

HASTINGS

HASTINGS

**A BOY'S OWN
ADVENTURE**

A memoir

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For Jude. Who's heard it all before.

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INTRODUCTION

How, or how not, to write a memoir? I'm slowly coming to the conclusion that there's no right way to do it. Are you going to dig deep and try to give a true account of yourself, or are you just going to tell a few entertaining yarns? I'm inclined to think that the former is bound to leak out of the latter if you can look past literary style and moral dissection and write as directly as possible. (I was going to say 'honestly' but I'm having an issue with that too.)

In fact I'm not even sure what my system is, apart from sitting there and remembering stuff and writing it down. A little memory, a little licence and a lot of humour. Like recalling the time, early in the morning, when the nightcart man and the milkman both arrived, clanking, at the gate at the same time and I lay there hoping they wouldn't bump into each other. Did it happen, or did I

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just make it up? I don't really care because it definitely *could* have happened.

I've jokingly said that it takes a lot of fiction to write non-fiction, but I think it's true. I lay out the frame of the story, which is without doubt inspired by actual events, and then my febrile imagination just flows into the gaps and creates the whole. The fiction, when it arrives, lands with such force that one can easily become convinced that the act of writing is bringing forth a forgotten truth. I love going down that corridor of detail: one detail piling onto another until the moment is done. Only then do I feel free to move on, searching for the next little seed of memory that I can build on.

I wrote 'Shooting fish in a barrel', the third yarn in this book, for a Radio New Zealand short story competition, only to be disqualified because I was, to my surprise, described as a 'published author'. But the damage was done: I was away.

All these stories cover those chaotic years when life starts to get complicated, when you become responsible for your own actions — when you dig a very long tunnel into a very unstable sawdust mountain, or flip your mother's car while hooning about down by the river, or catch your first glimpse of the awesome mysteries of pornography. I hope you get as much enjoyment from reading them as I did from writing them.





The author at three years old.

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was had. Funny to think of Mum ‘having me’ — at 9.15 a.m. on 11 August 1943, somewhere in the middle of the Second World War, in a nursing home in Mount Albert, Auckland.

Dad came ashore from his adventurous life in the Merchant Navy when they knew Mum was pregnant. He picked up a job with the Auckland Harbour Board, working on the dredges, which must have been a bit of a comedown after the insane anxieties of crewing in the engine rooms on those torpedo-dogged convoys sailing back and forth across the Pacific.

They rented a lovely sunny flat downstairs in a two-storeyed villa in Ponsonby’s Picton Street. I must have been only about two years old but I have distinct memories of propelling my baby sister, Valerie, in her pram, perilously close to the edge of the verandah.

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I suspect that the alarm bells this set ringing might have helped to burn the moment into my brain.

I also remember going upstairs with Mum to pay the rent to the owner, who looked like a caricature of a salty old sea captain, all white whiskers and turtle-neck sweater (though this could've been the beginning of me visualising my life in archetypes). He had worked as a wood grainer in the boat-building yards at Westhaven and his house was almost entirely and randomly wood-grained: walnut burr next to aspen, next to sycamore, next to oak, next to mahogany. Panel by panel.

And here's a story I don't remember, but one that Mum and Dad loved recounting. Every evening I used to toddle up to the gate to wait for Dad to come walking down Picton Street after getting off the tram on Ponsonby Road. One day he arrived, the gate was open and I wasn't there. In a panic my parents rushed up to the police station, which was only a couple of blocks away, and there I was, sitting up on the police sergeant's desk, bawling my eyes out, my little fists clutching overflowing handfuls of pennies. 'Thank God you're here,' they said. 'No amount of pennies will shut him up!'



The Frizzells' sunny sojourn on Picton Street only lasted a couple of years before Dad was lured down to the 'family seat' in Hastings, Hawke's Bay, by the offer of cheap mortgage financing from his two spinster sisters and a job as a shift engineer at the Tomoana Freezing Works. So, bye-bye Auckland and hello to the dynamic chaos of shift work.

