

FICTION AND FACTIONS The Political Novel in New Zealand

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The brief was broad: around 40 minutes, talk about anything, whatever is on your mind. Well, what's been on my mind lately is politics. And fiction. Last year I published a novel, my seventh. It's routinely introduced at talks and festivals as 'political'. The only one to be so labeled.

Now, from my point of view, everything I have ever written has been political. The fact that I can write at all – descendant of Irish famine refugees and dispossessed Highland crofters – that I have been delivered the necessary health and education and readers with money, inclination and time for books – has all been over to politics.

But why this book? What makes a work of the imagination 'political'? Is it because it occupies the junction between fiction and journalism, fact and fantasy? Is it because references to political events or politicians are embedded in the narrative like hokey pokey in icecream? Does it depend upon some notion of authorial intention, not simply to entertain but to critique the workings of power? Is it because the text suggests factional allegiance, to left or right? And can fiction that professes to be 'not political' drift free above the muddle of ideas, decisions, actions that we bundle together and label 'Politics'? Or is the personal political, as Carol Hamisch and the 70s feminists insisted and is every novel, every one of our imaginings inescapably 'political'? And as a novelist, is there something distinctive about writing 'political fiction'?

New Zealand novels begin with politics. With *Anno Domini 2000*, or *Woman's Destiny*, published in 1889, the work of a politician, Julius Vogel, 24 years in government, three as Premier.

It's still in print and its author's name is attached to a NZ literary prize, the Vogel awarded each year for Science Fiction, and not to be confused with the Australian Vogels which are awarded to young writers and named for one of the sponsors' products, the Vogel loaf. Those Vogels are named for Alfred Vogel, a Swiss naturopath who according to the company website, 'won the trust' when visiting a Sioux reservation near Wounded Knee in South Dakota, of a medicine man, Black Elk who gave him a handful of prized Echinacea seeds as a farewell gift. Back in Switzerland, Alfred set to analysis, processing, and the creation of a multimillion dollar industry. The site does not mention what happened to Black Elk, but elsewhere it is recorded that he remained on the reservation, revered as a survivor of the Battle of Little Bighorn, and a devout Catholic who is currently being proposed for canonization. His tribe meanwhile, remain embroiled in the battle to reclaim their lands in the Black Hills.

I am with Carole. You can't escape politics, not even when you are buttering your toast. Nor when you are writing a novel.

Our Vogel, Julius, is remembered now for the public works schemes he initiated, draining, bridging, roading – and for the first women's suffrage bill which was defeated in his term, but paved the way for the bill of 1893. By then, Vogel was back in England, the epitome of the colonial success story, spending a gouty retirement penning a novel.

It's set in 2000, the central character Hilda Richmond Fitzherbert, 23, and Undersecretary of State in the cabinet of Mrs Hardinge, prime minister of the Empire of Britain, and the most powerful politician on earth.

Her seat of government is Melbourne, now a city of 2 million, where we discover Hilda attempting to avoid the attentions of a nefarious local nobleman, Lord Reginald Parramatta. His secret ambition is to destroy the Empire by declaring Australia an independent empire with him, naturally, as emperor, but in the novel's climactic scene, Hilda foils the plot, captures 2000 Australians, and heads off to visit New Zealand where her father has invested wisely in a plan to divert the entire Clutha River to expose the gold reefs in its bed. She travels to view the moment of diversion with other dignitaries in a private aluminium aircruiser that bobs along at 100 miles an hour, 50 feet above the Tasman.

She finds true love at last in the Emperor himself, Albert, fresh from victory over the Americans. They'd been upset that he had refused to wed the daughter of their president so decided to invade Canada, but fleets of armed imperial air cruisers have put paid to that. The empire is peaceful at last, even problematic Ireland, and Lord Reginald Paramatta dies an edifying death from wounds sustained in the American war, nursed in his final hours by the saintly Hilda.

'Reginald,' she faltered. "I fully freely forgive you all your wrongs to me..'" and she sank upon her knees before the couch and prayed ...and as she prayed a faint smile

irradiated the face of the dying man and with an effort to say, 'Amen', he drew his last breath.'

