

What's a New Zealand novel?

Sue Esterman

Enemy Camp

David Hill
Puffin, \$20.00, ISBN 9780143309123

Lullaby

Bernard Beckett
Text, \$26.00, ISBN 9781922182753

Open Your Eyes, Jackson Ryder

Rudy Castaneda Lopez
Escalator, \$30.00, ISBN 9780473295691

"She was that age, the generation that grew up online and lost their perspective."

It has been interesting to read three such different but compelling books. All three writers are New Zealanders, but only one book is identifiable as a New Zealand novel. I mention this only because there was a session at the recent Writers Week in Wellington during the Arts Festival where I was expecting a robust discussion about what constitutes a New Zealand writer but unfortunately that didn't happen. So the question is still there, but I don't think I can address that in this review except through an occasional comment.

As I suspected, *Enemy Camp* was easy to read, clear, and compelling, and I did not need to read it again immediately. *Lullaby*, on the other hand, demanded a second reading, as the concepts and ideas raised are challenging. *Open Your Eyes* was engaging from the start, well-written and, although at times I felt it had almost too much going on, I put that aside and enjoyed the ride.

David Hill has always had a great knack for bringing story and character to life in a way which really engages the reader, and *Enemy Camp* is no exception. The novel centres on the Featherston camp

for Japanese civilian and military prisoners, where Ewen's father is a supervisor, having been invalided out of the army. The denouement concerns the riot at the camp by Japanese prisoners-of-war.

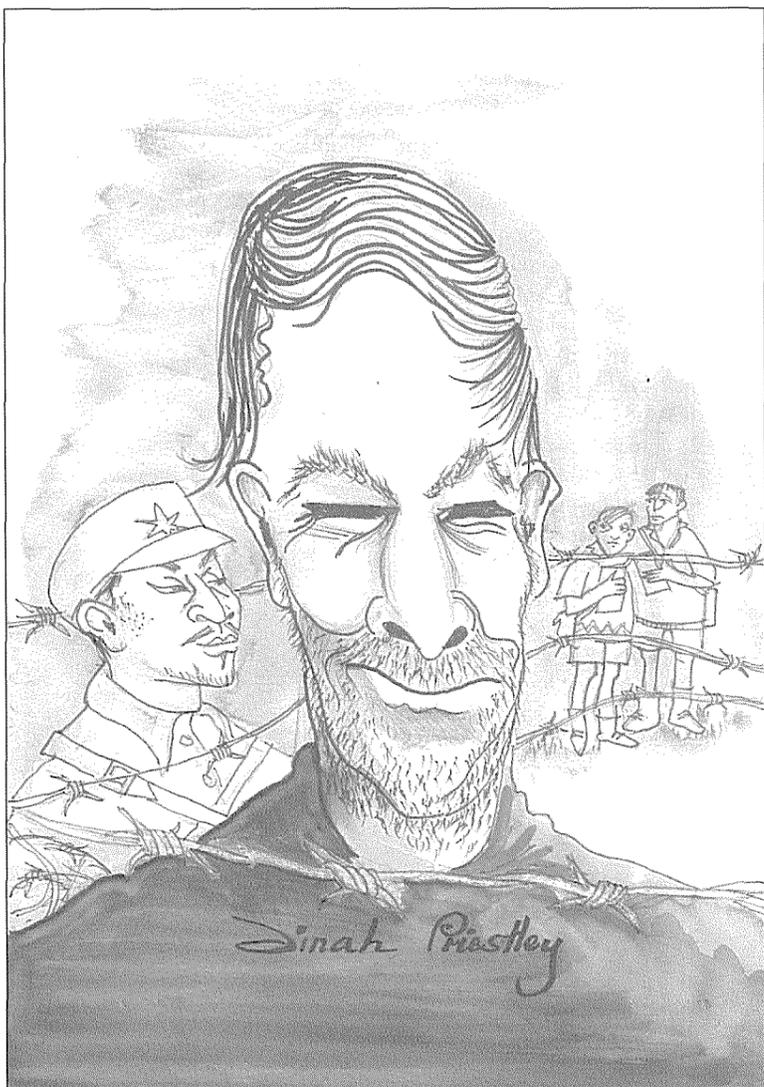
Hill brilliantly creates the feeling of the late 1940s in New Zealand (it was pretty much still like that in the 1950s, which I do remember well) through dialogue, particularly between the boys who are the main characters, but also through his ability to provide great insight in a few words. Readers of a certain age will find that this story rings true in its depiction of the range of opinion in small-town New Zealand about the war, and the ingrained suspicion and distrust of anyone who could be construed to be an enemy or a potential threat to national security – we only have to recall the internment on *Somes Island* of so many – and I think that younger readers will be caught up in the story regardless of their historical knowledge.

The young heroes (for so they appear) are all at primary school, and their teacher (an enlightened chap) sets them a writing task: they are to keep a journal and try to write something in it each day. Ewen, our narrator, at first is not keen on this idea at all, but despite himself gets caught up in the magic of writing. This technique gives impetus to the story, and Ewen leaps out of the pages, along with his friends Barry and Clarry (the latter suffering from polio – also a significant factor in our history. In addition, it allows for a great deal of humour and empathy between the characters).

