

An Interview with Bill Manhire

JENNIFER LEVASSEUR
& KEVIN RABALAIS



Photo: Bruce Foster

Chinstrap penguins in Antarctica in a photo by Martha Holmes
Courtesy: Royal Geographical Society Picture Library

BILL MANHIRE, New Zealand's inaugural poet laureate, co-directs the International Institute of Modern Letters. Recipient of the New Zealand Book Award for poetry five times, his collections include *The Elaboration* (1972), *How to Take off Your Clothes at the Picnic* (1977), *Milky Way Bar* (1991), *My Sunshine* (1996), and *What to Call Your Child* (1999). He has also written short stories, including the recent collection *Songs of My Life* (1994), and a selection of essays, *Doubtful Sounds* (2000). An advocate of New Zealand literature, he has compiled several anthologies of fiction and poetry, such as *One Hundred New Zealand Poems* (1993), *Six by Six* (1989), and *Some Other Country* (3rd edition, 1997).

Manhire's celebrated creative-writing course at Victoria University in Wellington has graduated some of the country's most prominent and successful writers. In 1998, as part of the Artists to Antarctica program, he visited the continent and is now preparing an anthology—*The Wide White Page*—of imaginative writing about Antarctica. In 2001 his *Collected Poems* was published in New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

In October 2001 Manhire served as a juror for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. Shortly after, Jennifer

Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais interviewed him in his home in Wellington, New Zealand.

Jennifer Levasseur & Kevin Rabalais When your *Collected Poems* was published in 2001, a reviewer wrote, "Future historians of New Zealand literature may refer to our period as the 'Manhire era.' No one has ever before had such an influence." How do you react to a statement like this?

Bill Manhire Well, I react with confusion. I'm flattered but also puzzled. I'm sure that the idea of influence springs mainly from my work in the classroom. Many of the writers who have passed through the workshop have gone on to become significant figures in contemporary New Zealand literature and, in several cases, internationally. But they might well have gone on to become significant writers anyway.

That article went on to say, in relation to the writing workshop, that the claims I sometimes make about encouraging individuality are accurate and true. That's a relief, because it's certainly my aim. But there's a nice contradiction in this: if you have "influence," but that influence adds up to making sure that a whole variety of voices get heard, then maybe you have no real influence at all.

JL/KR This idea of influence is something you've written about. In your poem "On Originality," you explore the ways in which a writer's voice is composed of many voices. Your body of work is often praised for its lack of repetition, its many voices. Did you consciously set out to create a diverse body of work?

BM It's just slow, accidental drift. I don't think I ever *decided* to do anything. What made me excited about books and reading, originally, was my mother reading the Grimms' *Fairy Tales* to me when I was a child. I wasn't sure what was going on, but I knew that it was puzzling and mysterious. Those tales gave me a physical, shiver-up-the-spine reaction. That type of reaction to language was exciting to me, and in some very basic way I have always wanted to create texts that have a physical effect on the reader.

As for changing styles, I think that you can actually get too comfortable writing in a particular way, and at that point the sense of surprise—which is what drew you in to the whole

mate moment between a father and child. Then in the final stanzas, the poem shifts in tone and seems to address the reader.

BM I think that's the kind of personality that I have. I pretend to be accessible, but really I'm secret and reserved and private. I'm not sure that's a good thing in me as a person, but I kind of like it in the poems. I like to play with the reader a little bit, but not necessarily or always in a deliberate way. One of the poems I've always loved is Stevie Smith's "Not Waving but Drowning," part of which goes: "Nobody heard him, the dead man / but still he lay moaning: / I was much further out than you thought / And not waving but drowning." Is that person standing there in the water waving happily to someone on the beach, or is he signaling for help? I've always liked ambiguous gestures on the page—though if I were actually drowning I hope I would find some less equivocal gestures.

One poem of mine where I can see that pattern of tonal shifts working strongly is "Magasin," where you feel you're in a

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process in the first place—stops. I think that's why I shift along and try to avoid repetition (though I also notice that many of my poems gather their energy out of repetitive phrasings). So I want to change a little yet still be continuous with myself, still in sight of where I started.

