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Read NZ Te Pou Muramura Pānui

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The Writers in Youth Justice programme

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Foreword

Kia ora tātou. Talofa lava. Malo e lelei. Bula Vinaka. Hello.

There's that scene in Alan Duff's classic book, *Once Were Warriors*, where Beth Heke is confronted with yet another gut-wrenching truth:

> *And it occurred to Beth that her own house – no, not just her own house but every house she had ever been in – was bookless. The thought struck her like one of Jake's punches… Bookless. Bookless. We're a bookless society. It kept hammering and hammering home. Soon it was like a sense of loss, almost grief.*

In one of my many provocative and fascinating conversations with Alan, we have come back to that scene over and over again. Referring to his own life experience, Alan writes in his latest book, *A Conversation with my Country*, 'Books saved me: from that first epiphanic moment as a fifteen-year-old boy sentenced in borstal to

seven day's solitary confinement – yes, a solitary confinement at aged fifteen.'

Ben Brown's Read NZ Te Pou Muramura Pānui is about the consequences of being adrift. Lost. Bewildered. Angry. Bookless – yes. But not without stories. And not without a desire – both prompted and unprompted – to tell the stories.

And the stories, miraculously, became a book:

> *The emphasis was on getting something down on paper. Can't spell, doesn't matter, I'm the editor, that's my job. Can't write, don't sweat it, the staff will take dictation for you. Can't read, so what, it's not what I'm asking you to do. Can't think of anything to write about, yeah you can, just answer the question, think the thought, describe it using whatever language comes to you in the moment.*
>
> *I wanted a book at the end of this project and told them as much … a book about a world, a lifestyle, a day-to-day existence that 99% of their peers, and the vast majority of those who call ourselves adults, have absolutely no idea about. That's the book I wanted.*

Ben's Pānui is a mesmerising account of how he conducted a writing workshop at Te Puna Wai ō Tuhinapo,

the Oranga Tamariki Youth Justice Residence at Rolleston, just outside Christchurch.

He pulls no punches. He challenges us to listen to these stories – because *If nobody listens, no one will know*.

And, now that we know, we have a responsibility to try to change things, to shape a better Aotearoa.

This is what Read NZ Te Pou Muramura is trying to do – shape a better country, one reader at a time.

Because research shows that reading is the most effective poverty and disadvantage-buster around. In fact, according to OECD research, reading is the most important indicator of the future success of a child – more important even than socio-economic status.

Ben gives us a glimpse of the difference words and stories can make. It is raw. Real. Uncompromising. And utterly truthful:

> *He gave me seven lines, six of them deliberately worthless but made insightful by the last…*

So, our profound thanks to Ben and to the rangatahi of Te Puna Wai ō Tuhinapo for their gift to us.

Our thanks too, to the visionary Luke Pierson who has generously given a substantial donation over three years to enable us to continue to bring the annual Read NZ Te Pou Muramura Pānui to Aotearoa New Zealand's literary landscape and enable one of our country's leading

writers to discuss an aspect of literature – and our country – close to their heart.

Finally, we are deeply grateful to everyone who supports the mahi of Read NZ Te Pou Muramura. You enable us to make sure that more stories are told – and heard.

Ngā mihi nui

Peter Biggs CNZM
Chair
Read NZ Te Pou Muramura

Karanga mai
Karanga atu
Karanga ki te tihi
Karanga ki te taha
Karanga ki te pūtahitanga o ngā awa
Hau pai mārire
Whakapōwaiwai te ahi
E tū
E tū
Kaha rawa te manawa
Rarahi te waiata
Pūmau
Pūmau
Rere atu rā
Tata mai tonu
Tihei mauri ora

You're a male, which is not the simple definition it used to be, but let's allow that's what you are. You're a thief, a drug dealer, a bank robber, a murderer. You're a gangsta, staunch as, notorious. You're a lone wolf on the prowl looking for the lambs. You're a screwed up teenage suicidal maniac. You are the lost cause. You are the found. You're the kid that broke the mould and paved the way. There's a monument out there somewhere got your name on it. Maybe it's true you don't know why you did it. Maybe it's true you don't give a damn why you did, beyond the fact that you got caught in the process.

Statistically of course, tēnā koe e tama, you're more than likely Māori. You're more than likely poor. Ironically, you've probably been the victim of violent crime in your short life. There's a good chance you've been abused, assaulted, neglected or abandoned. Gangs and family dysfunction will be common themes for you. So I wouldn't mind at all if you called me Matua, or Uncle even, like 'Uncle, put away the thumb,' if I casually flicked you the shaka sign, forgetting it's the Mob salute and realising by

your raised fist that you fight for the other side.

You know already the dark side of addiction, the sinister allure and the spiral to destruction. Anger, fear, helplessness, and anxiety are emotions familiar to you. They are deep. They are visceral. They speak to the animal in you. Suspicion comes easier than trust. Paranoia follows. You require medication just to keep your head straight and go to sleep at night. You hate the world.

