Fiona Kidman

The heart of the matter



Read NZ Te Pou Muramura Pānui

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Foreword

Kia ora tātou. Talofa lava. Mālō e lelei. Bula vinaka. Greetings.

This is the first foreword I have written as Chair of Read NZ Te Pou Muramura for the annual Pānui. Luckily I am being cradled into this role by its founding mother, Dame Fiona Kidman, who, like bookends, helped start this organisation and has returned to do the Pānui for our 50-year anniversary.

Dame Fiona explores the beginnings of Read NZ, whereby she shows how many things have stayed the same. Many of the programmes that were around in 1972 have stood the test of time, such as Writers in Schools. She mentions the 1974 Operation Book Flood, a programme created to

'flood' two Auckland primary schools with 10,000 books across age groups, which would be on rotation thereby enabling each child to be exposed to 500 books. Dame Fiona wonders whether the results are tucked away somewhere. They were but have now been untucked for this Pānui. The results showed a 25 per cent increase in the amount of reading across the two schools, and an average of 0.645 years improvement in reading age for Standard 1. The results also showed 'children had more positive feelings about reading and school in November than in May.' The latter reveals that the study only looked at a change over six months. Maybe, though, it would be enough even if there was only one reader in Operation Book Flood who became a lifelong reader; if, in the words of Dame Fiona, that reader was 'bitten to the heart's core by a good book.' Read NZ programmes unlock moments that many of us are forever grateful to have been given, the most foundational indicator of lifelong success: a love of reading.

We carried out research in 2021 for our National Reading Survey, which again showed decreases in reading in Aotearoa, with 94 per cent of ten- to seventeen-year-olds reading at least one book, either online or in hard copy, down from 97 per

cent in 2018. Twenty-one per cent of readers increased their reading during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdowns, but half of these readers returned to their normal level. And so, it is without remediation or a sense of saviour role that Read NZ continues to promote equity in access to reading. We do this by reducing barriers, increasing access to role models and books, and supporting the viability of careers in writing and reading.

People sometimes ask who Read NZ is for – the readers or the writers? Dame Fiona Kidman shows that this is not an apt distinction; the two are intrinsically connected. She writes that she learned to read, so she became a storyteller, and that 'writers and readers need each other.' Of the books included in Operation Book Flood, none were by New Zealand authors. *Haki the Shetland Pony* (as in te reo for 'Jack' the Shetland Pony) sounded promising but was set in the Shetland Islands with a circus elephant – no doubt a good read, but this year with help from our partners, we printed *Stories from Aotearoa New Zealand*, a teacher-curated selection of New Zealand titles recommended for use in the classroom, to promote our stories. However, I note that Dame Fiona set a precedent in the '70s by printing the leaflet *New*

Zealanders' Favourite Books – this was without the advantage of being able to digitally share it or have the diversity of books and role models in Aotearoa that are available now.

The knowledge that the ability to read and write can change lives is felt by everyone who is involved in this organisation. We are a new board, with many of the previous board members stepping down after a decade or more of service. This is an organisation with heart and history, and we know that the breath of vitality that reading gives should be shared. Kia ora, Dame Fiona Kidman, for everything you do for reading and writing in Aotearoa.

I finish with a karakia by our board member Darryn Joseph.

Karanga ki a Ranginui e tū nei,
Karanga ki a Papatūānuku e takoto nei,
Nei te reo maioha o Te Pou Muramura:
He korakora, he māpurapura i te pō uriuri,
He whakaihiihi, he whakaohooho i te ao mārama!
Tihei mauri ora ki te ao pānui pukapuka!

Call to our ancestor Ranginui
Call to our ancestor Papatūānuku

Here is the welcome of Read NZ Te Pou Muramura
Sparkles and flashes in the dark night
Stimulating, inspiring in the day's clear light!
Breathe vitality into the world of reading!

Ngā mihi,

Willow Sainsbury
Chair
Read NZ Te Pou Muramura

The heart of the matter

1.

