

# Relationships shine in new Kiwi sci-fi

THE BURNING RIVER  
**Lawrence Patchett**  
Victoria University Press

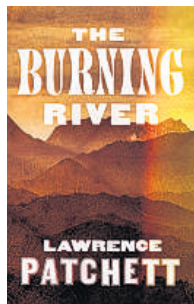
WATERLINE  
**Chris Else**  
Quentin Wilson Publishing

By CUSHLA MCKINNEY

In recent years New Zealand has begun to recognise and celebrate our many talented authors of literary and crime fiction. With the odd exception, however, most local science fiction and fantasy writers are better known overseas. Whether this is due to a paucity of publishers or intellectual snobbery is a moot point, but these two books are proof that our speculative fiction is as good as any around the world.

In *The Burning River*, Lawrence Patchett conjures up a vision of a distant future in which society has reverted back to pre-European times. The novel is set on a southern coastline where three settlements maintain an uneasy peace. Lowest in the pecking order are the Raupo, whose health and fertility are slowly but surely being sapped by the stagnant waters and disease-carrying insects that surround them. On the bluffs above are the Whaea, a matriarchal tribe whose regenerated forests and clean water are sequestered by a formidable fence, while a third group controls the intervening plateau and the stream of refugees fleeing troubles further North. But this fragile equilibrium has been unsettled by arrival of a new group, the Burners, whose fires cast a permanent pall across their island camp, and there are rumours of even more fearsome tribes following in their wake.

The story's central character, a plastic-miner called Van, is the



## Win a copy

- The Weekend Mix has three copies of *The Burning River*, by Lawrence Patchett, courtesy of Victoria University Press, to give away. For your chance to win a copy, email [playtime@odt.co.nz](mailto:playtime@odt.co.nz) with your name and postal address in the body of the email and "Burning River" in the subject line by Tuesday, December 10.

whangai son of the Raupo's headwoman, Matewai. As a Pakeha of unknown parentage, he is acutely aware of his outsider status and when a young Tamahine Toa, Kahu, arrives with an urgent summons from the Whaea he is at a loss to understand what they want of him. At first he assumes he has made her mother Hana (with whom he shared a bed at the recent Summer festival) sick, but Rua says elders wish to teach him his whakapapa, and he eventually agrees to accompany her home, where he is delighted to find Hana not only well but pregnant with his child. It soon becomes clear that their liaison was far from accidental however; the Burners are coming for the Whaea's land and the elders want Van to negotiate with his natal whanau for permission to resettle in their rohe, a mission that will force him to completely re-evaluate his own identity and place in the world.

One of the most striking aspects of *The Burning River* is the way it plunges the reader into a fully formed world, one that it is unapologetically Aotearoan and which is given — and requires — no explanation. Everything from the flora and fauna to the echoes

of our pre and peri-colonial past are instantly recognisable. But a familiarity with this country's landscape and history are not a prerequisite for becoming immersed in Patchett's vision, and Van's struggle to find his place as husband, father and leader is central to human experience. The overall effect is both intimate and universal, the reader's experience reflecting Van's own as he navigates his way through an unfamiliar culture, redefining himself in the context of relationships old and new.

Although *The Burning River* never reveals what precipitates the loss of civilisation, Chris Else's new (and long-awaited) novel provides an all-to-believable account of the first stages of such a decline. With a near-future setting that differs from today in degree rather kind, *Waterline* depicts a country whose inhabitants are slowly but surely sleepwalking towards oblivion. With climate change obliterating coastal communities and more and more functions of government outsourced to faceless AI, people are retreating into gated communities and online rather than real-worlds. As the daughter of a wealthy family



Despite the differences in time, setting and tone, the nature and complexity of family, climate change, inter and intra-community relationships form a central theme in both *The Burning River* and *Waterline*. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

and trophy wife, Stella has sheltered from life's grim realities until the family's multimillion dollar Wellesley mansion is swept into the sea, and they are forced to re-locate to the much less salubrious Southern town of Byte.

When she runs into trouble during the move, Stella accepts the help of obliging stranger Geordie, unaware that as the leader of an off-the-grid community called Garrison, he is classified a major security risk. This interaction triggers a Kafkaesque chain of events that see her husband trespassed from Byte while Stella and her children join Geordie in Garrison, where they become caught in a feud between the settlement and an inner-city gang of techno-evangelists that splits the community between Geordie, who wants a negotiated peace, and his brother Krey who wishes to take an eye for an eye.

Despite the differences in time, setting and tone, the nature and complexity of family, inter and intra-community relationships form a central theme in both *The Burning River*

and *Waterline*. Like Van, Stella must find her place within a community whose customs and social hierarchies are unfamiliar and long-established, a process that requires her to recognise and exercise leadership abilities heretofore latent. In both novels the most emotionally satisfying moments involve the relationships between individuals; the slowly strengthening bonds between Van, Hana and Rua in the former, the physical and psychological intensity of first love as experienced by Stella's son Luke and Geordie's daughter Tara in the latter. And while the novels share ecological concerns and depict a dystopian future, neither succumbs to the despair that is an all-to-common feature of the genre.