I can also be a bit stubborn. If someone were to make a speech about poetry being a vehicle to make our lives better, I would run over to the other side of the room and make the counterstatement. Yet if someone were to say to me that poetry is part of the entertainment business, that a poem is the singing telegram in another form, I would run across to the other side of the room and make noises about the sublime. I shuffle between explanations as to why poetry does or does not matter. The New Zealand poet James K. Baxter once described himself as having been born with an attitude that put him against the status quo. I've never known quite what the status quo is because I'm a shifty sort of relativist. Whenever someone states something very vigorously, something inside me makes me want to go off and take the opposite view in a secret, muttering sort of way.

JL/KR Many of your poems lead the reader to unexpected places. In "Poem for Vanessa," written for your daughter, you place the reader in the position of a voyeur—watching an inti-

very serious position, watching a young man visit his father in the hospital, and it's apparent the father is likely to die. As the poem progresses, things get more serious and charged, and it sounds like something absolutely significant is happening; and then at the end there's this terrible horse-racing pun. That the poem ends in ridiculous, banal comedy, when it started with something so serious, is difficult for readers. But it's wonderful if you can bring these emotional swerves off. Making the poem sound confident as it navigates its own surprises—that probably helps a lot, too.

JL/KR Though you say you're a private person, you are also a public figure. You appear frequently on national radio and television as an advocate for literature. How do you deal with these opposing aspects of your life?

BM I don't think that I'm a public figure in terms of what I write. I don't think that people read my work and say, "Oh, this is a significant insight that will help me lead my life." Well, maybe occasionally, but most people are mildly puzzled by my work. I'm a public figure in the sense that I go on radio once a month and talk about a poem or a poet or some aspect of literature and behave, I hope, like a good teacher who makes what is

wonderful, but difficult, accessible to a wide range of people. I was the inaugural poet laureate, and of course this has a public dimension to it. So I'm perceived as someone who has been able to help with this difficult, intimidating thing called Literature.

JL/KR Does it frustrate you that in some circles your poetry might not be as well known as your public functions?

BM That worries me quite a lot, actually. Maybe I should just go into a corner and write. The truly worrying thing is that finding time for my own writing seems to get harder and harder. Maybe I need to leave that semipublic life behind.

JL/KR At the same time, you've helped many writers through those public functions. What have been some of the rewards in that part of your career?

BM I hope I've helped make the whole activity of writing, reading, and publishing poetry seem normal. When I was eighteen

community. The readers were always somewhere else. In early New Zealand novels and poems, there is a lot of decorative local detail—Maori words or names of native birds and plants. Someone will write, "They walked along the road and listened to the song of the *tui*, a white-throated bird." Writers don't gloss their phrasings like that if they're writing for a local audience.

So the first step for New Zealand writers was to move from the sense that the audience was somewhere else and to start writing for the people next door—which produces in turn a sort of provincial naturalism. The next step was to develop a sense of audience (and therefore of possible subject matter) that wasn't simply one or the other.

The deep, practical problem for New Zealand writers is that just under four million people doesn't constitute a sufficient book-buying public. If you want to live by your writing, you may have to produce books that will sell elsewhere. So I think we are seeing some of our writers fairly deliberately aiming for

I guess that a lot of poems come out of a deep romantic impulse, the rapt inspection of the self, which can be extremely tiresome in other people but not, of course, in your own life. However, I also want to be antiromantic as well. One way to express unease is to let humor in. The humor and playfulness in my writing have more to do with a counterpoint to the romantic impulse than with postmodernism, a label often given to my work.

or so, writing poetry was still a strange thing for a person in New Zealand to do. My father went to his grave secretly convinced that he'd raised a bit of a sissy and maybe a latent homosexual, even though I'd recently made him a grandfather. And if you look at New Zealand poetry a generation or so before mine, it's notable just how desperate to be thought manly were poets like Denis Glover or A.R.D. Fairburn. Of course they wanted to do a very simple human thing: use words to express their own quite complex feelings, but to have complex feelings in New Zealand in the 1930s and 1940s was not to be properly masculine. So you find them constantly attacking women and putting immense effort into being blokey. You know, third-rate Hemingway stuff. Well, you start to draw your own conclusions. I think that poetry—the reading as well as the writing of it—seems much more "normal" in New Zealand now, and I'm happy to take a tiny bit of credit for that change.

JL/KR Many New Zealand writers now appear to be setting their work outside the country. Why do you think this is the current trend?

BM When you go back and look at early New Zealand literature—and this is true of American literature as well—there is this sense that the audience could never be the writer's own

international as well as local readerships. Elizabeth Knox would be a good example among recent novelists in terms of settings. And then there's a surprising number of New Zealand writers—Emily Perkins, Kirsty Gunn, the children's writer Margaret Mahy—who write novels where the settings are somehow entirely placeless. There are plenty of particulars, but they seem to belong anywhere.

