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The Best New Zealand  
Short Fiction, Vol 5

Owen Marshall (Ed)

*Reviewed by Victoria Kuttainen*

The above quote sums up this collection for me: little sparks of light spiralling up into the night, punctuating the ennui and emptiness of backwater life in rural or semi-urban isolated New Zealand. That's what these stories are, and why this collection matters to me. The superior power of the stars of best-selling fiction often outshines and extinguishes local voices: library-goers get sucked in by the Jodi Picoult and the Salman Rushdies, and if they even consider fiction from New Zealand, they do so obediently, reaching for well-known titles by Katherine Mansfield or Maurice Gee. It is only because of this that I ever dare venture inside the covers of national anthologies like this one, and as the Short Review's editor will attest, even when I do it takes me a long time to come up for air.

Recently, a review in *The Australian* described anthologies as great feasts of literary indigestion: oddly combined assortments of rich and sumptuous foods that are hard to take all at one sitting, but which are better dipped into here and there over the course of a season. Indeed, this is one reason why the national anthology usually puts me off: I rarely finish it, and feel a bit guilty for neglecting to do so.

But the other reason national anthologies rarely appeal to me has something to do with their history, I think. Anthologies have long been associated with pedagogical purposes. In their earliest forms, they served the agenda of empire: they were collections of tales from the colonies that gave British schoolchildren a taste of life in the foreign, far-flung pink bits of the globe. They often featured gorgeous covers of exotic natives but their contents were stereotyped portraits of life in the backwoods or the goldfields or the tropics. As nationalism took hold in the colonies, they were also instrumental to the nation-building project, and in this, national short story collections targeted a local readership rather than one back home in the motherland. Again, however, the offerings were selected more for the fairly bland picture they assembled of the land and its regions being tamed or for local color—literary resources rather than literary genius.

Amidst these, other anthologies emerged as giftbooks—collections of the best and brightest of stories in the pages of Punch magazine, for example, and these were not so nationalistic in their focus, but often selected more for their entertainment value, or for their fanbase, and sometimes for literary merit. Later national anthologies tried to break out of the pedagogical focus, and switch to this more popular "best and brightest" format, but their largest market remained school and university libraries, and this target readership certainly influenced their content and approach.

These anthologies were often hampered, too, by fairly restrictive considerations of what it meant to be a "national" writer or what comprised a "national" story. Even as collections made an attempt to slough off these restrictive criteria, first in the Leftist 1960s and later in the multicultural and feminist 1980s, they did so self-consciously and obediently, sometimes with a hint of tokenism and "good-for-you"-ness that a dose of naughtiness and disobedience would have done well to moderate. After all, good literature should be at least transgressive, pushing against categories, labels, and restrictions rather than creating new ones.

As a result, I always feel like reading the national anthology for fun is a bit of an oxymoron, like buying rolled oats or granola because they taste good, not because they are meant to be good for me. Even though a bowl of steaming porridge with a drop of milk and honey might be the most sumptuous treat ever on a dark mid-winter's morning, the box of oats often sits neglected at the back of my cupboard behind the stars like Cheerios and Corn Flakes—easier, more palatable favorites, even if they are less-substantial and filled with junky confections. It doesn't help that national anthologies are often packaged in Glasnost-era paper and cheap type-setting, even if their covers are increasingly glamorous, as this one is.

So my thanks go to the Short Review's editor for urging me to finish this anthology and review it for her, because despite my aversion for the national anthology and despite the literary indigestion (it does favor dipping-into rather than single-sitting reading), the bright sparks this collection offers up across the cold and

"Above them, in the loneliness of the forest, the sky was deep and blue, and the silver stars were as molten as if the fire had melted them. Flames cackled and spat red and orange in the blackness. The Coruba in the bottle that Genesis held sloshed around, glinting as it caught the light, sparkling like his eyes. He was like a dark magician. He'd folded the night into his pocket, and pulled out his fingers holding a fire. Claire looked upwards, to where the sparks formed bright little parachutes, spiralling up into the night, before they burned out, extinguished by the superior power of the stars. 'There's gonna be fires like this in hell,' said Genesis, 'when I get there!'"

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First anthology?: No, Vol 5.

Editor bio: Well-known, award-winning Kiwi short story writer and novelist, Owen Marshall is the third consecutive editor in the Best NZ Short Fiction series, following on from Fiona Kidman and Fiona Farrell. He has authored twenty-three books to date.

Authors: Norman Bilbrough, Ellie Catton, Paul Chapman, Craig Cliff, Charlotte Grimshaw, Lizzie Harwood, David Hill, Christine Johnston, Fiona Kidman, Shonagh Koea, Sarah Laing, Graeme Lay, Frankie McMillan, Carl Nixon, Julian Novitz, Vincent O'Sullivan, Faith Oxenbridge, Sarah Quigley, Alice Tawhai, Peter Wells.

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Alice Tawhai "Festival of Miracles and Luminous"

What other reviewers thought:

forbidding Tasman are gorgeous little discoveries. In particular, the penultimate story, *Pants on Fire* by Alice Tawhai, brilliantly conveys a sense of teenage ennui to which any of us who have grown up anywhere in the sticks can so surely relate. Tawhai's talent for capturing voice and character—and, in particular, regional dialect without resorting to cliché or stereotype—makes her one of the most impressive emerging writing talents I have encountered in years.

Other stories were stand-outs in this collection, too, but mostly they were all so very impressive that the task of picking favorites becomes a pointless exercise in personal taste. Nevertheless: Lizzie Harwood's *Throat for Dinner*; David Hill's *No Problem*; Graeme Lay's *South Island Story*; Peter Wells's *Knowledge*; Craig Cliff's *Copies*; and Eleanor Catton's *Necropolis* are my particular favorites from this collection. And I have chosen them, just as Marshall has, too, I believe, not because of some way they represent New Zealand (for goodness sake, I only made my first trip there 6 months ago), but because they are good. They represent those little "flash[es] of fireflies" Nadine Gordimer once spoke of in describing the power of the short story to illumine life in a poetic, potent, and viscerally real way.

Another delightful thing about this collection is its extensive *Notes on Contributors* section, where Marshall allows each writer a good half-page to introduce themselves to their readers and discuss the genesis of their story. Tawhai writes, for instance, "All my writing is from my life, and the moments that I remember are like photographs, which I cut up to make stories. Some bits are big, and some bits are tiny, like a name, or a colour. When I put them all together, like a collage, they make a new picture and hopefully you can't see how I stuck it all together".

So there's another analogy-freebie for me to steal: if this anthology is a collage, it is one that makes a vibrant picture of New Zealand fiction, where their most well-known writer Katherine Mansfield solidified a firm place for the short story for years to come, and where the short story has not become an ossified relic, but a picture of colorful diversity that is alive and well. If it takes a national anthology to expose me to such a rich array of emerging writing, I'll keep buying them, even if they do take me half a year to get through.

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*Victoria Kuttainen is a Canadian lecturer in English and Postcolonial Literatures at James Cook University in tropical Queensland, Australia. She's interested in what used to be called Commonwealth Literature — specifically American, Canadian, NZ and Australian short story writing — and has just gone on maternity leave so she finally has time to read again (and do reviews!).*