The fact that first-class novels such as these can find a market here gives me hope that Kwi-Fi will soon stand alongside Yeah-Noir as a home-grown genre we will be proud to call our own.

Cushla McKinney is a Dunedin scientist.

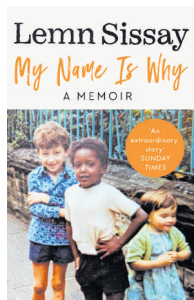
MY NAME IS WHY  
**Lemn Sissay**  
Canongate

By CLARKE ISAACS

In this memoir, Lemn Sissay retraces the sad years he suffered as a boy and young man caught up in the coils of an English "welfare" system that subjected him to a fragile, unloved life.

Now chancellor of the University of Manchester and, in 2012, official poet of the London Olympics, Sissay describes himself as British and Ethiopian.

Born in 1967 to a young Ethiopian student, Sissay was



entrusted to the care of foster parents, Mr and Mrs Greenwood,

a white Baptist family, and given the name Norman.

"Home was now hell," Sissay writes of his plight in 1979. "I couldn't do anything right. The better I did, the worse I was treated."

In 1980, he was moved on to a children's home, never again to see his mum and dad.

"Most children in care have someone they can call family. I had no-one."

Then he was famous in his

area. He was called Chalky White.

"Not a day passed without 'nigger' or 'coon' or 'wog' or 'black bastard' firing from someone's lips into my face." He was permanently in fight-or-flight mode.

From age 12, he spent five years in children's homes, often experiencing harsh treatment that contributed to mental health problems.

His last stay was at the Woodend "assessment" and

remand centre, where he was badly abused.

Much of the book contains reports from social workers, which Sissay much later was able to obtain, that track the rigid, formulaic superintendency of doubtless well-meaning but ill-informed state children's custodians.

A striking feature of a book that is both sad and suffused with the courage of a boy caught up in the soul-destroying acts of both well-meaning and sadistic adults, are the gnostic poems Sissay has written for each chapter.

Clarke Isaacs is a former ODT chief of staff.

## Living within and against state 'care'



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# Aftermath of Hyde rail disaster lasts generations, author says

IT DOESN'T TAKE A WAR

**Elizabeth Coleman**

The Copy Press

By JIM SULLIVAN

Twenty-one lives were lost in the Hyde train crash in Central Otago in June, 1943. My neighbour, now in her 90s, is probably the last survivor of the 113 passengers. Of course, she recalls vividly the horror of that day but, happily, it remains just an incident in a full and fruitful life. However, in this book we discover that the tragedy marred the life of one woman — not a passenger, but a 4-year-old



who lost her father and brother in the disaster.

In a sometimes harrowing narrative in this revealing and honest account, Elizabeth Coleman puts a convincing case

for the theory that what we call post-traumatic stress can affect at least a couple of generations of the families of victims. Almost certainly, similar stories could be written by some who lost loved ones in the Tangiwai, Wahine and Erebus disasters.

The author describes vividly the events of the time as she recalls them and the effect on her mother, who later underwent electroconvulsive therapy as she wrestled with losing a husband and son, and having another son badly injured.

Elizabeth Coleman reveals her own troubled times which, with

no counselling given in the 1940s, became a life of struggling with grief, affecting her marriage and relationships with her children. For 25 years she has been researching and writing about the accident and reveals with some relief that immersion in the story has allowed her to find great happiness in her new image of her 4-year-old self and now in her feelings of self-worth as an adult.

This does not turn the book into a psychiatric treatise and much of the story follows the path of solid family history. Life on the farm at Kyeburn, courtship and marriage and the tribulations,

frankly revealed, of a Riversdale housewife and mother.

There were other tragic events in the story but now at 80, she writes, “My life has been both impoverished and enriched. I am alive and believe that love is the source of all life.”

Not a bad outcome, and getting to that point makes *It Doesn't Take a War* a book that deserves to be widely read, especially if you plan to spend a moment at the crash memorial near Hyde which the author had a major hand in establishing.

Jim Sullivan is a Patearoa writer.

## Horrific times recounted as bombs rain on Gaza

STILL LIVES: A MEMOIR OF GAZA

**Marilyn Garson**

Mary Egan Publishing

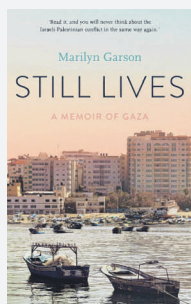
By JESSIE NEILSON

“Israel warns us we must leave our homes. Hamas orders us not to move. The others, Islamic Jihad and the others, they threaten to block our supplies to make us go home — but Israel is bombing the homes!”