Writers and readers need each other. They are, in a sense, interdependent. Sixty years ago, I made a conscious decision to become a writer. It's hardly any coincidence that, for much of my life, I became caught up in an organisation that celebrates reading. Read NZ Te Pou Muramura is having its 50-year anniversary, and I'm proud to be part of this celebration, having played a role in that enterprise, that vision, te awatea, shared by a group of booksellers and publishers. The New Zealand Book Council, as it was known then, was inspired by UNESCO's International Book Year

in 1972. This Pānui is a salute to this organisation and what it has become, its power and its influence in the realms of literacy, and also its history and beginnings. The journey, if you like, that I have shared with Read NZ.

I have told my life story before and there are several versions of it. In the end there can only be one true storyline. Inventing alternatives may work if a writer is making fictions, but not when one is committed to telling what really happened, as nearly as possible. So here, in bare bones, is the essence of where my reading began.

I learned to read in a country hospital in the Far North. At the end of World War II, my parents had bought land in Kerikeri. My Irish father was in the air force throughout that war, although his health had prevented him from seeing active service abroad so he didn't qualify for a rehabilitation loan to buy a farm or set himself up for the future in other ways. My prudent Scots mother, herself of farming stock, saved up his pay and earned money of her own from milking on her parents' farm. There was enough for a deposit on the cheapest block of land they could find. My father bought it, sight unseen.

In an early novel of mine called *Mandarin Summer*, the fictional me, who becomes a girl called

Emily, has this to say:

> It's nearly thirty-five years now since I first went north. I was with my mother and I was eleven years old. When we left the south my grandmother and my aunts and uncles all came to the railway station and wept over me, as if I was going to a far country. My grandmother wore black, presumably to suit the occasion. My mother wore her best clothes with a cherry-red pudding bowl hat over her short-cropped greying hair as if to say, well, it's going to be all right, it's going to be fun up there amongst the orchards and hibiscus, the pukka sahibs and tea on the lawn.[1]

Except for the fact that I was still shy of six, that is how it was, just as the fictional narrator describes the scene. It was hard for most of the years the real-life family was up north. The pukka sahibs were British Raj people who had escaped the Sino-Soviet conflict in the 1930s and set up camp in Kerikeri, planting citrus orchards. Most of them had a view of themselves as apart from the rest of us; my parents

arrived and worked as servants; the land my father bought was barren and difficult to cultivate. The property was at the end of Darwin Road, back then a dusty gravelled track. We lived in an army hut for seven years, until relief appeared from my father's relatives in Ireland, in the shape of an inheritance, which gave us a happy escape to the farm we later owned in Waipū.

If I have made this all sound too desperate, I should say that my parents were thoughtful people with cultivated backgrounds. We might not have had a car to get around, but we had inherited the family silver and good Irish linen on our plain deal table, and there was nourishing food on that table, much of it gathered through my parents' endeavours to live off the land. Although my mother was an outwardly shy woman, in private she was a storyteller who engaged me in storytelling games. I was read to at night, and the hut overflowed in its corners with sixpenny orange and green Penguin paperbacks. And my father was strict about how I spoke the King's English.

All of this shifting from one place to another meant I didn't start school until around my sixth birthday. 'We will do our best to get her up to speed,' the teacher said grimly, or words to that

effect. Shortly after this, I fell ill and was admitted to Kawakawa Hospital, some 40 kilometres away. I would stay there for several weeks, or was it months? It was a long time, I know that. As my parents had no vehicle except their bicycles, and there was no bus between the towns, I wouldn't see them again until I was allowed back home.

After a week or so in hospital, a visiting teacher called Miss Brown came to see me. When I told her I was six, she said, 'Of course you will be able to read.'

Her face fell when I said that no, I hadn't learned yet. 'Well,' she said, 'I'll have to teach you this afternoon.' And that's what she did, although I didn't realise that it took more lessons than one to learn to read. I was now able to make my way to the musty little hospital library at the end of a corridor and find myself some books.