It's fairly safe, I think, to call this tosh. Not to be mentioned alongside contemporaries like *Tess of the Durbervilles* or *Portrait of a Lady*. Its closest cousin would be Verne's *The Purchase of the North Pole*, also published in 1889 in which scientist entrepreneurs attempt to melt the Arctic ice cap to reveal coal deposits by detonating a huge cannon concealed beneath Mt Kilimanjaro. The explosion will tilt the earth's axis and change the climate. But Vogel lacks Verne's wild inventiveness. A few air cruisers can't really compete with a giant cannon and a plan to achieve what we've achieved with so much less effort by hopping into our cars in our millions to pop down to the mall.

What has kept Vogel's book in print isn't science fiction, but politics, the digressions where the politician emerges from the narrative to outline a new tax system or the necessity for global confederation. We see the man and we see his era. This is a novel of extraction, the fantasy fueling all that manic engineering, burning, draining. The same mood expressed in the heroic demeanor of the loggers standing in grainy print beside the fallen kauri. Their pride seems misplaced to modern eyes, but then, we have been exposed to another kind of imagining: a world devoid of trees, the extinction of species, the political dystopias of our own creation.

The speculative futuristic frame of *Anno Domini 2000* is shared by other titles that always turn up on the Google lists of political novels, along with that characteristic of being anchored in contemporary preoccupations. *1984*, for example, where Orwell's Everyman, Winston Smith and his beloved Julia exist in a future of mass surveillance. It has taken on new currency in our era of Five Eyes and digital snooping while remaining unmistakably a post-war fantasy, written during the months when at Nuremberg ordinary men were giving their testimonies, just following orders, inflicting unspeakable horror, so appallingly banal. *The Two Minute Hate*, the *Thought Police* required little imagining.

The other title that usually features on the lists, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, was begun in 1984 as an act of homage to Orwell, and intended, in that era of heady feminism, as a counterpoint, to be 'the world', as she put it, 'according to Julia.' It depicts a future, where women are herded and valued for their fertility, a preoccupation that belongs unmistakably to 1984, the year when Rita Arditti published her best-selling *Test Tube Women*, describing the new science of in vitro fertilization, the harvesting of ovaries, sexual selection. Other species, cows, hens, sheep, were being exploited as never before for their femininity – their eggs, their mammary glands with their valuable secretions, their wombs for the production of two, three or more profitable offspring – so why not women? Recently Atwood's novel has taken on further political resonance as the West identifies its shadow enemy in Islam and its signature brand, the veiled woman. It's always interesting to watch how the politics of a novel are reframed by the preoccupations of a new era.

In New Zealand, the futuristic political novel has been best expressed in Karl Stead's *Smith's Dream*, published in 1971 when it felt as if Keith Holyoake had been in power for ever – since 1960 – and the factional lines were fiercely drawn over Vietnam. Now novel and movie adaptation are more likely perceived as action story, another repeat of that timeless male fantasy in which the hero must struggle against a man who is older, dominant and murderous. But in 1971, a future where the country is governed by a bland totalitarian populist, with the assistance of American linked armed forces, seemed a mere breath away.

It's not fictional territory I have ventured into often myself, but I remember how it felt to write the future. My first novel back in 1992 ended with New Zealand as a sun-scorched wilderness after global environmental collapse. Small groups huddle round the few remaining fiercely defended water sources, and at intervals they cull their population, by forcing some out beyond the barricades. One woman has survived the cull and lives alone, a wizened incontinent old crone, on a tiny island off the west coast, that in all this desolation is miraculously lush and green. She has reverted to a primate state, covered in fur. And one day her peace is interrupted, three strangers discover the island, they come ashore, there's a quarrel amongst themselves, murder, the island withers overnight and the old woman compels the survivor to carry her on his back across the mainland, where they stop from time to time, and when they stop and she pees, springs are reborn, creek beds fill, rivers grow to torrents, and finally in the ruins of the Oamaru Post Office she is reunited with another ancient creature who is her sister. And as they curl around each other, rain begins at last to fall.