JL/KR What kind of reaction do you see when local writers are successful in international markets?

BM Well, there's a double reaction, but possibly both reactions come from a kind of insecurity. One reaction among some writers and academics is to feel that international success means that something authentic, truly local to the place, must have been commodified or blanded out. This is an odd view, really—a bit like sportspeople saying our athletes shouldn't compete at the Olympics, that they'd be more successful if they just stayed home—and a very conflicted, as they say, set of attitudes. One very good novelist, Damien Wilkins, finds himself being reproved for writing a novel set in the northwestern United States (*Nineteen Widows Under Ash*) and then being equally criticized for writing one called *Chemistry*, which, though it is set in small-town New Zealand, is deemed to be false to its setting pre-

cisely because publishers in the United Kingdom, United States, and Australia are publishing editions of it.

I guess that's the ungenerous side of the provincial mentality and is just the current manifestation of what New Zealanders call the "tall poppy" syndrome. The more positive response is that there is usually a lot of support locally for a New Zealand novelist, filmmaker, or poet who achieves success somewhere else. This probably has something to do with the feeling that the village can show the city a thing or two—we can do it, we can take on the world. So if a New Zealander publishes a book in,

empires can be insular. That's one of the reasons we set up the Best New Zealand Poems Web site; it's encouraging that over half the hits it gets are from international visitors.*

JL/KR You talked earlier about the physical aspect of hearing stories. Is writing physical for you, as well? Do you feel rhythms to lines before you set them on the page?

BM I think I always hear a piece of poetry as cadence before I hear it as meaning. If it doesn't work itself out as cadence or as

JL/KR Does much of your work begin this way?

In a strange way, the Icelandic sagas are like Jane Austen novels. People are killing one another, but it's kind of like behavior at an eighteenth-century tea party. You have to manage protocol, and if you can do something that does it more stylishly than anyone else, you'll be remembered. In Grettir's Saga, a guy gets speared in the stomach, then looks down and says, "Oh, I see double-bladed spears are in fashion this year," and then promptly dies. That's pretty classy. It depends on this deep sense that everything is against you, everything is laid out for you, and the areas of choice have to do with behavior rather than substance. Quentin Tarantino should probably film one of the sagas.

say, London and there are good reviews, you'll find ecstatic headlines in the local newspapers—"New Zealand Novelist Praised in London"—and everyone rushes out to buy it. The Australians coined a good phrase for this sort of behavior: cultural cringe. Years ago, there was a drug dealer named Mr. Asia who became famous—or infamous—outside of New Zealand. We pretended to be horrified by this, but, really, we were just delighted that one of our boys had made it.

I suspect it's problematic to be a writer in one of the smaller English-language cultures. There may not be enough that's different about us at first glance, let alone exotic, to make people pay attention. We don't even speak a foreign language, and without that kind of colorful opacity, perhaps we just become invisible. Certainly, something unfortunate has happened when a genuinely great poet like the late Allen Curnow is almost entirely unknown in the United States.

I find Czesław Miłosz's anthology *Luminous Things* pretty instructive in this respect, because it proposes itself as an anthology of poetry from around the world. What this means in practice is that it contains American poems and poems translated from other languages, but there is absolutely nothing from the wide range of other poetries in English. I think that a little bit of Blake gets in, a bit of Larkin, a bit of Lawrence—but what can this mean? Just, I suppose, that people and civilizations with great capacity and vision can have large blind spots, that

musical phrasing, then it doesn't interest me and I won't keep it.

BM It differs from poem to poem. Often, I'll hear an ordinary cadence from everyday speech and just follow the resonance of it. There's a poem in my Antarctic sequence titled "Song" that begins, "For the first time in a long time." This is a common phrase, sure, but one day I heard it with another rhythm attached. So I added that line: "There is sun making sunshine." I carried that couplet around in my head for a while, and then when I was in Antarctica, feeling totally overexcited and yet totally serene at the same time, all the rest suddenly came to me.

JL/KR For the past few years, you've been working on an anthology of writing about Antarctica, *The Wide White Page*. Was this a project you had in mind before the trip?