The State picked you up from kindergarten when you were four years old and took you to a stranger's house to live. You have a sister somewhere. You wonder what she looks like now. You are hardcore, resolute in your defiance, determined to walk an unrepentant path, for it is there you earn your scars. You think you're dead already and that's a crying shame because it makes you doubly dangerous. You are bigger than your Father. You are sweet sixteen and adamant that vengeance will be done. You are young, you want your Mother. You are hard, you want a war. You are seventeen and a father who has yet to see his son. You are fifteen and you'd kill your Mother's boyfriend in a heartbeat. You like to train, it keeps you ready. You practice MMA – mixed martial arts. You might be small but as they say, 'It's not the size of the dog in the fight…' Anyway, shit gets outta hand, you just stab him in the neck with scissors. You struggled at school with literacy. Numbers don't make sense to you. Teachers didn't give a shit. You don't think that's fair. You'd like to be a builder or an artist or a soldier in the army.

You're the lucky young fool and you're happy to admit it. You think you got here by accident: made dumb decisions with consequences you hadn't really thought about, go left instead of right, go fast instead of slow, go out instead of stay home. And yet, when the debris of your dumb decisions are cleared away and the dust has finally settled, somehow, you still feel lucky. And so you should. You caught a break. You're still alive. If your luck holds along with your humility, you might just find an inner strength you never knew you had. You might develop character. And who knows, maybe one day you'll be wiser than you are now.

You are smart and you write well. How could you not have a story? How could we not be interested in what that story says?[1]

Nō reira, mihi mai koutou ki te pānui nei…

Mēnā kāore he tangata e whakarongo ana, kāore
he tangata e mōhio ana.

If nobody listens, then no one will know.

When I was a kid, we called it Borstal. It was the Damocles Sword of my wayward youth, promising sharp and serious consequences for the intractable

1 This initial section has been reproduced and revised from the editorial of Brown, B. (Ed.). (2020). *How the fuck did I get here: Soliloquies of youth*. Read NZ Te Pou Muramura.

juvenile delinquent, which by all accounts I seemed set on becoming. I was prone to boredom and easily distracted, especially within the classroom, which led at times to spectacular disruptions as I was unceremoniously removed by teachers driven to the edge of murder. One of them, in particular, would drag me from the room by the ear promising, 'It'll be Borstal for you, lad, mark my words,' in a strong Devon accent.

Borstal was somewhat quaintly named after a village in Rochester, Kent – the garden of England, wherein there lay a typically austere Victorian prison. In 1901, as a direct result of recommendations made in the Gladstone Committee Report 1895, an experiment in penal reform for young offenders began that enabled courts to prescribe 'Borstal detention' as a separate sentence for offenders aged 16 to 21, removing them from the hardcore criminal influence of older, more seasoned, inmates and the harsh retributive regime of the general prison experience in favour of a more 'corrective' approach including education and industrial training under the supervision of suitably qualified staff.

Such was the kaupapa that came to Aotearoa with the Crimes Amendment Act 1910[2]. A penal institution in Invercargill was set aside for offenders under the age of 25. Borstal training in New Zealand was formalised in statute with the Prevention of Crime (Borstal Institutions

2 Crimes Amendment Act No. 15. (1910). http://www.nzlii.org/nz/legis/hist_act/caa19101gv1910n15234/

Establishment Act) 1924[3]. As David Williams, now Emeritus Professor in the Faculty of Law at the University of Auckland, summarised in a 1984 paper, 'The Abolition of Borstal Training', 'The essential elements of borstal training included: reformation of the offender as the paramount avowed purpose of the sentence; indeterminacy with respect to the length of time trainees spent in custody; and the clear stipulation that the sentence was available *only for young offenders*[4].'

Williams continues: 'It is rather unusual for the Legislature to directly state the theoretical objectives of a penal institution in the enactment which empowers courts to pass a particular sentence, but all of the elements of borstal training listed above were specifically spelt out in the Prevention of Crime (Borstal Institutions Establishment) Act 1924 and in the Criminal Justice Act 1954 which replaced it.'[5]

I should mention that the legislation empowered the courts to sentence offenders of not less than 15 nor more than 21 years-of-age. An 'indeterminate sentence' meant a minimum of two and a maximum of five years, while an order of detention, in lieu of conviction, could be imposed for a term of no less than one year and a maximum of

3 Prevention of Crime (Borstal Institutions Establishment) Act 1924 (15 GEO V 1924 No 20) http://www7.austlii.edu.au/nz/legis/hist_act/pociea192415gv1924n20674/

4 Emphasis added.

5 Williams, D. V. (1984). The abolition of borstal training: a penal policy reform or a failure to reform penal policy?. NZLRFOP, (238). p.78. http://www.nzlii.org/nz/journals/NZLRFOP/1984/238.pdf

three. In summary then: don't lock kids up with criminals. Train them, educate them, 'reform' them. Allow discretion with regard to release.

I had a couple of friends who did some time inside, one during the twilight of a failing Borstal system and one directly after it was abolished, both of them within the stipulated age range according to the body of laws, which guided discretion in the sentencing of young offenders. I met the friend that went to Borstal in my first year at boarding school. The other guy that went to prison was a mate from my hometown.

My boarding school friend could steal any motorised vehicle you might care to mention. My other friend just liked fighting. The vehicle thief was fifteen years-old when we started the third form but he wouldn't finish the year. We called him Koro. He quite liked the 'Old Man' aspect, latent as it is with the wisdom of ages. The sobriquet comes with its own allocation of mana, drawn from its meaning as the term of address familiar to anyone known with respectful affection as Grandfather.