I remember the crazy freedom in imagining such a narrative. It felt close to writing poetry, loose, associative, with a strange logic, like dreaming. I also remember how when the two sisters came together in the Post Office it felt as if I had solved some psychological dysfunction in myself and was free to become a proper adult at last. It's hard to explain this precisely, but I think there is always in writing fiction the external narrative – plot, character - visible to the public, and the private narrative the writer is telling her or himself, invisible, possibly unacknowledged, but the force nevertheless that is driving the story.

The political dimension to a writer's work is not always as evident as in Vogel, Orwell, Atwood, Stead. Jane Austen, for instance?

In the 2000s, she's white muslin, wet shirts and simpering sex. But in one of the most interesting books I've read this year by a New Zealand writer, the Otago academic Jocelyn Harris strips away the muslin. In *Satire and Celebrity in the Works of Jane Austen*, Harris exposes a writer who was far being the cloistered aunt insisted upon by her nephew and first biographer, but keenly interested in politics, from her earliest scribblings to her final work. It's a poem written just three days before her death, her skin already richly marbled black and white with decay. It's a poem, a jaunty little ditty, about the cancellation of the Winchester races.

They were an institution on the aristocratic calendar, like Ascot, but in 1817, a volcano in distant Indonesia had exploded, the ash cloud hung heavily over Europe bringing storms, disastrous crop failure, starvation, riot.

In Winchester, *'the 'Lords and the Ladies [all] sittin'd and ermin'd'*, were assembled, writes Austen, but their revels are ended when the city's Saint Swithin, sends torrential rain as a rebuke to their dissolution:

'By vice you're enslaved. You have sinn'd and must suffer!'

Chief among the dissolute was the Prince Regent, charged in his father's madness with ruling the country, and a man Austen privately confessed to 'hate' – and it was not a word she used often or lightly.

She was not alone. He was widely loathed, lampooned in a new and popular print medium, the satirical cartoon, as an extravagant, grotesquely bloated libertine. Austen had access to these, along with that other dramatic new post-revolutionary medium, the newspaper, with its apparatus of editors and journalists and its columns of print critiquing the events of 'le jour', the day, in that blissful dawn when the three old estates, clergy, nobility and commons, were being shoved aside by that crude arriviste, the fourth estate.

She lived in a turbulent era, of revolution, regicide, war, riot, famine, pervasive poverty. Laws were passed to curb dissent, rendering it a capital offence to *'stir up dislike of His Majesty, his heirs or successors'* in speech or print, and the law was enforced. When the poet and journalist, Leigh Hunt described the Prince Regent in his paper, *The Examiner* as *'a corpulent man of 50...a libertine overhead and ears in disgrace... who has just closed half a century without a single claim on the gratitude of his country or the respect of posterity,'* he was sentenced to two years imprisonment and a fine of L1500.

His wife Marianne moved into gaol with him, along with three of their children, a 4 year old, a 1 year old and a new born baby, and they painted the ceiling of their cell blue to look like the sky, but making fun of power was clearly not to be done lightly.

Harris's meticulous book shows how Austen made her fun, encoding political comment in plot, setting, characters, sometimes in a single word. Just one example: when Sir Walter Eliot in *Persuasion*, fool and extravagant fop, cries, 'Can we retrench?', in that one word, 'retrench' contemporary readers would have heard the widely satirised cry of the Prince Regent when asked by parliament to reign in his borrowings from the public purse. 'Must I then retrench?' It's as if I were to write a character of the past ten years who repeatedly uses the word 'opportunity' or 'excellence' – words politically loaded with a rightwing resonance that will, in a few years' time, please god, be inaudible.

Novels stand outside time, with their narrative structure of beginning, middle and end. They outlast politics, which are by nature ephemeral, swift and changeable and can quickly become invisible, detectable only to the skilled eye.

So - novels can imagine the politics of the future –but what of novels whose subject is not the future but the past? The historical novel, as much an imagining and as unmistakably of its era as those Hollywood epics where it's supposed to be Ancient Egypt, but it still looks like 1934 and Claudette Colbert is wearing the wig, or 1972 and it's Liz with a lot of eyeliner.