BM My interest in Antarctica comes from having been born in Invercargill, where the next stop across the water is the ice. As a teenager, I lived in Dunedin, which was the departure point for U.S. naval ships going down to Antarctica. Operation Deep-

*The Web site (www.vuw.ac.nz/modernletters/bnzp) is sponsored by the International Institute of Modern Letters (IIML), and the 2003 edition has been edited by Robin Dudding. The IIML is co-headquartered on the campuses of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and Victoria University in Wellington.

freeze, it was called. Dunedin was a gray, Presbyterian city, settled by Scots, but every so often the place would suddenly be filled with American sailors who were, to say the least, colorful by comparison with the population they were moving through. A lot of them used to drink after hours in my father's hotel.

For New Zealanders, Antarctica is a little like the desert interior is for Australians. It's a kind of psychic territory, especially for those of us from the South Island. The place is in your head, and it matters to you even though you may never go there. I had always heard heroic tales about it because Scott and Shackleton passed through New Zealand on their way to the ice. Hearing all the heroic stories, on the one hand, and seeing all these wild, jazzy Americans who had Polaroid cameras and amazing gear, on the other—it had a lot of weight in my imagination.

Antarctica has no native population to produce a literature and no native population to read or sustain it, and yet there are a lot of novels, poems, plays, and feature movies about it, about five or six hundred discrete items. The idea of the anthology is to represent Antarctica as it's been "made up" by the human imagination. So it is not just the Antarctica of the explorers or the scientists and environmentalists—or, these days, the travel industry; it's the Antarctica that human beings have hypothesized and speculated about and still only marginally explored. So my versions of someone like Scott will include the received views and texts, alongside Ursula Le Guin's feminist take on polar exploration, plus maybe a sketch from *Monty Python*. I want the anthology to argue that Antarctica is more than a single, simple thing. I want it to be impure and ambiguous and equivocal in all the ways that I enjoy the world being.

JL/KR You have long been interested in the Icelandic sagas, as well. What drew you to them?

BM This is the world of accidental drift again, really, though it must have something to do with my temperament. The sagas were produced by a rather small nation made up of extremely independent settlers who left Norway and Denmark because they weren't prepared to fit meekly into the developing single-monarch structure. So they settled down on an island off the edge of continental Europe and became farmers and fishermen. The sagas are full of young Icelandic men who travel around Scandinavia, maybe go on Viking expeditions or just turn up at a Scandinavian court and do something that terribly impresses, maybe even outwits, one of the monarchs. Then they return home to live off that mild moment of glory for the rest of their lives. This kind of provincial mentality equates nicely with New Zealanders and Australians who go off at the age of twenty and have their O.E., their overseas experience, travel around Europe and North America, and then return home to settle down and have children. That world of a thousand years ago feels to me entirely familiar.

There is also something in me that likes the fatalism of the sagas: this idea that the world is going to come to an end, that there is going to be a great battle eventually between the good guys and the bad guys. You must do everything you can to support the good guys, but—and this is the crunch—in the last, great wintrous battle the giants and monsters will win. So you're under the circumstances all the time, and how you behave under them becomes quite significant. These are texts where behavior means

everything. In a strange way, the Icelandic sagas are like Jane Austen novels. People are killing one another, but it's kind of like behavior at an eighteenth-century tea party. You have to manage protocol, and if you can do something that does it more stylishly than anyone else, you'll be remembered. In *Grettir's Saga*, a guy gets speared in the stomach, then looks down and says, "Oh, I see double-bladed spears are in fashion this year," and then promptly dies. That's pretty classy. It depends on this deep sense that everything is against you, everything is laid out for you, and the areas of choice have to do with behavior rather than substance. Quentin Tarantino should probably film one of the sagas.

JL/KR In the late 1980s you stopped writing poetry and concentrated on prose for several years. What prompted this switch?

BM I was trying to spin myself around. I've always believed that most people have only a few stock views about the universe, a certain number of perspectives about things. James K. Baxter is a good example of someone who had some big, prophetic messages, but he very quickly bored himself. He had a massive facility with language, but he had to change his lifestyle and the way he wrote about it in order to go on saying the same things: that we're all doomed and fallen and death-bound, or whatever it was that drove him along. I really like repetitions inside texts, but there are moments when I felt that I was repeating myself between one poem and the next in ways that were boring. I stepped into the prose in order to move away from those thin self-imitations.