He was in charge of maintaining the compressors that kept the ammonia surging through the pipes encircling the vast freezers full

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of export lamb. Because of the hands-on, hands-off irregularity of ammonia engineering, the workers were all housed, with their families if they had them, in a rough sort of village attached to the factory. The compressors that pumped the freezing liquid to every nook and corner of this massive complex were temperamental and so these men had to be right on hand to respond to any glitch in the highly lucrative trade in frozen lamb. The phone in the hall would ring in the middle of the night and I would hear Dad call out, 'Joan! Number three compressor's gone down!' and off he'd scoot, out the door and over the road into the plant that loomed up out of the stockyards and stoney acres of tobacco weed like Gormenghast, five stories of blackened concrete and rusty iron.

There was no kindergarten, no preschool, just little Richard out there in the wind, Mum back in the shack running the washing through the mangle and Dad over the road doing whatever he did with his giant machines. I seemed to have the run of the place. Whenever Mum sent me over to Dad's domain on some sort of a mission I'd make the most of it, wandering deeper and deeper into the complex of shunting yards, loading platforms and fat-rendering pits. I was fascinated by these great swimming-pool-sized ponds, rimmed with crusty edges of dirty yellow fat. The stench was astonishing.

Except for the locomotive driver who occasionally gave me a wave from way up in his cab, nobody seemed to take the slightest bit of notice of me. Sometimes I'd be passing a loading dock and a huge icy door would open with a great graunch and a group of shivering men would shuffle out blinking into the light, digging deep into their layers of wadded clothing for cigarettes and matches. Little did I know that one day I'd be joining the mole men in their subterranean employment.

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In my usual solitary fog I'd follow the crisscrossing maze of railway lines until I reached the holding pens where the next day's flock stood quiet and still, oblivious to the fact that they were about to get an all-expenses-paid cruise to the Smithfield markets in London. On one occasion I kept walking, past the docile sheep and on to the notorious dormitories, where the seasonal workers from out of town bunked down for the duration. The din was terrific. Hooting and hollering: men playing Crown and Anchor, darning their socks, stitching up their sugar-bag jerkins, playing guitar. Everywhere there was laughing and joshing, especially around the Crown and Anchor game.

I remember the heady funk in the room, too: damp socks, the roast-mutton smell of their meals. The workers would take entire roast dinners over to the lunch canteen in Agee jars, heat them up in the oven and then plop it on a plate — something to supplement the hearts and sweetbreads they stripped from the sheep carcasses on the chain, shoved into mutton bags and boiled in the overhead steam vats used to hose down the butchered animals.

If I wasn't getting lost in the wonderland of stockyards and stink, I'd be exploring the hedges and paddocks around our house. One day I climbed a scrappy mānuka tree to feed the horse in the paddock next door. When I leant over with a handful of grass the branch I was on broke off at the trunk and down I went, only to be brought to an abrupt halt by another broken branch that penetrated my thigh and slid up under the skin between the bunched muscle fibres, leaving me strung up like a coat on a hook. I'm not sure how long I hung there squirming and screaming before Dad came down and unhooked me. I still have the scar.

It was quite a life. One night I was lying in bed with the sheets drawn up to my chin when Mum bustled past, holding a trap

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with a very large, very dead rat dangling from it. But the small neighbourhood did have an Ozarkian sort of charm, and a very hole-in-the-hedge fluidity. In fact Mum reckoned she saw the little girl next door show me her bottom through one of these handy vegetation breaks. I came into the kitchen to tell her that Kathleen had showed me her bottom, but I couldn't understand why she'd done it because I had one of my own.



Dad was a classic engineer. Everything was, in some way, engineering. He was constantly puzzled by 'art'. Why would you need art and design if you had engineering? Apparently engineering could solve anything.

