.' I did not want to spend my writing career documenting other's lives, but I did want to document my parents' lives which became my second novel, *Voyagers*. Not wildly different from the first. From then on, though, I have indulged myself with style and subject matter. In this way, I have won readers, and lost them. If readers like a book they expect another on a similar topic and in a similar style from the previous book. It was sound advice from Bert Hingley, but I still choose to ignore it. My last novel, *Waiting For Elizabeth*, was set in Tudor Ireland, my current work-in-progress is set on Alcatraz where the families of correctional officers lived in close proximity to the prisoners.

Now that my commitment to the Whanganui Literary Festival is over I am free to go back to this novel. It takes time to get back into the world of a novel in order to build the time and place truly enough for the reader. I love getting lost in the worlds of my novels, but one of the disadvantages of taking time away from writing is finding my way back into the world of it. For the moment I am feeling my way back to Alcatraz in the late 1930s, re-reading what I have written, reading background material etc. and soon, very soon, I'll be back to writing 2,000 words a day. I cannot wait.

October 2013

Christine Leunens

Novellist

Palmerston North

I start the writing day reading, not writing; reading was my first passion, immersing myself long hours already as a child in the work of writers who were often from a different country, and often too from a different century. I became close to them and their thoughts, and could relate to them in my mind and heart in a way I frankly couldn't with those my age. Funnily it never struck me as odd at the time that I was making best friends with the dead; or with characters who didn't really exist, *really*. I read just long enough to feel settled, the breakfast rush/school drop off starting to drift away and my interior world waking up – it's a gentle entry into that place of vivid images. I only write a novel when I have something I know is strong enough to keep me at my desk for a couple of years. I find I think of writing a novel in terms of two distinct forces – don't ask me why, this isn't thought out, it's instinctual. There is the setting and characters, life following its course. Then comes along what corresponds to some problem, pain, complication or drive – a collision, bang – and the story is conceived and starts to grow and develop in my mind. That's when I have to start putting it on paper.

Aotearoa, 'Land of the Long White Cloud', struck me as the most beautiful place I'd ever seen. When I was in Europe and first saw an image of Spirits Bay I just stared and stared at my screen. At last, when I first arrived in the Manawatu over seven years ago, there was a feeling that New Zealand was as close as one ever gets to paradise. Underneath this wondrous beauty, populated by such friendly, funny, ingenious and sensible people, I discovered that there were nevertheless scars, deep scars. A story is always born from a wound – at least the kind of stories I write.

I graduated from Victoria University of Wellington with a PhD in Creative Writing in 2012. During my four years there, I experimented with third person narration – which didn't come as naturally to me as first person narration does, despite its limitations – and I was encouraged to play around with past and present tense to determine which would best serve the emotional essence of the novel. Having the support and insight of my supervisors and the other writers in the PhD Programme was invaluable. My first novel, *Primordial Soup*, was put on the Essential Reading List of the Association of UK Libraries in 2004. The French translation of my second novel, *Caging Skies*, was short-listed for the Prix Médicis and the Prix FNAC in 2008; Taika Waititi's film adaptation, entitled 'Jojo Rabbit', made the Black List 2012 and the casting is currently underway. *A Can of Sunshine*, which was generously supported by a Victoria University of Wellington Doctoral Scholarship and a New Zealand Arts Council Grant, has just been published. Currently I'm working on my fourth novel, a historical New Zealand novel set in the Seventies.

Watching one of my books being turned into a film feels a bit like watching white light going through a prism and a rainbow coming out. The white light corresponds to the more abstract notion of words on the page, which seem, comparatively, almost invisible, yet bring to life images in each individual's mind, as they had in my own

mind as I was writing. It is essentially a personal experience. Every time one of my novels is translated into another language, it is amazing to think that this process will continue within the subtle new hues of another culture and its laws of syntax. The rainbow, like the film, is open to awe. There is music, the endearing faces of actors, voices, powerful images and such elements that work together to furnish a more universal spectacle that we share more laterally.

Excerpt from *A can of sunshine*, by Christine Leunens

'Language is this high-rise glass building,' said Edith as she reached her arm up. 'You can see up and down it and from the looks of it, moving up and down would be easy, but you're pretty much stuck at your level depending on your friendship with a person. You can chitchat with most folks on the top floor. But you can't just jump through those glass floors to have a deeper level of talk with someone who didn't ask you down. You'd land in a bloody mess and embarrass them as they watched you do that to yourself. They'd just want you to clean up and get back on up to your proper level. Good friends usually get halfway down. Husbands can get a bit lower – because of physical intimacy and because they tend to forget the secrets you tell them, so they're safe enough. The only discussions you have way down on the ground floor are usually just with yourself.'