New Zealand fiction visits the events of our history, but selectively. Sometimes a kind of courtesy seems at work. There is no novel set on Flight 901 to view Erebus, for example, nor on the Wahine as it drifts toward the reef. Perhaps in a small country we feel too close, we know people for whom this was not in the least imaginary, perhaps it is some understanding that fiction is sometimes eclipsed by reality and stands exposed as an act of ego, a mere display of technical competence.

Perhaps this is why the novels of the greatest trauma in our country's history, the First World War, were written so long after the armistice. Memorials to that event are pinned to the heart of every settlement with their long lists of dead. Less obvious is that war's other dimension, the massive resistance, the protest meetings that erupted when that new political entity, the National Government which later morphed into the National Party, introduced conscription in 1916. No memorial to the four MPs representing that other new political entity, the Labour Party - Fraser, Semple, and the rest, sentenced for sedition, imprisoned - twelve months with hard labour - for arguing against military involvement. I had no idea until very recently just how large this opposition was: that of 187,593 men who were registered as eligible for service overseas, 77,811 stated they did not wish to fight. Not just Archibald Baxter and a few mates. Not just religious objectors, but thousands of socialists who saw no fight with their brother workers in Germany, New Zealand Irish objectors who did not want to fight for Britain while Ireland was not free. Maori objectors, principally Tainui, who refused to fight for a government that had recently seized their lands.

The contemporary public narrative of this contentious period was left to journalists, though their version seems as fictional today, now that we have been able to read the private diaries, the letters, the memoirs, as any novel. What strikes most in reading the reportage is its tone: the determined jauntiness of dispatches from the front, the 'Prussian hearted Hun' of it all, the chilling cruelty of a report, for example, in the Manawatu Standard in 1915, of the man 'of German origin' who hid overnight in Collinson and Cunningham's department store in Palmerston North, tore the shop's Union Jack in strips and wove a noose from which he hung himself over the stairrail. "*He was of the grey rat family,*" wrote the editor by way of obituary, '*widely known but not highly respected.*'

Fiction had to wait. It is the wash of colour backgrounding Mansfield's great stories of childhood, those stories written in the 1920s for the brother who had died in

Flanders, the darkness behind the luminous beauty of the children gathered to play snap in the wash house at the bay. It's 20 years before John A. Lee could turn first-hand experience – he lost his left arm in France – to fiction in *Civilian into Soldier*, before Robyn Hyde could imagine her *Passport to Hell*, decades more before Shadbolt's play on *Chunuck Bair*, or Elizabeth Knox's haunting *After Z Hour*. As for the savage struggle between warmonger and conscientious objector, it's 70 years before Maurice Gee's *Plumb* enters the debating chamber, seeing the old socialists, *'so much left undone, so much that will never be done. I knew how these important men must feel...when they were out of this chamber, when they stood alone.'*

And those fictions, those imaginings, are probably closer to the truth of that terrible war than the politically charged journalism of its era, with its omissions, editing, and emotive style.

This corrective function is present in this country's great historical imaginings: in Paula Morris's *Rangatira*, for example, where Lindauer's portrait of Paratene Te Wai, is given his voice. His conversation with the artist, is, as Morris writes in the end notes, 'conjecture and invention', and what brilliant conjecture it is, that dignified first person account of the voyage - in steerage - to England, the publicity tour led by a grandstanding, egocentric missionary who grabs centre stage along with the profits, sickness, breakdown, longing for home. The voice draws us into that shapeshifting act of empathy that lies at the heart of fiction. And when the voice becomes silent, there is the end note, recorded by James Cowan in 1895 where the old man receives his notice of eviction from his home on Hauturu as it is turned by government edict to Little Barrier and a bird sanctuary, cleared of pests, of people. *'The ancient warrior, bent with age, would not touch his summons so it was laid on the ground at his feet. He picked up a manuka stick and danced feebly round the obnoxious paper, making digs at it as though he were spearing an enemy.'* Morris's fiction lends its truth to current treaty negotiations and the contemporary playing out of this country's ongoing narrative of colonial invasion and appropriation.