So, Koro was Māori. We all were – it was a Māori school – one of a litany of mission schools, Anglican in our case, and opened in 1854 to accommodate and educate young Māori men according to a kaupapa of partnership, guided less, in my view, by the principles established fourteen years earlier on Busby's front lawn at Waitangi, than by the vision of a perpetual relationship between our young Māori souls and the little white chapel on the hill

wherein we took the Sacrament and sang our hymns on Sunday in te reo.

Koro was also illiterate, but he was brilliant at tech drawing and could tear down an engine in his sleep. He just couldn't write his own name, so I began to notate his drawings for him. In return he showed me how to make plastic keys out of yellow Sunlight dishwashing liquid bottles, which you could use on certain locks to great effect.

At boarding school, certain locks were all that stood between us and midnight ice cream in the kitchen or better still, bulk boxes of peanut slabs in the tuck shop. Towards the end of the last term of our third-form year, he finally grew tired of formal education and, on a fine spring Sunday morning after chapel, using one of his plastic keys, he gained access to the rebuilding site of our proud old school, where he liberated a fifteen ton Euclid Earthmoving Scraper and took it up the farm behind the college to gouge out chunks of paddock until the principal and the police arrived and convinced him to hand over the massive machine. After that, he was gone for all money.

I met him four years later solely by chance in the public bar of the Blue Heron pub in Porirua. It was 1980. I was eighteen and cocky, just finished my last year at school and on my way down south back home to the Motueka Valley. On a whim, I jumped off the bus in Porirua, I had friends from school there. The bus used to stop for ten minutes or so in the carpark by the pub. I rocked into the bar to look for a phone so I could ring up Mum and

Dad and tell them I was going to stay a couple of days in Wellington. That's when I saw Koro at a leaner, sharing a jug with a mate.

They wore blue oil-stained overalls. He was working as a mechanic, battling his way through an apprenticeship so he could qualify, but he knew the gig inside out, he always had. He told me that after the Euclid incident, he did Borstal for a little over a year, told me it was a shithole; that most of the screws were … I'm going to say bastards here, but my friend actually called them something a little less polite, though probably more appropriate given their role as state appointed guardians for the duration.

Anyway, one screw took a shine to him, not a pervy or violent shine as was often the case in such places, but a shine that said, 'You fixed my car so I'm gonna help you, son.' Luck and a decent man, rather than policy and good management, caught my friend a break.

He's dead now. Passed away five years ago from heart disease and kidney failure. Every negative Māori statistic applied to him, boy and man. But he died an honest mechanic with a wife and a bunch of kids and enough money to take care of them in the will he signed himself – not with a scribble or an X, but with his name.

From 1 April 1981, Borstal training was abolished in accordance with the Criminal Justice Amendment (No 2) Act 1980[6]. With the apparent enlightenment of the

6 Criminal Justice Amendment Act. No. 2. (1980) http://nzlii.org/nz/legis/hist_act/cjaa219801980n76306/

times and the brisk application of the Penal Institutions Amendment Act 1980[7], the term 'Borstal' was struck from the books. Youth prison would be the new reality – known rather blandly as 'youth institutions'. That year, under-20-year-olds would account for a fraction over 41 per cent of the inmate population of Aotearoa. Moreover, every stipulation regarding the sentencing of youth offenders was abandoned. The reformation ideal was effectively binned.

My hometown friend was a good-looking Pākehā kid: blond hair, blue eyes, sharp features. He wasn't a big guy, slight as a kid, slender and whippy as he grew older, but man, he was tough. He'd take a beating with a smile and then unleash. His father was a violent alcoholic fisherman. His mother copped it sweet. But not my friend, it wasn't in his character to just roll over and accept it. He'd fight back every time. This made him angry. Angry at home. Angry at school – where they told him he was dyslexic. He didn't give a shit about that, it was just another word he couldn't spell. He didn't last the fourth form; there is no scholastic future in assaulting high school principals.

He was angry on the street. He tattooed himself with offensively antisocial insignia and took to wearing eyeliner just to piss people off. From the age of eleven, drugs and alcohol fuelled his rage against the world. At fifteen, when he wasn't fighting his father, he went fishing with

7 Penal Institutions Amendment Act. No.77. (1980) http://nzlii.org/nz/legis/hist_act/piaa19801980n77348/

him instead, which gave him more than enough cash to piss and drug away.

He burgled and brawled and bashed his way through adolescence – unrepentant, unrelenting, fearless of consequence. Little wonder then, that the justice system would eventually tire of his antics. Court directed rehab, corrective training; neither had any discernible effect. So in 1983 at the age of nineteen, a judge kicked him upstairs to the big boy's jail with a one-year sentence for violence against persons and property. Upon release from Mount Crawford, he stole a car in the capital, drove it onto the Picton ferry, then all the way to Nelson where he quite deliberately left it parked outside the court that sentenced him.