Tina Makeriti

What is my motivation for writing? That's easy. I just love it. I wish I could find more time to do it. When I don't do it (most of this last year), I actually find life a lot harder. It's nicer for the people around me when I get to write as well, because I'm less grumpy. But what keeps me writing? Time and money. These are the most precious commodities to a writer because it's so hard to get enough of either of those things to sustain writing time. So I've become a lot more blunt about that. We need time and money (which, let's face it, really just means money) to keep writing. For me, New Zealand is the best place on the planet, but writers here are in a paradoxical position. We can't make a liveable income from writing in this country, yet we get to approach publishers directly without the agent system that makes writing incredibly competitive overseas. So you can have a career here that you might not have had the chance to have overseas, but you'll never see sales figures like the USA or UK. Unless you sell your work overseas, which I hope is getting more and more possible with things like the Frankfurt Book Fair. The other thing New Zealand writers can access is public funding which really makes a huge difference. Unfortunately all funding has come under stresses in recent years, so it's pretty tight out there. But we need the writing. All of us, not just the writers.

I have a PhD from Victoria University's Creative Writing programme, and have taught writing at three tertiary institutions in New Zealand. One of the things about studying and teaching creative writing is that I've become much more aware of the critical value of this work. It is very easy to view creative writing as less important to academia and society than things like physics or psychology, but the more I learn and teach, the more I think this discipline has a vital place alongside sciences, social sciences, humanities and technologies of different kinds. Fiction, creative non-fiction and poetry continue to do what they have always done, which is to observe, take a critical view of the world around us, absorb that world, then transform it and cast it back out again for others to consume in forms that can be pleasurable, entertaining or challenging. Any critique or comment on society can therefore be absorbed by a wide, general audience (rather than an exclusive one, depending on the work itself). The critical role of creative writing is crucial to our ability to process and understand the world around us, to think creatively about who we are and why we behave as we do, and where we might go from here. The power of creative writing to transform and stimulate thinking in other areas is crucial, but then it doesn't have to have such a pragmatic goal attached to it either. It can simply represent a space of being in the world.

So it makes sense that people can learn how to write much as they can learn how to philosophise, make music, do physical or mental examinations, or build computer programmes. There's a set of skills that must be learnt, and then there is something much less quantifiable that is nonetheless recognisable when you see it, which is where the creativity comes in. Practicing how to generate that creativity is important.

I was surprised that, when my first book was published, people began to ask me questions about society and culture. Of course I had been engaging with those questions through my stories, so it made sense, but I had somehow thought the author would remain behind the characters. It's made up! But people read the work as real and relevant even though it is imaginative. I remember one of my writing teachers saying that writing festivals were one of the few places where people still discussed these big philosophical, political and societal questions, and perhaps this was one reason for their popularity.

As a writer who is Māori, there is also a whole other side to what I do. I hadn't set out to write about te ao Māori, but when you arrive in this thing called a writing community, which I have found to be an exceedingly nice community in Aotearoa, you do look around and wonder where all the Māori are. I know we're out there, and particularly strong in areas like scriptwriting and poetry, but as a fiction writer I feel like there's massive gaps. The statistics bear this out: proportionally Māori writing is terribly underrepresented, particularly in fiction. There needs to be a lot more of us published in order to reflect the diversity of ngā iwi Māori. There are so many unwritten stories. Many of the things I write come out of those gaps and unwritten voices. There's an endlessly rich cache of stories there for us to access, and I want to see more Māori in the position to be able to dedicate themselves to this discipline. That's going to take time, and let's face it, money. But it's crucial to our understanding of our nation and our sense of self. You could say the same of Pasifika and migrant writing in Aotearoa. So many unheard voices!

Rex McGregor

Playwright, Auckland

<http://www.rexmccgregor.com>

An artist is a butterfly
That flits above the horde
Of entomologists who try
To pin it to a board.

Carol E Paterson

New writer
Queenstown

Writing in Aotearoa, right now!

Right now it's hurry up and wait!

My writing goal is to find a writing style that best serves my desire to have conversations with the senses of my readers.

Will this course reveal poem writing as my style? Wait and see.

My writing has been informed by reading and assignments in Essay Writing (Massey University), Creative Writing (Diane Brown), and Writing for Websites (Open Polytechnic).

Results from these activities have included; writing website content, collating assignments and self-publishing them for family. I also write a regular newsletter making space for my poems in them.

At times of writing without the structure of courses and assignments to guide me, I found that my natural instinct was to write in verse. Now after learning a little about Haiku Poetry online, I often find myself belting out a seasonal tidbit or two inspired by scenery and weather. I am blessed to live in Queenstown where each season offers its own unique stories.

Since deciding to enrol in Diane Brown's 'Making Fine Poems' course, I have felt like a child anticipating Christmas morning. The course begins on 7 October 2013; the wait is nearly over!