One day the engineer decided to replace the rotting back steps with concrete slabs, which he decided he would move 'Egyptian style', using lengths of firewood as rollers. Mum was recruited to keep the chunks of concrete vertical while Dad provided the forward propulsion from the rear and I hopped around like a nuisance in my dressing gown and slippers.

It seemed to be a triumph of engineering, until Dad tried to position the slab towards its resting place and the logs refused to behave. One by one they spun out from under the bottom edge, Dad lost the vertical balance, and God knows how many pounds of concrete slowly toppled to one side and onto me and Mum.

You'll have to imagine the ruckus because I don't remember a thing from that point on. Dad managed to lever the slab up enough to get Mum's legs — minus a shoe — out and then I evidently just slid out like a slice of tomato from a ham sandwich with only a nasty gash on my knee.

How was I still alive? Apparently Mum's sensible shoe had wedged sideways under the slab and had taken all the weight. Given the physics of the shoe-fulcrum and the obvious fact of my survival I can only assume this to be true.

And then there was the cart that engineer Dad decided to engineer. Now, a typical cart is a skeletal thing like a big capital letter 'I', one central bar with two cross bars and a pram wheel at each extremity. The front cross bar pivots for steering and the rider controls the steering rope from the three-sided beer crate mounted amidships. We can all picture it.

But God put engineers on this earth to make things better, and so Dad went all-out to build a better cart. For a start he decided on a wheelbase twice as long as the norm, with a connecting board as wide as a scaffolding plank. The cross bars were replaced with axles — actual axles — and somewhere he'd found a crate, or box, big enough that when it was stood on end I could sit in it as if it were a sentry box, or cab. In front of the box, where my legs extended, he fashioned a long, hooped cowling, which bore a passing resemblance to an old-fashioned truck bonnet. He painted the whole thing barn red.

The crowning touch was the steering mechanism. No ropes and feet for this pantechicon: Dad's skills had gone into hyper-drive. Even at the tender age of four I knew this arrangement was special. I sat in the cab in front of a bona-fide steering wheel mounted on a shaft that passed through a passable looking dashboard all the way down through the bonnet to a spectacular mechanism called a 'crown and pinion', two of Dad's favourite words. This fabulous device looked like two conical gears engaged at cross purposes, thus enabling me to steer the thing from my imperious position in the cab.

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Dad couldn't get an engine under the bonnet with both of my legs in there, so he supplied the motive power by pushing the rear end of the flat-bed with a long-handled garden hoe, which meant he could run alongside in regal style in his baggy ex-military khaki shorts without doing that awkward bending-over-pushing thing. It was a magnificent piece of engineering.



The house at the Tomoana works was also the site of my first encounter with paint. When Dad took it upon himself to paint the roof of our rented white-weatherboard box he decided that I should witness the process. So up the ladder I went. Almost immediately I slipped on a wet patch and continued on my back, down the gentle slope, grabbing the tin of paint and bringing it with me until I finally lodged myself in the guttering. I hung there grimly at the edge of the roof as the paint ran down the corrugations, spilling over and around me before cascading to the ground below. Somehow or other Dad managed to fish me out and carry me into the washhouse, where he scrubbed me from head to toe with turpentine. There was green paint in my navel for years.

Dad must have been promoted from shift engineer to regular engineer or some such because we left Okefenokee for the relatively civilised pebble-dash suburbia (if suburbia can be eight blocks away from the CBD) of Hastings Street, Hastings. Then Dad got the promised low-interest loan and we moved down a few blocks to 507 Sylvan Road, a big, turreted villa where the Frizzells set up house for the next 35 or so years. I moved from Hastings Central to Parkvale Primary, over by my beloved Windsor Park, and it was in this part of town that the following tales slowly unfolded.



The Hastings clock tower.

2

PUTTING THE MAP ON HASTINGS

But first, a pause for a bit of geography and history. Where were we? Where was Hastings? Why was it so close to Napier and why was that little place halfway between called Clive? What a strange line-up — Hastings, Napier, Clive — it sounded like a clarion call from one of my *Boy's Own Paper* cavalry charges. I think I honestly didn't know the difference between a Māori place name and a Pākehā one. I think I thought Bridge Pā and Taradale were Māori names and Te Mata Peak and Tomoana (T'mona) were English.