Those I found were old and worn, but they were full of wonderful words and stories. One of the first books I read was Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*. The sex had been deleted but passionate emotion, sorrow and colourful battle references remained, not to mention comedy. The laughter, oh there was that. I remember the joy of discovering the errors and pratfalls of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,

and the way Pyramus and Thisbe at the wall play tragedy against comedy.

When I returned to school, I had become a storyteller, able to entertain classmates, all older than me. I had been mysteriously promoted to Standard 2. I had also learned to write. Miss Brown had helped me write letters home and, in the end, a pitiful missive demanding that I be allowed to leave hospital had found its mark, and I was returned to my parents. I could see it – writing worked.

If this makes me sound like some child prodigy, it's not the image I want to project. I'm a person who has been given the gift of language and, clearly, back then, its time had come in my life. What I do know is that, before we went north, as an only child on my grandparents' farm, I had been surrounded by language and engaged in conversations with adults from a very young age. There was an expectation that I would respond and verbalise in the same way that they did. Later, there didn't seem anything extraordinary about learning to unlock text. I never understood that it might be hard to learn how to read, and I'm grateful for that.

Soon after I left hospital, the power lines were installed along Darwin Road, bringing electricity to our house.

One of my poems called 'Electricity' begins like this:

> In all the marvellous lights of the world
> we were able to read books. Before
> electricity
> was fed along our road, we read by
> candlelight
> or a kerosene lantern, those flickering
> fires
> turning words into unsteady little
> crickets
> that chirruped across the pages
> and followed us to bed to keep
> us awake. When the power board
> came and brought the lines past our gate
> we could snap a cord from the ceiling
> as the bulb showered us with steady
> yellow light, a trifle dull perhaps
> but still it was easier to decipher
> the script, the secrets of the characters
> on the page.[2]

For all that I would read and read and read, for a variety of reasons, not least a district high school that only went up to the fifth form, I left school

when I was fifteen, never to return. Apart from some lifelong friendships, the main thing I took away was an enduring love of Irish poetry, thanks to a young red-headed Irish teacher called Eileen O'Shea (later Larkin). Yeats's words *tread softly because you tread on my dreams*[1] stirred something inexplicable in me. I had dreams but they were ill-defined, nebulous; something that I can only describe as longing. That love of the Irish poets would translate later into a broad love of Irish literature.

Back then I had a life to lead; I needed to be grown-up and to dance nights away – rock 'n' roll, listen to Elvis – and to party in an era when disapproval of such behaviour was rife in Aotearoa. As it turned out, it was an era that decades later would provide rich material for writing. In particular, it would illuminate my understanding of the circumstances surrounding the life and death of a young Irishman called Albert Black. This 20-year-old immigrant was hanged on a charge of murder the week before I left school. It would take me another 60 years to articulate my despair and disgust for the death penalty. In my novel *This Mortal Boy*, I argue that the charge should have been manslaughter. But I had lived through Albert's times, and I could see how the moral climate of them influenced the outcome.

If I was a minor part of the rebellion of the 1950s, it wasn't doing me much good in terms of realising dreams. I had drifted through a number of lacklustre jobs by the time I was seventeen. In Rotorua, where my family had now settled, a small miracle occurred. A job came up at the local library; at my father's insistence, I applied for and got it. Suddenly, things began to fall into place.

The head librarian was a woman called Kit Spencer (later Wright, after she married the widowed town clerk). Kit was already a legend in library circles: she was beautiful, her misty, blue-tinted hair caught in a chignon, a divorcee, an early feminist, the first woman Fellow of the New Zealand Library Association, and a woman with pure steel at her core. Her *girls* – we young women who worked for her – had to measure up, look after the borrowers, be well groomed, and do as we were told. Kit was a woman who changed my life; she became my mentor and my guardian angel. She saw something in me, giving me responsibility and a sense of pride in myself. Surrounded every moment of every working day by thousands of books, I had never been happier. Kit directed me towards the great storytellers of the late 19th and early 20th century, like Chekhov and Tolstoy. They fed my passion for