Incidentally, and possibly of no immediate relevance, one of the mottos on the coat of arms above the entrance to Mount Crawford Prison reads 'Honi Soit Qui Mal y Pense' (Evil to him who evil thinks!), the motto of the Most Noble Order of The Garter, amongst other luminary institutions. Whether relevant or not to our proceedings, the value of this ornate threat proved worthless. My friend continued raging at the world, but with the benefit of a prison education that taught him how to get away with things. And get away he did, for seven more mad years of reckless disregard until a happy ending from a fairy tale surprised him. He fell in love, got married, had two daughters. They contained him. He's a Grandad now and can't remember when he last got angry.

Both my friends have stories worth the telling.

Keeping in mind the inherently political nature of law and order reform in general, more often than not, what we see are populist responses measured against votes rather than veracity. Reasoned public debate gets drowned out by indignant assertions of softness and coddling, occasionally given oxygen by the excited media coverage of a baby-faced kid tangled up in a murder rap. Within such echo chambers, the promise of a harder line for the recalcitrant young offender seems to play better in the polls. Spare the rod and spoil the child, so to speak. Bread and water and a good kick up the arse, that'll fix it. Such was the pervading mood that sent my young Pākehā friend to prison.

Now, I'm not here to try and excuse or justify bad or criminal behaviour in our rangatahi, in our youth, or in my friend for that matter. When I called him up to talk about the idea of using his experiences for this mahi, he said as much himself. 'Don't sugarcoat it, Brownie. I deserved it.'

Well my friend, maybe you did. The law certainly agreed with your assessment. But the day-to-day realities that shaped you haven't changed. We know that brutal, deprived or disadvantaged circumstances in a society, a community, a whānau, whatever… will yield undesired consequences, some of which are criminal, resulting in human pain and suffering and all manner of loss. It's a stark self-evident truth that just keeps giving. It may be that we don't have the means to deal with those circumstances; it

may be that we just don't have the will. Either way, we are still left with the consequences.

If all we get for our troubles is a punitive, retributive prison system to deal with serious criminal consequences, then we are not protecting society, not in the long run, not by any stretch, unless we decide to lock up criminals forever. Because once you remove corrective and reformative ideas from a penal system, 'protecting society' is all you've got left.

Regardless, the early 80s was marked by a lot of tinkering and bugger all fixing in tandem with a growing disquiet that existing child welfare and youth justice programmes simply were no longer fit for purpose, if indeed they ever really were.

> *The population has been built from warriors to crooks, water changed to milk, lost youth with no intention to Read books, unfortunate UPBringings, no Love for the system, all we needed was someone to Listen ... if nobody listens, then no one will know ...*[8]

Over four consecutive days in early January this year, I delivered a writing workshop at Te Puna Wai ō Tuhinapo, the Oranga Tamariki youth justice residence at Rolleston just outside Christchurch. In the same week, America projected its power by killing an Iranian General at the airport

8 Andre. (2020). NZ Life. In B. Brown (Ed.). *How the fuck did I get here?: Soliloquies of youth* (p.35). Read NZ Te Pou Muramura.

in Baghdad – with a pinpoint missile strike from a drone; and rumours began to emerge of a strange new virus infecting the citizens of a Chinese city named Wuhan. Closer to home, a dirty sun reminded us that Australia was on fire – and not that far away; and Serena Williams made it through to the second round of the NZ Open on her eventual way to the title.

The workshop was part of the Writers in Youth Justice programme; a Read NZ Te Pou Muramura initiative conducted in cooperation with Oranga Tamariki. Its immediate intent is fairly straightforward: take creative writing into the youth justice residence arena, encourage participation, generate work, produce a literary object of merit, meaning and worth, maybe a testament to troubling times, maybe a monument to folly. As a likeable young criminal approaching early release quite thoughtfully expressed:

> *Even though I'm out, doesn't mean I'm free. I dreamed Genesis 5.14 but when I looked it up its just some dude lived 900 years so I looked for something else that made sense and found this. Psalm 51,4: Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.*[9]

9 Tane. (2020). Even though I'm out. In B. Brown (Ed.). *How the fuck did I get here?: Soliloquies of youth* (p.15). Read NZ Te Pou Muramura.

In 2008, Mike Doolan, who led the policy team responsible for the youth justice provisions of the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act 1989[10] (now known as the Oranga Tamariki Act or the Children's and Young People's Well-being Act), commented that, 'The professional method that dominated practice throughout the century suffered a severe blow in 1982 when the Human Rights Commission of New Zealand found the state department responsible for child welfare in breach of international covenants, particularly in relation to its residential programmes and its treatment of Maori[11]...

In relation to young people involved with the state department because of offending behaviour, nothing seemed to be working well. The expected outcome of happy, productive, morally correct lives as a result of state intervention was significantly under-achieved. Costly residential and therapeutic programmes that congregated the troubled and troublesome emerged as part of the problem rather than part of the solution.'[12]

I have to say, strictly as a personal observation; it seems to me that the word 'whānau' is missing from the renamed Act. I mean, the title of an Act of Parliament speaks directly to its intent. Now, I'm pretty sure Mike Doolan and his colleagues saw whānau as central to the

10 Oranga Tamariki Act or Children's and Young People's Well-being Act No. 24 (1989). http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1989/0024/latest/DLM147088.html

11 Spelling as per original text.

12 Doolan, M. (2008). Understanding the Purpose of Youth Justice in New Zealand. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, (3), p65.

effectiveness of what was at the time considered internationally as landmark legislation. Here's Doolan once again:

'The child is neither subservient to, nor autonomous from, the family, but rather the child and the family – now conceived more broadly as all those connected to the child by kinship or relationships of significance – are centrally and eternally engaged with one another. The interests of the child or young person who offends are no longer paramount – rather their interests must be balanced with those of their families, their victims and the wider community.'[13]

'(A)ll those connected to the child by kinship or relationships of significance…' If ever you wanted a clear definition of whānau, especially from a child's perspective, there it is.