Gail Pittaway

Writer, teacher, critic
Hamilton

Despite having written two excruciating novels and plays for myself to star in as a child, and then short stories and poetry as an adult, I didn't call myself a writer until I became published; but it was as a journalist that I developed the courage to publish and be damned. I have been a literary and theatre critic for over 8 years and that regularity of commitment to the deadline, that late night crunch of words down into a small hole on the printed page, has been strangely invigorating. The challenge of critiquing a production of *Lear* or a contemporary script is one of distillation, as there is always a word count as well as a deadline. While it is unlikely that my collected criticisms will ever be published, I have laboured over many of them as if they were haiku or sonnets. Many of them have been of new works, because Aotearoa right now is a place of invention, of doorways opening to the past and future, a meeting place of myth and mundane, where Maori, Pacific, European and Asian films, plays and texts are created. I am proud to have been unafraid to interpret them to an audience for the first time.

As a writer, I am also concerned about the impact of loss of memory upon my writing. In my own poetry, I must wonder whether events are remembered out of strong emotion or out of the need to retain the impress, the stamp of moments, so that who I am and have been is retained against the wearing down and erosion of time, the natural attrition of ageing. Memory, I have discovered, is both episodic and procedural (see, Sacks 2005). I find poems, both mine and those of others, often reveal the contrast between the two – the continuous present or past tense against the urgency of a one-time occurrence, the tension or contrast between what is learned and what is felt.

As a child I would climb up the stairs at our local museum and stare up at a huge flat disc that took up most of the stair wall, barely believing it to be a fish. A few years ago I returned and read the sunfish caption, now being tall enough. The words, presumably by a museum staff member, seemed worthy of being exhibited themselves and so I 'found' this poem on the wall.

The Sunfish on the Stairs
(At the Whanganui Regional Museum)

Sunfish
are a species
that roam the open sea
relying on wind and waves
to carry them from place to place

They are often driven ashore
at high tide and left helpless at the ebb

Such was the fate
Of this
specimen.

Judith White

Novelist, short story writer
Auckland

Judith White spends much of her time going round in circles looking for excuses, busying herself with reasons not to write. All she wants to do is write, all she wants to do is not write. But when she does, when she's sitting there working in her notebooks or at the computer, the measuring of time stops, and she is grounded in the here and now, finally knowing who she is.

Writing is her means of expression. Writing is the window through which she gazes, to make sense of the world through story. Her writing allows her to cover herself with feathers and leaves and lichen and broken shells. She can crawl undetected through the undergrowth to where characters skulk in murky fog, waiting to be summoned to play their part.

Backstory:

In the beginning: Poetry, stories, diary entries, at night with a torch, secretly. Diaries stuffed within the inner sprung mattress. Writing in code. Her words encrypted in the letters of the Greek alphabet. The secret life of a teenager under siege. The fear of being misunderstood. Or teased. Or judged.

After school, she worked as a lab technician. Left New Zealand, travelling, working, exploring. Australia, France, Switzerland. The gypsy life. Wandering from the north to south of the continent of Africa. Danielle, French travelling companion. Hitchhiking. Barges, trains, buses, trucks, cars, on foot, on a donkey. Adventure. Fresh impressions and danger. Speaking in French if they wanted to discuss their situation, as English was more likely to be understood there. More coded commentary. Her journal writing was sparse, with understated notes, key words, and the edited mention of things that might be seen as inflammatory politically should her writing fall into the wrong hands. But frequent letters back home captured the sounds and the colours and the people that surrounded her. Selection of detail.

Years later, trying to settle down in Wellington, she met a man who was in town working as a software engineer as he took time off from working as a mountain guide in the Mt Cook National Park. He had climbed Mt Cook seven times and he lured her with life and death stories of adventure in the elements at their most harsh. He told her of the earthquake he experienced when on a climbing expedition in Peru, in which over 60,000 people were killed in a mudslide. He wooed her with his cello. She entertained him with stories of tribal drums in the night, searching for Bushmen in the Kalahari Desert, visiting Masai tribespeople living in dung huts, brushes with witch doctors and exorcism ceremonies.

They married. Two children, Clem and Xanthe. The years hop-scotching over themselves. Went to Seattle to live for 28 months. No green card, couldn't work, didn't know anyone. Children only just at school. Time to write. Articles and short stories. Sent stories home. Radio New Zealand. Yes!

On the way back home, the family travelled for a couple of months in Thailand and India and Nepal, trekking for three weeks with packs on their backs in the Himalayas with the children.

They arrived back in New Zealand in time to hear Judith's first story broadcast by Radio New Zealand, read by Elizabeth McCrae. Judith carried on writing short stories, in this and that notebook, on this and that computer. Her husband suggested she gather her stories together. There was a competition for a collection of short stories – the 1988 BNZ Katherine Mansfield Centenary Award – so this was the incentive. She won. In 1991, Hodder and Stoughton published most of the winning collection of stories, with more added. *Visiting ghosts* was short-listed for the New Zealand Book Awards.

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