As a writer, I have ventured into the past more often than the future, and what remains with me of that experience is its curiosity: the strangeness even of my own lifetime. I read newspaper reports from the 70s with a mix of recognition and total disbelief. I have used the past to write about the present: a story about Richard Seddon proposing that he was actually female with a genetic disorder that turned him male in adulthood, because I was sick of hearing and reading in the 80s about the need for 'strong' leaders. Or a romantic Victorian style novel about the introduction of mustelids into this country in Mr Allbones' *Ferrets* because I was caught up in the debate over the introduction of genetically engineered organisms into these vulnerable islands. The past is always available to us, like that ancient cabin trunk that can be retrieved from the back of the garage, reworked and given new purpose as a coffee table.

And then there is the writing that addresses the politics of the present, the fractious faultlines that run the length and breadth of this country. The politics of gender and race and class.

When fiction writers step out into such contentious territory, it's sometimes possible to hear the sharp intake of breath. It's there in one of Patricia Grace's early stories, for example, *A Way of Talking*, published in 1975 and the one she chose to open her Selected Stories in 1991. The story concerns two sisters, Hera, the narrator, older, cautious, still at home, about to be married. And Rohe, sometimes Rose, younger, back from the city and university for the wedding. They go for a dress fitting to a Pakeha neighbour. They are all sitting have a cup of coffee after the fitting when they hear

'the truck turn in at the bottom of the Frazers' drive.

Jane said, 'That's Alan. He's been down the road getting the Maoris for the scrub cutting.'

And Rose takes a big pull on her cigarette, blows the smoke out gently and says, *'Don't they have names?'*

And there it is: fiction doing what no other medium does as well, placing its finger on the instant so tiny it could easily go unnoticed. There follows the older sister's embarrassment and anger, and later, back home, the shift in understanding that is the whole point of fiction, why we tell stories at all. Hera makes a silent promise to her sister:

'I'll find some way of letting Rose know that I understand...I'm not as clever the way she is. I can't say things the same and I've never learned to stick up for myself....But my sister won't have to be alone again. I'll let her know that.'

And that is what Grace has done, is doing, fiction by fiction, year by year.

You can hear the same intake of breath in Fiona Kidman's ground breaking *A Breed of Women*, published in 1979, which opens with a woman waking on an autumn morning.

'This is the day, Harriet told herself. Today I shall lose weight, be better understood by my lover and my husband. Today I shall make something new and significant in my life.'

What she makes is the novel itself, tracing her life from small town childhood to adult independence, sexual freedom and professional engagement up to the point where she loses her job, which could be construed as failure, as anticlimax, but no. In the concluding paragraph, Harriet decides:

'She had reached a watershed, but it was a timely break for her.. Time to be herself ... to write down what it had all been like, and how she had arrived at the present in preparation for the future...'

Which also sounds like the resolution Kidman has followed through a long career, writing down what it has been like to lead a woman's life in this country in this era.

Then there is that major political faultline, the Main Divide: the one where left is set against right.

Factional politics in New Zealand are fierce and visceral, though we tend to conceal this unless it's an election year when political story telling shifts up a gear. It's The Story of Metiria Turei, she's done wrong, she's got that fatal tragic flaw in her past, like Oedipus accidentally stabbing his dad at the crossroads then sleeping with his mum, she's fibbed to the welfare and she must be punished so she's being pursued through a city airport and a journalist friend of our family says he found himself in the middle of the pack, wondering as he ran, 'What the hell am I doing?' A good question. Was it that good old playground perennial, chasing a kid till they cry? Was he the shining agent of moral retribution? Was he just doing his job? Was he taking part in another orchestrated grubby campaign to weaken the opposition? Was he embarked on some journalistic mission to cleanse the corridors of power, like Woodward, like Bernstein, or closer to home, like Duncan Garner, dedicating heart and soul to, as he expressed it so eloquently, 'fucking destroy' Chris Carter? The sorts of questions Giovanni Tiso also raised in a thoughtful online assessment of New Zealand journalism's role in the Turei narrative and the ready acceptance that '*once the blood was in the water, the sharks must do as nature commands them.*'

Then Metiria's gone, The End, and Winston Peters is on the ropes, he's done for, then he's not, he's bouncing back mid-ring, fists raised and the crowd is on its feet...