family drama. I read contemporary fiction too, the Americans Elizabeth Hardwick and Jack Kerouac, and British writer Graham Greene; I have, of course, borrowed from his epic masterpiece *The Heart of the Matter* for the title for this Pānui. Sadly, no New Zealand writers, they were yet to come. My ferocious reading habits had returned. Soon I was advising the locals on what to read. As well as more serious reading, I loved collecting up piles of romances for older borrowers or terrifying thrillers for the young fire-watching men who descended from the treetops in the nearby Rotorua forests to grab reading material. The older women – we called them our *old ladies*, though I figure most of them were younger than I am now – would reward us with cakes and lollies. By the time I was nineteen, I was the deputy librarian; in Kit's absences during illness, I took over and ran that library and its staff and managed book purchases from the local booksellers. And, it was in that library that I met my husband, Ian Kidman, the school teacher to whom I was married for 57 years, until his death in 2017. The old ladies brought me crocheted doilies for wedding gifts. I have some of them still.

Towards the end of my library career, which had shifted to the local boys' high school library where

Ian taught, I had the task of refurbishing an entire library – enabled by generous grants from a wealthy school board. I was not only in charge of a library, but also overseeing large-scale book purchasing, plus organising events to engage teenage boys in projects that would interest them in reading. Two published writers in the English department, one a novelist, helped develop these programmes. I had a great time – it was only six years since I had left school myself, and I was busy imagining what I might have enjoyed when I was still in the classroom. Book displays of hobbies, student choices, activities; we did all of those.

I left when I was expecting my first child because, as the principal said, it wouldn't do to have me wandering around pregnant in a boys' school, especially as my husband was teaching there. I suppose Ian was evidence of unbridled lust in the bedroom. I've never quite worked that out, but I do know it was suggested I spend the following months knitting booties. What I actually did was write a play, inspired by a dramatisation I heard on the radio of Nelle Scanlan's *Pencarrow* series, about rural life in NZ and the lives of country women. The year was 1962. By the time of my daughter's birth in early 1963, I had decided to

commit my life to writing, something I have never resiled from.

2.

There are jumps in this narrative. Some ten years would pass. There was a move to Wellington. There was getting taken up by people in broadcasting who gave me work as a dramatist for radio theatre, then a prize – the Ngaio Marsh Award for television writing – the means to support life as both a writer and also part of a family that was hard up and needed income to renovate an old house on a Hataitai hillside.

I was looking for more regular work. I answered an ad in the newspaper's situations vacant column for the job of first secretary/organiser of the New Zealand Book Council. Or, as we know it these days, Read NZ Te Pou Muramura. The interview took place in a bookshop, Parsons Books on Lambton Quay. I was interviewed by Roy Parsons; I have described him elsewhere as a 'shrewd little man with a pointed goatee beard, his head constantly wreathed in cigarette smoke, an Englishman who had emigrated some years earlier and founded a left-wing bookshop.'[4]

Roy explained the organisation to me. Under the general umbrella of the New Zealand Book Trade, an organisation drawn from the national booksellers and publishers associations, the Book Council was honouring International Book Year. Its purpose was to link booksellers, publishers, writers, educators and librarians, to discuss and act upon book-related issues of common interest. The Council planned to reach disadvantaged readers through its activities, as well as pursuing the more commercial strand of increasing interest in books to attract higher sales.

It had already been decided by the Book Trade board that a project called Operation Book Flood would be initiated. The aim was to see how children in low-decile schools would respond to a large-scale injection of books into the school. An academic study to analyse the results had been commissioned. This was undertaken by Dr Warwick Elley under the aegis of the New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

Roy asked me to comment on these aims and ambitions. I wondered aloud if it might be worth inviting writers to go and talk to school kids about writing. Call it Writers in Schools, I suggested. Roy nodded vigorously, 'I'm going to recommend you get this job,' he said.

And there it was. The chairman of the board was the distinguished historian Keith Sinclair. Others on the board included Dr Clarence Beeby, Patrick Macaskill, John Watson and David Wylie. There was one woman – just one – Janet McOnie from Auckland.