Historians hadn't found us yet. We had no right to exist. We were just there, all thrown together on the Heretaunga (English?) Plains like survivors in some sort of lost magic kingdom of rivers and stopbanks — miles and miles of stopbanks — built by a lost

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civilisation. Driving out and driving in were considered epic journeys. Auckland might have been on another planet.

None of this bothered me; if I'd been asked to vote on it I would've said I'd landed at the centre of the universe. Standing on our corner of Sylvan Road and Victoria Street, with Te Mata Peak, the Tukituki River and the mad wilderness of Windsor Park to the back of me and the distinctly non-wilderness of Cornwall Park and the misty vista of the Ruahines in front of me, I was the master of all I could barely survey. A few blocks to the left of me the one main road ran directly up to the mighty Hastings CBD: three cinemas, a Woolworths *and* our own Westerman's — a real department store, complete with money-sucking vacuum tubes. Could you ask for more?

Well, you could ask for a library, and there it was, up at my end of town. Set in a row of official-looking civic spaces flowing up Heretaunga Street from the big Spanish-style town hall, it sat back behind some very imposing doors in a huge gloomy brown space set about with large glass cases containing models of famous ocean liners, each about the size of a kitchen bench. Some were split down the middle and displayed against a mirror that gave the illusion of a whole vessel. Others you could walk right around and peer into the portholes or right into the bridge and out the other side.

Books and boats, what a romantic association. You had to turn your back on this labyrinth of vitrines to contemplate the books, of which there was a head-spinning selection: all the *Biggles* books, the *Just William* series and a complete collection of Westerns about some young cowboy who lived with his golden palomino in the exotic dreamland of Colorado.

Right down the seriously gloomy end of this small-town

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Bodleian I found a selection of very dark books about the Second World War. I don't know how they got there, or how I discovered them, but I'll never forget pulling one of them down and opening it to a shocking photo essay of the day the Americans cautiously moved into the concentration camps. Such horrors a young boy should never have seen, but I saw them and even ducked back for another look every time I went in for the latest Willard Price adventure. Feeling somehow guilty, I never shared my discovery with anyone.

In my third-form year — when I was about 12 or 13 — the library moved over to a bright new war memorial building with a specially commissioned Peter McIntyre mural; the ships and the dark books didn't make it across. Too much darkness for this overlit horror of a book repository. I hated the place, but I loved the mural.



I'm not going to walk you all the way down Heretaunga Street — it took me long enough to get around the library — but suffice it to say it was, still is, an impressively lengthy thoroughfare. The actual road, skipping along under several different aliases, runs south to north all the way from Havelock North to Fernhill. The railway line runs east–west, bisecting it at a right angle, and what was then a smart little gridded agri-service town clustered around the junction. It looked like a crucifix laid out on a patchwork quilt, with Christ's feet resting on the southernmost 30 mph sign and Auntie Molly's frock shop and the railway station right there in His left armpit. Actually, if you want to extend this daft simile, the gasworks would be in the Saviour's right armpit and His head would sit under the halo of the Stortford Lodge roundabout.

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We lived a block inside that southern speed limit marker. Dad's brother George, a tall, quiet — apart from his wheezing asthmatic chest — market gardener with a heavily weathered face, lived directly opposite us on the more rural, northern edge of town. Aunt Molly, with her tidy house and garden, lived pretty much smack-dab in the middle. Aunt Nora, the brisk and literate ex-schoolteacher, lived over on the east coast at Bay View, where her beachfront cottage did indeed have a view of the bay, with an even closer view from the tripod telescope upstairs in the sunroom.

You could've ridden your bike around Hastings before lunch. My primary school was a short walk south and the thriving commercial hub of Robinson's Corner — the dairy, grocery, butcher, chemist and fish and chip shop — was only a couple of blocks north. All our material needs catered for within a three-block radius. No wonder I felt a bit special.