Naming aside, the Oranga Tamariki Act establishes the framework within which institutions, such as Te Puna Wai ō Tuhinapo, function. This is the kaupapa that guides the jailing of our youth offenders.

Institutions such as Te Puna Wai occupy a fraught and delicate space within our society. The confinement of our rangatahi, of our tamariki, to a custodial structure of state demands, I believe, a thoroughly well considered set of policies and applications.

If you happened to be a YP at Te Puna Wai, which is to say, a 'young person' – YP being the acronym of neutral utility behind the wire, and the circumstances

13 Ibid.

of your residency have yet to be decided by either the Youth Court, District Court or High Court of New Zealand, then you would be on remand awaiting trial, or bail, or sentence. Otherwise you would've been found guilty of an offence, or a number of offences, as defined in The Crimes Act 1961[14], but a judge would have used available discretion because of your age, and probably other mitigating factors, to deal with you as a child or young person in accordance with the aforementioned Oranga Tamariki Act 1989.

There are four youth facilities beneath the Long White Cloud: three in Te Ika-a-Māui the North Island at Manukau, Rotorua and Te Papaioea Palmerston North; and Te Puna Wai ō Tuhinapo in Te Wai Pounamu the South Island. You may, or may not, know that there is room all up for 140 YPs in the youth justice residence system. As a YP at Te Puna Wai, your age would be somewhere between your thirteenth birthday and the day before you turn nineteen.

I want to imagine that what we are trying to achieve here is a small change for the better in a tiny and intimately personal part of the world, this part of the world that exists within the tumultuous spirit of a kid behind bars. I want to believe the intractable young criminal who sat across the table from me for two days giving me nothing but a hard look of suspicion, sparked with an

14 Crimes Act. No. 43. (1961). http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1961/0043/latest/whole.html

occasional sardonic smile, understands and appreciates both the irony and the truth of his eventual offering:

> *I make no statement, I speak no words, they are too valuable to gift.*[15]

It occurs to me that there are times when the right to remain silent and the need to say something exist in the same moment. I would suppose a choice is then made as to whether guilt is a matter of fact or a matter of conscience. Arresting officers know this instinctively. In the heat of the moment, a need for self-justification can quickly spin out of control into a defiant confession, but a confession none-the-less. Wherein a youthful mind forged in a crucible of fear and anger might argue, 'Yeah, I did it, but that don't make me guilty. My world has a different measure.' Thus disregarding silence as an option. This is what I put to them. Disregard your silence. Answer one question of yourself:

> How the fuck did I get here?

Introspection, personal critique, a considered meditation of one's own actions and motivations, a reflection upon one's place in the bigger scheme, an exploration of wairua; these are not topics of discussion normally

15 Ethan. (2020). Untitled. In B. Brown (Ed.). *How the fuck did I get here?: Soliloquies of youth* (p.9). Read NZ Te Pou Muramura.

associated with even typical teenage adolescent males, let alone murderers, rapists, robbers and thieves but then again, perhaps that's the point. They are anything but typical.

Here's a young fella from my rohe, just turned seventeen when I met him and already bigger than the average man, for whom he seemed to have little regard. He tagged himself Vadar but I discovered I know his whānau; they live not far from my marae in Huntly, so we might even be blood. Vadar tells me that some of his cuzzies play league with some of mine, but that he personally has no time for games. He holds up banks with a sawn-off rifle and black balaclava and he hates with searing determination. He sees himself as a die-hard enemy of the State and has resolved himself to a relentless campaign that may well be the death of him one day. I remember his crime spree from the news: I remember thinking at the time, 'Who the hell robs banks anymore?'

> *Yeah I'm K 6, Yeah I'm VADAR, Listen up, It's real to be Killed, it's real that I Steal, I did too much aggrob, I AM a high risk offender known to the SYSTEM ... Mask has to be on, Leave NO FACE behind...* [16]

Here's a sample from a lost kid, recently from

16 Vadar. (2020). No face. In B. Brown (Ed.). *How the fuck did I get here?: Soliloquies of youth* (p.88). Read NZ Te Pou Muramura.

Auckland, but Christ knows where before that. He turned up to every session and with awkward honesty stepped me through a life that clearly made no sense to him, as if he were the misspelled word in a sentence that didn't seem to need the added nuance of his meaning.

> *I never thort I wood be some one, I people wood like to be my frend or like my more than a frend, I never fort I wood be a good looking boy, I wood never no y I fort that but I might find some one just have to keep looking and tring and it mite cum true before I am 50, lets see if it dus*[17]

It worked like this, Te Puna Wai houses residents within a spacious high-fenced circular compound built around the metaphor of rivers converging to a unified purpose – te pūtahitanga o ngā awa – the kaupapa emanating from the takiwā of the local mana whenua, Ngāi Te Ruakihikihi of Taumutu – a rūnanga of te iwi o Ngāi Tahu.