Keith Sinclair exuded a nervous twitchy energy, always seemingly balancing on the balls of his feet. He had a mane of bushy grey hair and prominent, intensely brown eyes that glistened over bottles of red wine – and there were a fair few of those – at the Woolshed restaurant, a watering hole just off Plimmer Steps. At these gatherings, there were long, intense discussions about history, education and the way the Book Council should be run. These conversations were often observed by men who had taken off their fawn, belted raincoats and seated themselves at nearby tables. Yes, Secret Service men really did wear raincoats like that back then. You might well ask why they were there. Well, at the time, Keith was researching and writing his biography of Walter Nash and had been given access to a large number of classified documents. I suppose there was a concern that he might be passing them on. At any rate, it was kind of thrilling to have a job that entailed being followed by spies.

Writers in Schools got under way. The novelist Noel Hilliard, author of the controversial novel *Maori Girl*, was the first writer to tour. He went to Rotorua and spoke at three high schools. Other writers followed to different parts of the country. Margaret Mahy and Joy Cowley were early touring writers. And here I'd like to pause for a moment and pay tribute to Jean Needham, who followed me as the second secretary/organiser, and later broadened the programme's scope, developing it into a shape that laid the foundation for its long-term future, one that continues today.

Operation Book Flood had begun, and somewhere tucked away there are the results of that survey. It pleases me immensely that Read NZ continues to investigate and publish the results of National Reading Surveys. Sometimes these contemporary reports of declining reading habits make uncomfortable reading, but they provide a vital framework for the encouragement of people at every level, not just children and young adults, or any one particular group of society, but a broad spectrum of potential readers.

Lest you think it was all rosy from the start, there was much to learn. I was a novice bookkeeper, and Roy used to shake his head in despair over my efforts,

usually taking up the reins and doing it for me in the first year or so. And well he might – somebody had to keep a check on where the money went. On one inauspicious occasion I nearly sank the Book Council with one fell blow. The booksellers and publishers wanted to compile a leaflet of well-known New Zealanders' favourite books. This was a lovely job and I met lots of famous people with the pretext of getting their lists. When it was all ready, I had it printed in a beautiful, glossy and very large brochure. The printing costs were nearly as much as my annual salary. Alas, the trade people wrung their hands in horror. None of the books were current, none of them in print. As an anticipated marketing tool, they were useless. After some grumbling it was decided to keep the fledgling Book Council going and give it, and me, another year to see if it would all work out. This dual role of marketing alongside the encouragement of literacy and reading habits was an uneasy mix.

On a happier note, the Book Council ran a seminar called 'The Changing Shape of Books.' This topic was addressed by a number of literary luminaries who tried to second-guess what books would look like in years to come. None of us present then could have imagined the book in all

its manifestations of the technological age. We couldn't have imagined, for instance, ebooks and Kindles, the very idea that people could summon up books on their phones wherever they were. On their phones? Weren't phones things that were tied to a wall at home?

3.

It was the mid-1990s or thereabouts. I had long left the Book Council and was now the author of several books, including some novels. The first book was a collection of poems called *Honey and Bitters*, launched jointly with *In Middle Air*, poems by my friend Lauris Edmond (both Pegasus Press, 1975). The chair of the Book Council board was Dr Robin Williams. When he retired, he approached me to see if I would take on the role. I did, he amiably pointed out, know how things worked, given that I'd set up some of the programmes that were still running 20 years later – Writers in Schools, Meet the Author and so on.

I said yes. And with this agreement came the opportunity to start more programmes that I had had tucked away in the back of my mind for a

long while. I want to tell you briefly about Writers Visiting Prisons and Words on Wheels, both programmes that I was passionate about, and that became part of my own personal journey.