For the most part, the factional faultline is unremarked, its presence signaled in the mudpool bubble and plop of the words we use on the surface. Eleanor Catton voices some mild criticism of New Zealand's '*neoliberal, profit obsessed shallow politicians*' and is called a traitor and a whore on Radio Live and the broadcaster doesn't lose his job but in a few months later is appointed by the Minister to the Broadcasting Standards Authority.

And below the surface seethes the memory of the crowd baying for blood at Hamilton and the headlocks and batons and further back there's Vietnam and the argument at pub or kitchen table, National Mum and Labour Dad slugging it out, year after year, behind the roses on the trellis at Calvary Street. I doubt that in many of those arguments, the basis for that divide is addressed: the concept of a free market, the social contract, Klein versus Friedman, any more than I doubt that the theoretical basis for the factional divide in Northern Ireland leads to animated debate in the local pub over the precise nature of the eucharist: does the bread truly transubstantiate at the moment of communion to the body of Christ, the wine to his blood? Theory plays a small part. History, family tales, experience, the batons and the baying – these are the things that nudge us to one side of the divide or the other.

Left versus Right. The great 50/50 divide.

In this country we are not threatened by deportation or imprisonment in a cell, however nicely decorated, for political expression, though our laws of sedition have been applied in the past with great force - to silence Te Whiti, for example, or Harry Holland, while those defamation suits place some restraint on any impulse to publish that which might discredit or cause others to shun and avoid.

What restrains us is not so much the law but something more subtle: supermarket syndrome, that certainty in a small country that having dashed off your damning attack you will bump into the object of your fury considering the relative merits of the baby peas in the frozen goods section. Or the chance that careless political expression might affect your chances of promotion, your ability to pay the mortgage. It's not so long ago that letters to the editor were routinely signed with a pseudonym: Outraged of Outram or Mother of Four took good care not to give overt offence. Or there's that terrible affliction, good manners, that included politics among the list of topics to avoid at the dinner table among people one did not know well, along with vulgar speculation about how much someone earned, and religion, both now consigned to the irrelevance bin. But I think there might still be some hesitancy in coming out to total strangers that you vote Labour, Act, or feel strangely attracted to Colin Craig.

Maybe this reticence accounts for the fact that our novelists have rarely followed Plumb into the debating chamber: New Zealand has no equivalent to the American political blockbuster, no fictionalized Muldoon figure to equate with Willie Stark in *All the Kings Men*. No Holyoake or Bill Sutch equivalent to the figures in *Advise and Consent*, or to shift the fictionmaking to television, no Helen Clarke/ Birgitte Nyborg figure working her way through the labyrinth, no adaptation of Hager's *Dirty Politics* to equal a *West Wing* imagining of power.

We have largely left the narrative of factional politics to the writers of non-fiction: to the journalists and those super-journalists, the Political Commentators, - Soper, Watkins, Young, Garner, Hoskings - who shape the story and deliver it to us, serial fashion, day by day, creating the honeymoon, the fairytale. The Story of the Poor Boy, who makes his way in the world by the exercise of his wits, like the Clever Little Tailor, and becomes very rich and the leader of his people, yet kind, shown at the moment of his accession cuddling a kitten - Picton the Kitten - on the steps of Parliament and he's international, he's flying to Afghanistan on a private air cruiser along with a handpicked selection of journalists and Political Commentators, the fourth estate off to the war zone, a glass of bubbles in one hand and a canape in the other. And his country is prosperous, its world class, rockstar, and then he tires of being leader goes into the board room and shuts the door. The End. Now the regime has changed and the journalists' tale has gone into reverse. They have been handed the fairytale - the gifted, beautiful young woman who emerges from obscurity to walk the corridors of power in her feather cloak, her handsome husband at her side, and it could be Kate and William, only better because she's ours - but now the journalists reject the story, they are filled with doubt, with dread, they must blow away the fairy dust, toss the acid.