There are four residential units within the compound, holding a maximum of ten YPs each. There is also a 'secure' unit, a gym, and a meeting house or hall. Each residential unit is self-contained and includes a communal area, individual bedrooms – cells if you like – staff station and secure office, tv/rec room, kitchenette

17 Zac. (2020). Never thort I wood. In B. Brown (Ed.). *How the fuck did I get here?: Soliloquies of youth* (p.31). Read NZ Te Pou Muramura.

and, of course, a classroom. The writing programme took place in the school holidays and was therefore conducted in the communal area around a large table. Depending on the make up and mood of each unit, the demeanour of its residents and interpersonal dynamics; staff to resident ratios seem to hover around one-to-one, with reinforcements on immediate call should the need arise, which of course it does on occasion.

Outside, the lawns of the compound are regularly clipped and trimmed at the edges where concrete paths wind gently between the units. The initial vibe, as you cross the compound, is one of peacefulness and quiet order, enhanced by the nature of broad and circular spaces, removing that sense of confinement and tension sometimes created by corners. It is strangely disconcerting and it strikes me that some thought has gone into the layout of this place.

The programme began on Monday, 6 January 2020 and ran every day till Thursday, 9 January. There were 28 YPs in residence on the Monday, 29 on the Thursday, with a transfer down from Te Aurere in the Manawatū on Wednesday night – accounting for the extra head. Numbers were spread relatively evenly between units. Every day there were one or two absentees, a sickie or a couple of them locked up in secure for kicking off, but over the four days every YP got at least two sessions in. Most managed all four. Sessions were one hour per unit, per day, compulsory.

Matua, you say words can change the World, are they magic Words like spells, prayers, amen, are they orders, are they threats, are they war words, love words, swear words … one word, Matua, changed my World … guilty.[18]

At this point it might be useful to remind ourselves that writing is not natural. We are none of us born the literate scribe, whatever aptitude we might display. Writing is a pretence and an invention – our greatest invention even. But it requires tools and training. It's a trick we have to learn. Writing is a craft, it improves with practice, atrophies with disuse. It is magical and mundane and mighty. Yesterday's news. Tonight's recipe for dinner. Tomorrow's great enlightenment. As writers, we conjure. As readers, we are spellbound and engaged. As subjects, we are given meaning. In summary, we are nothing but a gathering of words. Somewhere between Darwin's ape and the secret name of God we made a mark and began the record of our existence. We are, each of us, the stories that follow us through life, and even death, and elaborate our journey step by glorious step, letter by letter, word by word, imbued with such potency that when placed in a particular order, a scrawl of symbols can change the world for better or for worse, in whole or in part.

18 Anonymous. (2020). Words. In B. Brown (Ed.). *How the fuck did I get here?: Soliloquies of youth* (p.32). Read NZ Te Pou Muramura.

There's only so much that even the best of us can achieve in four writing hours, whatever the conditions. You will understand of course, that here we were faced with certain extremes of circumstance. Some of our young writers are actually illiterate. By the way, that's not an oxymoron, that's a paradox, but it gives you an out if you make the mistake of presuming that literacy equates to intelligence. Several of them are on Ritalin or some such equivalent treatment, a few are on powerful antipsychotics such as Quetiapine, which, I can tell you, is a slammer. Emotional states run the gamut from darkness to light. Attention spans ranged from about 10 minutes to an optimum 45, and that was on a good day. Virtually all of the YPs are likely to have a problem with anything approaching a formal type of learning situation. The phrase 'push back' springs to mind. No point going in there thinking I was going to teach them how to be creative writers. I had a better idea than that. I went in assuming that they already were creative writers, they just didn't know it yet.

The course commenced with an A4 ream (500 pages) and a new box of biros. Each session began with a kōrero, a conversation on the kaupapa as I saw it, the question at hand, 'How the fuck did I get here?', being the catalyst. More often than not, the talk would lead to other questions, other themes, other topics of exploration. The emphasis was on getting something down on paper. Can't spell, doesn't matter, I'm the editor, that's my job. Can't write, don't sweat it, the staff will take dictation for you.

Can't read, so what, it's not what I'm asking you to do. Can't think of anything to write about, yeah you can, just answer the question, think the thought, describe it using whatever language comes to you in the moment. And so on and so forth.

I wanted a book at the end of this project and told them as much. No, actually, I expected a book. A proper book. A real book. A book that would not look out of place among other books or better yet, a book that might be read instead of other books. But most of all, a book about a world, a lifestyle, a day-to-day existence that 99 per cent of their peers, and the vast majority of those of us who call ourselves adults, have absolutely no idea about. That's the book I wanted. I took it as a matter of fact that I'd get it.

By the end of the programme 400 and 20 some pages had something scrawled on them and somehow, in spite of strict oversight by staff and myself, two biros had gone missing into the bargain. I believe I know what happened to one of them:

> *This pen has no ink and I'm getting pissed off, I feel like breaking this pen right now and putting this pen in the rubbish. I hate being in lockups because I have to behave and get a good report for the Judge, which is not easy when this pen is Shit.*[19]

19 Anonymous. (2020). No ink in the pen. In B. Brown (Ed.). *How the fuck did I get here?: Soliloquies of youth* (p.63). Read NZ Te Pou Muramura.