All the way through this excellent book there is great attention to detail – blackouts, rationing, the fact that you could not get replacement tyres for bicycles, the make-do attitude of everyone in the community, milk monitors and school veggie gardens, saluting the flag in the school playground every morning – all these small pieces of our history triggered memories for me. Good craftsmanship is everywhere evident. Hill has a knack for creating character in a few well-chosen words, and his descriptions of Clarry struggling to walk are extremely moving. Once again, David Hill has written a cracking good story which will engage readers. It would, in my opinion, work well as a class text, as there are many good points to trigger discussion and further research.

I have been a fan of Bernard Beckett's writing since his first novel came out. I was working in a school library at the time, and his books were refreshing and definitely caught the attention of my male student readers. *Lullaby* is about identical twins who discover early on that they can swap over from time to time, to deceive others, to amuse themselves, and to see what it's like to be the other twin. They are identical physically, but in no other way: Theo – gorgeous, outgoing; Rene, gorgeous, more inward-looking, less confident, and with significantly more academic ability. Theo, on the other hand, challenges Rene in many ways. He is far more successful with girls, has more confidence and is quite the showman. The boys have never been separated in class until they get to "finishing school", and since they don't want to be separated, Rene takes Theo's test which gives Theo far better results, but that comes at a considerable cost. In the long run, the result comes down to a choice between life and death.

The novel is set some time in the future, when medical breakthroughs provide opportunities for radical experimentation, which naturally pose significant ethical problems. An extract from Bernard's blog gives some background:



David Hill

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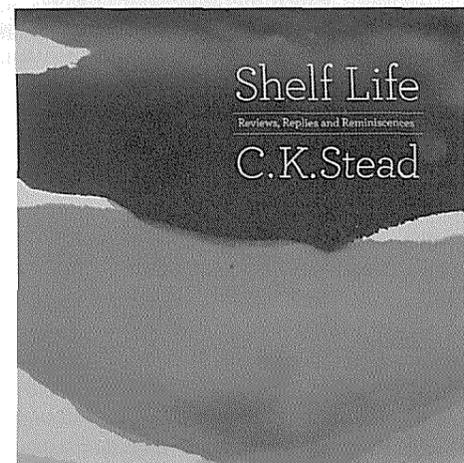
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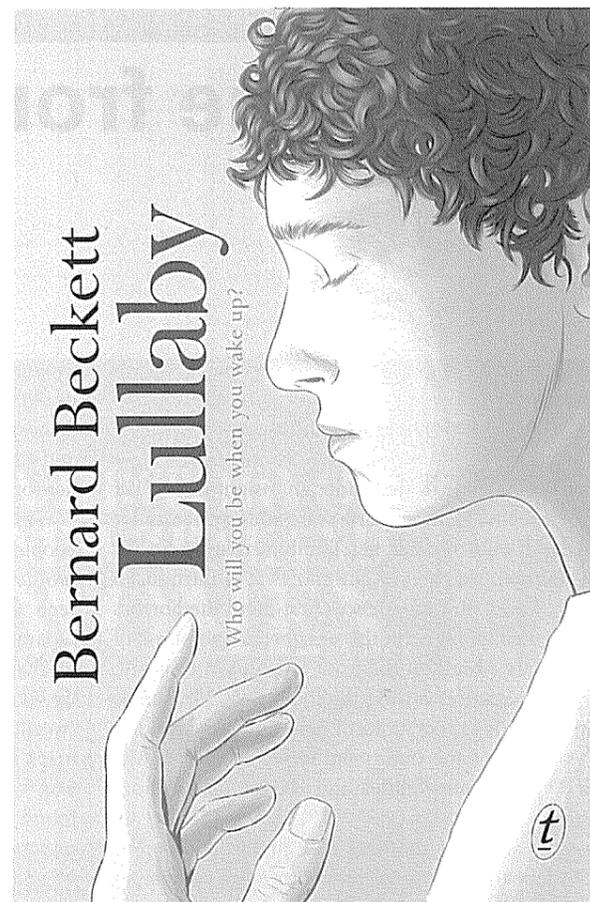
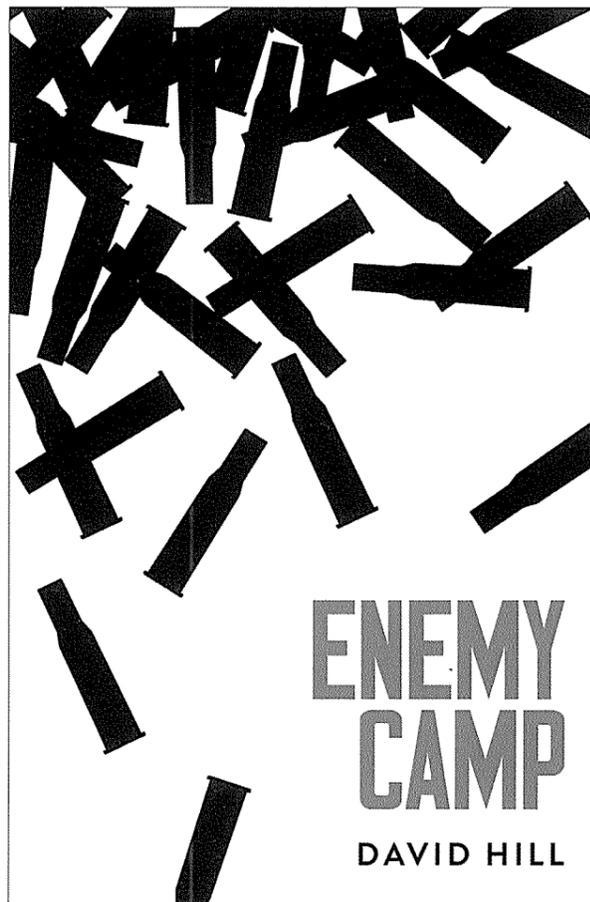
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Lullaby is an attempt to find the middle ground between the at times austere, but thought-experiment pure, approach of *Genesis*, and the more character based, but perhaps at the expense of clarity, of *August*. I was looking for a thought experiment that would take us deep into the heart of the metaphors we embrace when considering death, and I wanted the circumstance to not so much flow for the characters' situation, as be their situation.