We leave politicians to the earnest hagiographers and the hardcover bio, and the critical analysis to Bridget William Books, or Hager's steady steely scrutiny or the cynical eye of Steve Braunias and the columns that morph into '*non-fiction novels*' like Madmen, that 2011 'campaign diary like no other', with its multiple plots and cast of peculiar characters that could not be improved upon by the most fertile of imaginations.

Novels featuring politicians like Charlotte Grimshaw's brilliant satirical *Soon* are a rarity here. The summer court is assembled about the Prime Minister, the immensely right, immensely charming David Hallright. His ministers and acolytes, the political wives recline about the swimming pool like so many neoliberal lizards round a waterhole, observed by an outsider, Simon, and his lumpen left-wing brother. Seduction, betrayal, accidental murder and moral failure has politics at its icy, beating heart.

Mark Broach in a Listener interview with Grimshaw following publication of this novel, wrote that '*in the absence of public intellectuals and given the sputtering light of local journalism, we increasingly look to our novelists and poets to show us things we can't always see.*'

Or don't wish to see. Or are being persuaded, like those readers of the Herald or the Manawatu Standard in 1918, to see through a very partisan pair of glasses.

We may rarely venture onto the sunny patios of power, or into the debating chamber, but politics, the way we choose to organize ourselves within these islands and the ideas over which we have fought so bitterly, are always present.

Decisions made decade after decade form the turbulent background to Jake the Muss or the Deniston Rose or Kahu astride the whale or the men Walter Moody discovers assembled in the hotel in Hokitika. Politics are the stage on which Marshall's Larnach reaches for the gun and the dangerous territory where Wells's Lemmy and Jamie are forced to negotiate sexual attraction and where Johnston's Howard Shag meets his nemesis. It's the wash of colour behind those other groups of children – Emily Perkins' Forrests caught in the turmoil that will last in the heart forever, the children in *Owls Do Cry* scavenging at the tip but blessed with that acute sense of beauty that eclipses small town conformity.

The exact nature of those politics can depend upon the reader. Lloyd Jones's Mr Pip for example, was greeted by an English reviewer in the Guardian as

' a delicate fable that never shies away from the realities of daily life shadowed by violence.' Matilda the 13 year old Bougainvillean narrator lives in a settlement under siege.

Apart from the presence of pidgin Bibles,' writes the reviewer, 'civilisation might never have touched the village... Only one white man remains and through him the children discover in Great Expectations ...a bigger piece of the world... In the fertile

soil of Bougainville, Mr Watt's cultural seed has taken root and flourished... instilling in Matilda 'a moral code. By hybridizing the narratives of black and white races...the author has created a new and resonant fable that unites.'

Closer to home, however, Selina Tusitala Marsh reviewing the book for the Dominion in October 2007 was less enchanted.

In place of a delicate fable, she reads a novel saturated in the politics of colonial appropriation. Instead of something 'new' she reads *'a very old played out story of the continuing canonization of white male voices speaking for/over/through indigenous female voices.'*

The voice, moreover, repeatedly gets it wrong. Would Matilda, *'born and bred in Bougainville really label her environment as 'the tropics'?* Would she refer to a class mate as *'the boy with the big woolly head Has she seen wool?'* And what of the women who hide from the soldiers in the bush, *'[sticking] their teats into the mouths of their babies to shut them up.'* "Teats?" queries Tusitala Marsh. *"As in cows? Why not breasts or nipples?"*

And why is it that once the school closes, the children of this village have nothing to do all day – no food to gather, no chores – and most astonishingly, no alternative sources of knowledge. *'Wouldn't these children already know... as island people dependent on the land for thousands of years, the many uses of the coconut?'"*

We can choose or not to detect the politics.

Sometimes, however, they simply rise up and smack you in the face.

In 2010, one spring morning, I was flung into the air. The tectonic plates had made a minor adjustment. It's something that happens here. Right now, we're only 93 kilometers or so above the lava, sometime it will bubble up. In 45 seconds, Wellington could tumble or the entire West Coast could split from the South Island or Taupo could erupt and there'll be cloud and crop failure across the planet. It's how it is.