They asked me, 'Who's gonna read this book?' I said 'Management. And you fellas. And the people at the Book Council[20]…' And then I confess I got carried away. 'Maybe government people too. And school kids; high school, intermediate… Probably not primary school, eh, but definitely high school.' 'Really?' they said. 'Well, maybe,' I said. 'How much we gonna make?' they said. 'Nothing,' I said. 'Eh? How does that work?' they said, clearly disappointed and more than a little suspicious. 'Well, you are not allowed to profit from this kind of activity when you are in custody, eh,' I said. 'Stink!' they said. 'You know what? There are bigger things than money,' I said. 'Like what?' they said, clearly unconvinced. 'Like the chance to help a kid make a better decision by giving them the benefit of your insight and experience,' I said. They thought about that. 'Aw yeah, spose that's alright then,' they said.

We signed contracts together. Contracts are an important part of the mahi, of the kaupapa, reinforcing a sense of ownership, responsibility, and obligation. Establishing trust. The contracts said that our writers allow their work to be reproduced and distributed for the purposes of research and education, instilling the idea that what they write will travel beyond the double-locked doors of their incarceration. For my part it says, 'I'm taking you seriously. I have to. My name goes on the cover.'

I explain the two-way street of obligation and responsibility, informing them that as editor I must attend to the

20 Now known as Read NZ Te Pou Muramura.

work with diligence, care and due consideration, ensuring a delivery of content that is true to the spirit and intention of the writer, at the same time maintaining an awareness of both the expectations and sensitivities of the publisher, Read NZ Te Pou Muramura; of stakeholders Creative NZ and Oranga Tamariki; and of any potential readership.

'What does that mean?' they asked. 'It means,' I said, 'that people of influence in exotic faraway places like Wellington are investing time, energy, and money into this project. You are generating industry and enterprise, stimulating commerce and thought, adding to the great library of the world, so your words, like your actions, have consequences. Your words, like your actions, directly affect other people. This is the responsibility that every writer accepts. I expect nothing less from you.' They asked me, 'Are we allowed to swear?' I said, 'If swearing is all you've got, I can't really work with that, but if the context is appropriate and the application is measured and not without artistry, if it adds to what you are trying to say, then sure. Swear away. Though I reserve the right as editor to expunge what is not necessary.' 'Fair enough,' they said. In this way, we negotiated aspects of the creative process; defining parameters and boundaries, discussing areas of interest and possible exploration; looking for souls to search, scabs to pick…

Matua, can I write about my hood, can I write about my girlfriend, can I write about my crew,

I got a baby, I tried to kill my neighbour, I hate the system, I got a dream, I might get early release next Thursday, gonna go home and get wasted...[21]

The age of criminal responsibility in Aotearoa New Zealand is ten years old. The State may intervene directly in anyone's life from day one, should the State deem it necessary. The great sadness is that without such powers, children will die in tragic and otherwise avoidable circumstances. And state interventions don't play well. Truth gets drowned in the human drama. Clearly the application of authority, as we have seen in recent times, could use some adjustment. An obvious implication though, is that for the first nine years and 364 days of your life, you are the product of the adult world around you. After that, on your own head be it, kid.

Let's say I go out there right now and ask the first ten-year-old I find, 'Do you know what criminal responsibility means?' What are the chances I'll get a clear and concise definition? That shit belongs in a Dickens novel. It's a stupid notion, in my view. If it takes a village to raise a child, the flip side comes with the territory. It takes a village to screw one up. Let's own that, at least.

This August, Children's Commissioner Andrew Becroft called for the age of criminal responsibility to be raised to fourteen years, in line with recommendations for

21 Personal conversation between the author and YP.

the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. He said, 'Most children who offend come from backgrounds of trauma and disadvantage. A criminal response to their situation simply does not work.'[22] The reality underlying this former Principal Youth Court Judge's comments is that most children who offend are already known to government organisations. They're already 'in the system'. Some of them since birth. The only conclusion I can draw is that 'the system' as it currently applies has failed in some way.

In many respects, youth justice as we currently know and experience it, is the agency of last resort when it comes to diverting these kids from an adult life of crime and imprisonment. I have to say, when you're in there working with the hardcore, it feels like the toss of a coin as to what the outcome might be. No disrespect at all to those at the coalface, every member of staff I met at Te Puna Wai gave me the impression they were there for the right reasons, but they are the ambulance halfway down the cliff.

I recall a conversation with a staff member one lunchtime, he'd been a soldier twenty years, you could see that in the way he carried himself. Quite a few staff are ex-military. They call them 'staff' in youth justice, not

22 Wiltshire, L. (2020). Children's Commissioner calls for age of criminal responsibility to be raised to prevent life of crime. In *Stuff*. https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/crime/122536887/childrens-commissioner-calls-for-age-of-criminal-responsibility-to-be-raised-to-prevent-life-of-crime

screws or guards or officers. He told me, 'Army saved me bro. I coulda been one of those kids. Most of them don't see anything out there for them except what they know. What they know's not pretty, eh.' I said, 'So what did you know that made you join the army?' He said, 'I looked around me one day, at the shit I was doing and I worked it out, that I was better than that.' I had to ask him, 'Did you work it out yourself?' He said, 'I had an uncle told me, "Open your bloody eyes, boy". I try to tell them that, eh.' He shrugged, with a look on his face halfway between a little bit sad and a little bit hopeful. Gotta be hard being everyone's uncle.