At the time I became chair, I was also facilitating creative writing groups for the Centre for Continuing Education at Victoria University of Wellington. I got a call one day to ask if I would accept a prisoner out on day release from Rimutaka Prison for the Centre's Summer School programme. The late Bill Payne's story is widely known, and no confidences are being broken in revisiting it. A tall, good-looking man with black hair and a long closely shaven dark chin, he and I struck up an instant rapport. He was on a strict promise to return to the prison of his own volition at the end of each day. From the beginning, I believed him a writer. After Summer School ended, we continued to correspond. Before long, he was released from prison. He had the manuscript of a short story collection ready to show me, and very soon *Poor Behaviour* (Raupo Publishing, 1994) found a publisher, and his career was launched. *Staunch: Inside New Zealand's Gangs* (Reed Publishing, 1997) followed, to considerable acclaim. Soon he was a regular writer for *Shortland Street*, and a film-maker.

Meanwhile, more prisoners arrived at the classes, not all of them on quite such free rein – I remember one woman came attached by an ankle strap to a male guard. People thought they were a couple, they moved in such close harmony with each other, although sadly the guard was not quite as absorbed in the writing course as his charge was. It felt demeaning and I wasn't happy about the situation.

All of this got me thinking. There was a clear hunger for these courses, but access was difficult for many. Why not take writers to the prisons? So, I took this idea to the Book Council board and it was accepted. We called this programme Writers in Prisons. It got underway after long negotiations with prison authorities, and with the support of Arts Access Aotearoa. Bill was one of the numerous writers who visited, the first ex-prisoner to be allowed back into a New Zealand prison after release when he visited Paremoremo medium security as a writer. I was shaken to my core when I heard Ben Brown's 2020 Pānui, as he described the lives of men who had lost their way or been lost by social circumstance. It brought me closer to the people I thought I had known in earlier years but perhaps never understood as profoundly as Ben spoke of them. At least through Bill I had some

idea. I can only say how heartened I am that Read NZ runs the Writers in Youth Justice programme, and to know of Ben's role in it.

A light-hearted footnote to the Bill Payne story: I mentioned he was good looking – well, after his release he was a centrefold for a well-known magazine, baring everything but all. But the fact is, Bill was a catalyst for change in prisons, and for life after prison.

He also toured with Words on Wheels, the other programme I want to talk about. It began after I attended the Melbourne Writers Festival. The guest speaker at the festival dinner was an Australian publisher called Laurie Mueller. He spoke of writers' tours being taken into the outback by train. He had recently been on one of these journeys, joining a train ride into the desert with nine Australian writers.

I knew the outback a little, having travelled by train across the Nullarbor Plain. I remembered the tiny ramshackle towns dotted here and there across that vast red landscape:

> Laurie described the train crossing a long stretch of desert without any sign of habitation. Then two dots appeared

> on the horizon, which as the train drew closer, those on board could see to be a mother and small child. The little girl held a bunch of desert wildflowers in her hand. The train slowed down and stopped, the writers got out and formed a circle around the pair, while each read a story. When they had finished, the child handed over her flowers, the writers climbed back on board and the train moved away, mother and daughter waving, until eventually they all lost sight of each other.[5]

I found myself crying when I heard this story, about the power of the written word, about the connection between writers, spoken words and readers. I thought to myself, we may not have the rolling stock or enough train tracks to do this in New Zealand, but we have small buses, and there's no reason why we can't take words and books to every corner of New Zealand: again, the board obliged.

The first tour left Wellington's Civic Square in 1993, amidst a sea of balloons and streamers. Like the Australians, the touring group wore straw hats, so that when they arrived in a town, people would

recognise them and say, 'Oh the writers are here.' The bus was driven by Chris Pugsley, a military historian; he continued to lead several tours that followed. David Hill, the children's writer, was among those on the bus, as were novelists and poets Fiona Farrell and Apirana Taylor, poet Michael Harlow and the inimitable playwright, Renée, who brought you the 2021 Pānui. The many tours that followed fulfilled our wildest dreams. We had vowed at the outset that we would take writers, books and reading from North Cape to Bluff, from east to west, we would find libraries, schools, community spaces and, if necessary, sit on the side of the road to talk to people. We did all of those, everything. There are now book festivals throughout the regions that perhaps fulfil the need for the tours. But I like to think that our travelling troubadours sowed the seeds for what was to come. After I had stood down as chair of the Book Council, I went on one of the buses myself as a touring writer. One of my enduring memories is of the Dargaville librarian standing alone on a street as we left town in the early morning, waving her hat and calling, 'Come back, come back to us soon.'