When I returned to poetry, those repetitions were still going on. All those ambiguous gestures were still there. I didn't know



Cover of Manhire's *Collected Poems* (Victoria University Press, 2001)

if I was waving or drowning, but I think I was writing poems that had a stronger sense of narrative or plot and had a much more vigorous or satirical take on the so-called real world. Before I wrote the fiction, I don't think that I could have written a narrative poem like "Hirohito," which is a kind of plotted biography full of ambiguities.

JL/KR Your stories are often dark, but the language remains playful, as it is in many of your recent poems. Did these poems, like "Visiting Mr. Shackleton" and "A Final Secret," come from the experience of writing your stories, which are often humorous and satirical? What did writing in prose expose you to?

BM Writing prose made me see that humor is possible. I guess that a lot of poems come out of a deep romantic impulse, the rapt inspection of the self, which can be extremely tiresome in other people but not, of course, in your own life. However, I also want to be antiromantic as well. One way to express unease is to let humor in. The humor and playfulness in my writing have more to do with a counterpoint to the romantic impulse than with postmodernism, a label often given to my work. That label doesn't feel at all right to me. I don't like postmodernists when they stand up and wave their flags, and I like even less the academic industry that gathers around postmodernism.

JL/KR How do you approach poems like "The Next Thousand," which was commissioned for the millennium supplement of a New Zealand newspaper, and "Luck: A Villanelle," a love poem that was auctioned for charity before it was even written?

BM What I liked about writing those commissioned poems is that I put myself within a set of circumstances that made me inventive. I put a formal straitjacket on myself. I had never written a doggerel poem ("The Next Thousand") or a villanelle. Maybe I chose those forms so that it would feel okay if I failed. If you are left to utter only what you have to utter, you're probably going to write material that you've already worked out, or you're going to be boring; but if you put a set of constraints around yourself by deciding, for instance, to write a love poem for a man who has agreed to give \$2,500 to a charity, you really just do the research and put yourself in circumstances that you're not used to. And then this makes you shuffle your head around in certain ways so that you bump into phrasings and thoughts you didn't know were there in the first place, and so you become inventive in ways that are interesting to you as you write, and may eventually be interesting to readers.

Growing up, I remember watching movies about brave Allied prisoners in German prisoner-of-war camps. The more walls and fences and moats the enemy put around the Allied prisoners, the more inventive they had to be to escape. I think of literary texts in that way: the greater the element of constraint, the more inventive the writer has to be in order to take flight.

Most of the time, the writer won't make the great escape, but if he does, it is likely to be an astonishing experience.

JL/KR What was the experience of recently preparing for the publication of your collected poems, the work of almost thirty years?

BM I'm pleased by how much of it I like. I'm surprised to have written some of the poems, and there are a number I can't ever imagine writing again. Indeed, I don't know how I wrote them in the first place. I quite like that. Even stuff that I don't really care for, I feel quite affectionate toward, in the way that, if you look back at a family photograph album and see yourself at the age of seven or seventeen or twenty-seven, you think, "That person was rather silly in certain ways but rather likable in other ways and certainly he was a function of the fashions of the time, but really, you know, he was all right." Nevertheless, I think I would rather be publishing a first book and having all the feelings of triumph and agitation that go with it.

JL/KR You grew up on the South Island entertaining people in your parents' hotels, exhibiting yourself as a magician or "boy conjurer." Is there a connection between your work as a writer and that early hobby?

BM I'm sure there are connections. I also lived inside the usual boys' adventures, especially the sort that involved detective work and codes and secret messages. I think I spent half my childhood in disguise, or mixing up invisible ink and building periscopes. It's all standard stuff, I guess, in the world before PlayStation, and probably perfect training for a poet; but, with the conjuring particularly in mind, I'm sure that I want the audience to have the big illusory effect that the woman was sawn in half, that the levitating person really did float. And yet it's a set of backstage techniques, pure craft and patter, that produces the illusion. Yet if it were just that, then maybe I'd have gone off to work as an advertising copywriter. I still want to produce work that surprises me and makes me feel more mysterious to myself. Sometimes a writer can produce a big, magical effect without doing any backstage stuff. Everyone gasps, and there was no sleight-of-hand at all. That's when things are really wonderful.

WLT

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JENNIFER LEVASSEUR and KEVIN RABALAI'S work has appeared in the *Kenyon Review*, *Brick*, *Tin House*, and the *Missouri Review*. Their collection of interviews with American novelists, *Novel Voices*, was published in May 2003 by Writer's Digest Books. They both teach English at Our Lady of Holy Cross College in New Orleans.