> *Pasted up in YJ doin my time gee, telling them punk police that I ain't guilty. Rolling up to court cases getting opposed bail gee. Homie I don't give 2 fucks do I make myself clear. My dream was two follow my dad's foot step, become a black power two fist on my face but now it ain't about that shit it's about succeeding in life, get a job and get paid and especially get laid.*[23]

Whatever else you think of that, a kid's gotta have his dreams. Maybe the soldier does have some effect with his kōrero. And maybe some random writer telling young

23 Anonymous. (2020). Choices. In B. Brown (Ed.). *How the fuck did I get here?: Soliloquies of youth* (p.34). Read NZ Te Pou Muramura.

offenders that what they have to say is worth recording will go some small way towards a more positive outcome. And maybe we'll all wake up one day in the land of milk and money to find ourselves the perfect parents and guardians of sweet little well-adjusted angels, and oh what a Wonderful World of Disney it will be.

Sadly, I fear that day is still yet some way off. And anyway, the ticket price at Disney World was never worth the ride. Doesn't stop us buying the illusion though. It's what we do, it's how we get our kicks sometimes, we buy and sell illusion, often on credit or as they say in shadier premises, 'on tick'. The strange thing is, we know so much of what entices us, excites us, inspires us even, is often little more than smoke and mirrors. And that's a good thing. It keeps artists, writers, poets and dreamers occupied and, if we're lucky, fed and watered. Illusion makes the heart beat faster. Illusion stirs imagination. And imagination is our greatest faculty. It makes us the apex predator and the discoverer of worlds. It renders us capable of majestic endeavour.

Unfortunately however, illusion can prove just as problematic, especially in the abstract where notions like equality, fairness, freedom, access, opportunity, entitlement, power, authority, desire, belonging, love, mana, etcetera, etcetera, conflict with realities that are harsh, or cruel, or deprived, or violent, or simply indifferent. In such a context, illusion and imagination may conspire in a young and immature mind, to shape a kind of skewed or

warped out fantasy that gives their life real purpose, real importance, real meaning, if only for a moment, or failing that, notoriety forever.

Sometimes the consequences of fantasy are devastating.

I never thought I could sit down with the killer of a ten-year-old child and feel anything but loathing. I'm a father of two, both my kids made it through what I consider the danger years unscathed, and I'm so grateful for that. I can't even begin to imagine the grief, the pain, the despair, the sheer rage of that child's mother, father, whānau. And then I find myself sitting beside a fifteen-year-old kid, big for his age, you might say overweight, a wan smile, clearly bewildered but somehow still eager to please, and I know what he's done ... and he's asking me for guidance ... because a blank sheet of paper is scary as hell and the question was too in his face. So instead, I asked him if he knew about mana. He said, 'A little bit, not much.' So that's what we talked about for a little while. 'Now write about that,' I said. He gave me seven lines, six of them deliberately worthless but made insightful by the last:

My mana is lost.[24]

And I could feel no loathing.

24 Anonymous. (2020). Lazy. In B. Brown (Ed.). *How the fuck did I get here?: Soliloquies of youth* (p.40). Read NZ Te Pou Muramura.

LIFE is bad or LIFE is good, LIFE can be hard and LIFE can be sad. LIFE can be easy. Yes there are struggles. But Believe LIFE is not a sentence[25], writes a hardarse kid from the streets.

Kua mutu te pānui, e hoa mā. Tēna koutou katoa.
Hau pai mārire.

25 Noah. (2020). Life. In B. Brown (Ed.). *How the fuck did I get here?: Soliloquies of youth* (p.77). Read NZ Te Pou Muramura.

Publisher's Note

The book, *How the fuck did I get here?: Soliloquies of youth*, edited by Ben Brown, was originally published by Read NZ Te Pou Muramura in collaboration with Oranga Tamariki as part of the Writers in Youth Justice programme. The first edition of this book was published in a limited run and made available to the staff and young people of Te Puna Wai ō Tuhinapo. The Cuba Press is working with us to republish this book and make it available to the wider public.

Luke Pierson

I had the very good fortune to make a connection with the team at Read NZ Te Pou Muramura through a mutual acquaintance. The more I learnt about the work they do the more I wanted to find a way to support them. The annual lecture has been a fixture in their calendar going back to the 1980s and includes lectures from such heroes of the literary community as C.K. Stead, Lauris Edmond, and more recently Joy Cowley and Selina Tusitala Marsh.

The kaupapa of Read NZ Te Pou Muramura has always been to include every reader, and share their voice, particularly through their Writers in Schools programme. This is more important than ever, that every child is both seen and heard through their voice on the page. That is why I am so proud to be associated with the Read NZ Te Pou Muramura Pānui 2020, giving voice to those for whom the doors are often closed.

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Ben Brown

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