An earthquake is a seismic wonder, an awe inspiring few seconds of energy- release that renders all human artifice – our buildings, our social structures, our egos – insignificant. We're reduced to infantile surrender, tossed by gigantic hands and for a few seconds, we are united in a visceral experience, devoid of politics. But the moment we return to earth, politics kick in.

The Christchurch quakes have been a political event. They immediately altered the course of an election. Until the quakes, the mayor, Bob Parker was presumed finished, and his replacement by Jim Anderton a near certainty. But voters switched their allegiance as Parker appeared night after night on television, calm amid the chaos, purposeful, articulate, clad in the hard hat and high vis vest that were immediately seized upon by politicians running for national office in this country,

and, marketed by the same PR company, conservative politicians in the UK: the currency trader, the Old Etonian, toggled up in the camouflage of the working man.

The institutions put in place to rebuild the city and the manner of their governance, the way in which the centre came under the direct autocratic control of a central government which had already overturned a democratic regional election, while in the suburbs it was, as Brownlee famously said, 'All over to the insurers', by a government devoted to turning this country into a place where it is 'good to do business'. The manner of the recovery, the abrupt demolition of the old, whether repairable or not, the priorities for reconstruction, the anchor projects with their focus on the profitable tourist, the introduction of an entirely new kind of public education with its modern learning environments barnraising 70 or more children, so cheap, so efficient, the very style of the new architecture – all this expressed a particular political mindset, disaster capitalism in action.

At first amid the chaos, fiction fell back. Non-fiction, journalism especially the work of the remarkable John McCrone, took centre stage. And poetry. Lots of poetry as writers reached for the art form that best expresses raw emotion. But gradually fiction sidled back: Joe Bennett's *King Rich* took up residence in the abandoned hotel in the Red Zone, Jane Higgins's teenagers in *The Bridge*, travel to war in a taxi through an imaginary city in chaos, a novel she calls her 'quake book'. And my novel. The political one, written because I had been talking to a man struggling with recalcitrant insurers, an exhausting pinpricking battle over details too small to be of any interest whatever to the journalists of this country who were so very eager, with the honourable exception of John Campbell, to insist upon a story of boom and profit and progress in a place where it was so good to do business. I spoke to this man – married, young family, house a wreck of botched repair, flooding in heavy rain, and I asked him how he'd sum up how he felt about it all. He said, 'Impotent.' And I thought: yes. That's the place where fiction can get to: the tiny intimate pain where all politics has its origin, its end.

Over the past months I have been watching the new library take shape on the corner of the Square, just behind the ruins of the cathedral. It's a big rectangle, but in another year or so it will be completely dwarfed, as will the new cathedral, by one of those anchor projects that are the legacy of Brownlee and the Key regime: the new convention centre. \$475 million dollars worth of auditoria and breakout rooms. The library is a more modest affair of \$95million, but its exterior looks beautiful in the architect's drawings. Curiously the words library or whare puka puka don't actually appear on the hoardings. Instead the planners promise a 'community arena/events/whanau performances/ interactivity/ makerspace/stories, gaming,/ study/meetings/non-fiction. The drawings show people strolling through a foyer that could be a hospital or airport, the only hint of library a small bookshelf in the background. The planners promise café and retail space at street level, to 'draw people in' for books it seems will no longer be enough. And nowhere any mention whatever of fiction. No children's books. No novels for the grownups. I've stood in the Square looking at the hoardings, feeling a bit like one of the last remaining reel to reel taperecorders, a slide projector, curling tongs.

I've asked a librarian who has assured me there will be novels in the library, up on the fourth floor. But it's strange, this public dismissal of fiction. It feels like part of some more general diminution of the arts and humanities in our universities, part of the culture that focuses on the body, on sport, rather than the imagination, part of some vast movement of the zeitgeist under our feet, that mistrusts the imagination and what it might be capable of conceiving. Part of a new global politics.

But in the meantime, here we go, the writers of fiction, in our air machines, bobbing along, fifty feet above our country, looking down, seeing how it might have been, how it yet might be, making things up. Imagining.