

# The write stuff

Books are not dead yet, as a bunch of new releases by local authors shows. Story by Alex Bernard

**Y**ou could be forgiven for thinking books are on their way out as people turn to e-readers and major retailers close down as shoppers go online to buy the latest bestsellers. But there are signs that books are not dead yet and books by local authors are in demand, with a swag of new releases over the next month by writers from South East Queensland.

Brisbane has long been recognised as a hub of emerging literary talent. Simon Cleary's debut novel in 2005, *The Comfort of Figs* (UQP), sold out its first print run and is nearing the end of its second. It received glowing reviews nationally, including a great endorsement from author David Malouf who called it "an impressive debut".

Cleary's eagerly awaited follow-up, *Closer to Stone*, is out now. "Stories will always need to be told and there are plenty of other mediums - like movies - that are great ways to tell them. But when a novel resonates with

readers, it can really take off and you know then there's life yet in that old dog the novel," he says.

Cleary attributes some of the success of local authors to a good writing climate here. "The Queensland Writer's Centre helps foster all sorts of writing genres. Committed booksellers like Avid Reader, Riverbend, Coaldrakes, BlackCat and Folio are terrific at supporting local authors, and at helping readers know what's worth reading. The authors themselves encourage and learn from each other. It's a very supportive network here."

Jane O'Hara, Director of the Brisbane Writer's Festival, agrees. "I think the geographical distance from what is perceived to be the 'publishing hubs' (Sydney and Melbourne) gives Queensland writers a liberty of sorts to write beyond the mainstream and be less constrained by the publishing imperatives. There seems to be

a freedom and freshness of voice in the new and emerging Queensland writers that is noted and commented on by many of the international writers and publishers visiting Brisbane Writers Festival each year."

Gold Coast-based crime writer Katherine Howell's fifth book *Silent Fear* hit the shelves in February and she has been touring the country to do guest appearances and book signings. Her books have sold more than 75,000 copies, which allows her to write full-time, although she also teaches at University of Queensland part-time.

"I get a buzz when I see people at the events! That's not an experience you can get online, meeting an author, hearing about their process, even if they don't want to write themselves. I think half of them just want to hear my grisly stories about when I worked in the Ambulance Service," laughs Howell.

Howell worked as a paramedic for 15 years while studying creative writing and wrote

three novels which she says will stay stashed in a bottom drawer. The fourth became her first published work in 2007. "It was very hard and took me 17 years," she says, but she was determined to be published the traditional way rather than self-publish.

Madonna Duffy from University of Queensland Press says to be published traditionally remains a challenge. "I believe that really good writing always rises to the top and finds publication. Most publishers still open their lists to unsolicited submissions, at least for some of the year, and literary agents are still taking on new authors. We are all still actively looking for new and emerging writers, so I don't believe it's necessarily harder to get published, but it's still a very competitive field."

Dutton Park-based Edwina Shaw had her first story published in 2002 when she won a competition in the West Ender newspaper. Since then she's had several stories and memoir pieces published in journals and

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