We were surrounded by orchards and there was a sawmill. Has there ever been a better playground? Always something to eat, somewhere to build, shoot or hide away in. Always something to nearly get killed by.



After we moved in to 507 Sylvan road, the rest of the sisters duly arrived — and a brother, eventually. The house filled up. Did Mum always know she was going to need a house this big? My little bedroom at the kitchen end of the hall became a sacred place — no sisters allowed — home to apple boxes full of *Phantom* and *Uncle Scrooge* comics.

Hastings filled up as well. In the mid-1950s, and without any

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noticeable difference in infrastructure or personality, it became a city. By then it already had its world-famous Blossom Festival with its highlight parade of floats. Oh, how we loved that parade. Clubs, groups, shops and expressive individuals spent days, weeks, months, preparing for it.

A group of self-important citizens who had formed Greater Hastings later turned their attention to a vast and impossible project: New Zealand's Disneyland in Windsor Park. They called it Fantasyland, and they nearly pulled it off. Using volunteer labour, cheap cement and limited design skills, they cobbled together a pretty impressive cluster of quite sizeable things. There was a fairytale castle you could actually almost get lost in, a pirate ship as big as an Elizabethan galleon sitting in a large kerbed puddle, a concrete shoe for the old woman to live in and a miniature railway designed to wend its chuffing way through cunning overpasses and underpasses and past Humpty Dumpty on his wall and the space rocket assembled from what looked suspiciously like plumbing supplies.

Time, children and weather weren't kind to Fantasyland and the civic riches many thought it would generate never eventuated. It seemed to slip from a vision of future possibilities to a ghost town in about a decade. Eventually it was rebuilt as a waterslide complex called Splash Planet. But I was well gone by then.

The Blossom Festival, too, suffered a few setbacks. In 1960 railcar loads of rampaging hoons up from the infamous Hutt Valley ripped its rosy reputation to bits, and the man of vision and head of PR for the Greater Hastings committee absconded to Australia with the festival funds and the festival secretary.

But never mind, we still had the Hastings Highland Games,

when the whole town went Scottish for a month: bagpipers practising in backyards, the keening whine drifting off on the early evening air; marching girls rubbing fake tan into their sturdy Kiwi legs; highland dancers polishing their brooches. All that was happening just around the corner from me in my dear old Windsor Park, where you could rent a canoe or watch a few red-faced, bandy-legged giants toss a caber about the arena.

Writ large on a great billboard on the edge of town was the most enduring symbol of our success: ‘The Fruit Bowl of New Zealand’. That’s what we were. It could’ve been ‘The Meat Pack of New Zealand’ too, if they’d pushed it. Blossoms and lambs featured together on postcards. We’d go on Sunday drives to look at them, the lambs gambolling in the foothills of the Ruahines and the blossom pretty much everywhere you looked.

I don’t remember driving out to see the pea blossom but there must have been acres of it. If you weren’t inside Wattie’s looking at peas, you were out in the fields harvesting them.



Somehow this gormless little dreamer bumped happily along on this wave of vaguely delusional rural enthusiasm, hiding in the art room at school or tucked away in his gloomy bedroom at 507 copying out his favourite comic panels and pinning the results to the wall. I drifted through my schooling doing the barest minimum of what was required. I did Standard Four twice when it was discovered that I’d somehow got a year ahead. It didn’t bother me — I wasn’t in a hurry. School seemed OK, never felt like a burden. I’d walk off in the morning, then walk home mid-afternoon with what felt like the whole day ahead of me.

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There was time enough to bike around to Billy Fulton's and play with his two-way radio or dig out an extension to the underground hut. There were infinitely long summer evenings with that occasional weird light at dusk that made the few flowers that survived Dad's gardening glow like torches. And freezing winter mornings that exploded the milk bottles full of water that we put out at night on the tank stand.

It was a life of constant excitement.