4.

No doubt there is nostalgia in all I have told you this evening. Yet, in considering 50 years of Te Pou Muramura's operation, I think it useful to look back at some of our founding principles and see where we have come from. Today's programmes have changed and evolved, but I believe the principles and passions that gave birth to our organisation are essentially the same: the love of reading and the belief that it changes lives holds as true as it ever did. For myself, I continue to be bitten to my heart's core by a good book, finding within its covers passion, laughter and fear, memory of time past, appreciation of the present with all its disturbances and also its joys, and anticipation of the future. What is there not to love about a book?

I tell people I've had a fortunate life. Some people are kind enough to suggest that we make our own luck, that it was all down to me. But that wasn't the case. I had mentors and guiding influences to whom I'm eternally grateful. Over the years I've been involved with a number of groups on a voluntary basis, in particular the Randell Cottage Writers Trust, which is celebrating twenty successful years of writers' residencies in their

cottage on St Mary Street. And I've been a member of the New Zealand Society of Authors for as long as I have been a member of Te Pou Muramura: through the Society I continue to advocate at a political level for those things I believe in – like the government-funded Public Lending Right scheme, which remunerates writers for the free use of their books in libraries every year, although not, at the moment, the free use of our ebooks, or the use of children's writers' books in school libraries, scandals that escape the public's notice all too often. Writers cannot provide books if they are not paid for their work, if they do not have standing as professionals in their own right.

But a part of my heart has always been committed to the NZ Book Council, Read NZ Te Pou Muramura. And so it will always be, in the same way that the power and the beauty of the book and the written word will never fail to entrance me.

A farewell poem for the evening. It's called 'Like everyone who likes to read books'.

I wanted to work in a bookshop to be
close
to *the heart of the matter*[1], all those
outward

spines hiding romance and blood-
curdling
terror and chilling moments I wanted
to stay at home and be *on the road*[7] all
at once between the covers leaf
after falling leaf of words I wanted to
know
what they told me the minute
the author had written them down
their newness a prize but how could I
release
them into the hands of others, that's
what librarians
do and for a time that is what I did
instead, standing at the library counter
giving the books over taking them back
until I found my own words and wrote
them down.[8]

Endnotes

1 Fiona Kidman, *Mandarin Summer*, London: Heinemann, 1981, p.1.
2 Fiona Kidman, 'Electricity' in *Where Your Left Hand Rests*, Auckland: Godwit, 2010, p.22.
3 W. B. Yeats, 'Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven' in *The Wind Among the Reeds*, New York: J. Lane, the Bodley Head, 1899.
4 Fiona Kidman, *At the End of Darwin Road*, Auckland: RHNZ Vintage, 2008, p.179.
5 Fiona Kidman, *Beside the Dark Pool*, Auckland: RHNZ Vintage, 2009, p.213.
6 Graham Greene, *The Heart of the Matter*, London: Heinemann, 1948.
7 Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, New York City: Viking Press, 1957.
8 Fiona Kidman, 'Like Everyone Who Likes Books' in *Where Your Left Hand Rests*, Auckland: Godwit, 2010, p.26.

Acknowledgements

Fiona Kidman

My life has been shaped by books, both the reading and writing of them, and by the encouragement I have been given. There were many mentors, including one or two inspired and inspiring teachers, an extraordinary head librarian who instilled in me a sense of my own worth when I worked for her and two quiet men in broadcasting who nurtured my early writing. For the past 30 or more years, my work has been edited by Harriet Allan, and to her I owe more than I can ever say.

Read NZ Te Pou Muramura

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