So pleads a Gazan citizen to aid worker Marilyn Garson in July 2014, where full-scale war is breaking out in Gaza. Yet it is less a war, more of an all-out attack on the Gazans, as floods of people leave their neighbourhoods for UN-sanctioned shelters.

It is no matter that ambulances, schools, and “protected” shelters are being targeted deliberately, or that they are all part of a trapped community.

Garson is an experienced aid professional who had previously worked in Afghanistan, and in Cambodia, where she developed income-earning programmes for women who had been trafficked.



Next she leaves her peaceful home in the Hokianga to work similarly in income-generating initiatives in Gaza. Garson is employed by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) emergency response team.

With the sudden war comes an immediate change of focus. Here, children and teenagers make up approximately half of the population. She feels they all live constantly on a pinball deck, under the menace of drones. One of Garson's responsibilities is to map the co-ordinates of the UN-protected buildings and update this frequently so that Israel is aware of where not to attack. Another is to source thousands of



Gaza in 2014

PHOTO: SUPPLIED

mattresses, rubbish bags and other provisions, in a place where sewage systems and most other forms of infrastructure have broken down or been obliterated.

As a willing foreigner in Gaza that would be risky enough, yet her backstory places her and her organisation at much greater risk. Garson was born in Halifax into a large Jewish family of education and standing. One of her sisters, among her other leadership roles, is prominent as the chair of the ARZENU bloc of the World Zionist Organisation. While Garson herself is not a practising Jew, and indeed identifies as an absentee one, this aspect of her genetic makeup

overshadows all else in her latest situation. Her dilemma is in whom to confide, as well as her conflicting sense of ethics, and for most of her time in Gaza she keeps her identity hidden for everyone's sake.

By the end of 50 straight days of bombing, Garson and survivors around her have changed into grey, stooped versions of themselves. Members of UNRWA are now apathetic, unable to focus on projects. When Garson finally leaves, after four years and two wars, it is no longer merely as a secular professional. As she tells it, she has become a more “cognisant” Jew, and also an activist, driven

to seek out “the nub of our humanity” beneath cosmetic differences.

*Still Lives* is memoir and does not claim to be wholly accurate: it is only as accurate as her own experiences and memories allow of a deeply confusing and frightening time. She describes it as a raw cut at a life in progress; a record that “breathes and squirms and begs to have its messy wrinkles ironed flat”. Her recollections show intelligence and a level of despair at an impossible situation that looks highly unlikely ever to change.

Jessie Neilson is a University of Otago library assistant.

## A life in many days, day after day, makes a challenging read

THE RIVER CAPTURE

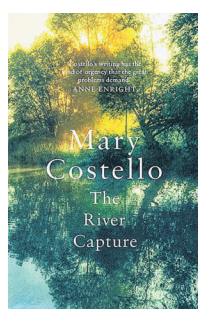
**Mary Costello**

Text Publishing

By JESSIE NEILSON

Luke O'Brien is having a break from his job as a secondary school teacher of history and English at Belvedere College in Dublin. After a relationship break-up he needs a change of scene, and with peace in mind he moves back to his family home of Ardboe House, County Waterford.

It is a great old rambling Georgian manor with much work needed. It is near the Sullane River and the small town of Clonduff and



he is hardly disturbed.

Luke finds his new solitary lifestyle breeds in him a great immobility, and with his increasing inaction his mind works overtime and he is constantly daydreaming.

Luke's specialty, or so he

believes, is the work of James Joyce, mainly *Ulysses*, but with an interest in one day giving *Finnegans Wake* a decent go. He toys with the idea of some new research. While he has not read the whole work cover to cover, he carefully dissects favoured chapters of *Ulysses* and plenty of details confuse and irritate him.

Turning up in his life one day to pull him out of his physical inertia is Ruth, who offers him a dog in need of a home. As interactions between the two progress, Luke is drawn ever more into grief and distress from the past.

While Ruth is open-minded and seemingly liberal, she struggles

with his admission that he had loved a man, Oisín. Luke's defensiveness grows as he draws on Joyce's supposed stance, that “Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made”. And with Luke's growing obsession with *Ulysses* and the characters within comes a distancing from Ruth.

Author Mary Costello lives in Galway and her earlier works have been greatly feted; her first and previous novel won overall Irish Book of the Year. Her second novel may compel some Joyce enthusiasts. However, as it slides towards pastiche it is also fairly alienating. While rereading

chapters of *Ulysses* can be as worthwhile as it is challenging, reading an imitation of such a character's wavering state of mind can be turgid and uninteresting. The ambiguity of characters is frustrating. However, the prose is lyrical and identifiably Irish, as are the lovely descriptions of the natural surroundings in the first half. This includes the “river capture” as an analogy of sudden diversions, and of imagination and paths being swept up into something new and unexpected entirely.

Jessie Neilson is a University of Otago library assistant.