The playwright in me can't resist the two-hander, be it Adam and Art, trapped in a prison cell, Tristan and Grace trapped in a crashed car, or here, Rene and his psychologist trapped in the session that will ultimately determine whether or not Rene is allowed to decide his brother's fate.

Beckett addresses these issues in large part through the interaction between the young psychologist, Maggie, and Rene. The conversations are wide-ranging, intellectual and, as I said earlier, challenging.

Every so often, there's a line which stops you in your tracks, as did this: "she was that age, the generation that grew up online and lost their perspective." That's all there is, but there is a wealth of discussion to be had about that sentence. Is the present generation of so-called "digital natives" losing perspective? Or is their perspective changing to suit their circumstances and new tools for learning? Is it a matter of concern? Beckett does not set out to answer those questions, but he does set out to make us think.

Is *Open Your Eyes, Jackson Ryder* a New Zealand book? It's definitely by a New Zealand writer, but could be set anywhere. The questions are universal. It is a fascinating look at the life of one American teenager in the 60s. I guess you could call it a coming-of-age novel, but that should in no way limit its readership. This deserves to be widely read.

Castaneda Lopez has been a New Zealand resident for a number of years now; the debate about what constitutes a New Zealand writer would be an interesting way in which to consider the author. The book has nothing to do with New Zealand at all, but the author has chosen to be a Kiwi resident so by that definition he's a New Zealand writer. Geographically speaking. But that's where any New Zealand connection ends. It's a totally American story.

Jackson Ryder (named for Jackson Pollock) loves art, but the death of his mother has meant that his father, grieving, has removed all artworks from their home, and forbidden Jackson from drawing. His father, bound up entirely in his grief, withdraws

emotionally from his son, and in short order picks up and moves with an ex-army friend from New York to San Sebastiano where he's going to sell cars, dragging Jackson along. For a 15-year-old New Yorker, San Sebastiano seems like the end of nowhere. But, also because he's a New Yorker and the child of immigrant parents, he is not prejudiced or judgmental, so makes close friends among the Mexican immigrant community. His school friends are a huge mix: American Indian, Mexican, white, Catholic, Jewish.

Lopez peppers the conversations of his characters with a smattering of Yiddish and Spanish – some readers won't get the meaning, but I don't think that is really going to interfere with anyone's understanding; it's mostly evident from the context. The novel is steeped in art history with many references to major pop artists and their work. It's intriguing, and I think might encourage some readers to search these out, and to explore their own reactions to modern art. There's a great deal going on: grief, anger, teenage crush on older woman, quasi-gangs, the Beatles, the young Civil Rights movement, heavy drinking, teenage relationships, high school with all its myriad factions and baseless racism, the emergent pop art scene of Lichtenstein, Allen Jones and Warhol among others, an inspirational teacher and, of course, seriously good friendships. Oh, and there's also a knife fight which goes seriously wrong. It's certainly a roller coaster of a story.

Jackson has a lot to sort out in his life; his mother was his guiding light, and without her and without art he struggles. But a truly remarkable art teacher, his own clarity of perception, and his remarkable inner strength, all combine to pull him through some rough times. Eventually, he is able to comprehend that his father has been dealing with demons of his own throughout their journey; Jackson is able to empathise, and the reconciliation with his father is beautifully handled. Perhaps reconciliation is the wrong word, better to say that they finally talk to one another, and listen to one another, at the end of a turbulent year or so.

This is a well-told, exciting and ultimately believable novel.

All of these novels are worth finding and reading. I recommend them to school librarians in particular, but also to anyone with an interest in good stories which will stay with you. These three certainly do that.

Sue Esterman is a former school librarian.