

## Bank of New Zealand Katherine Mansfield Novice Award winner – Craig Cliff



Craig Cliff completed a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and a Bachelor of Commerce and Administration with majors in Finance and Accounting before graduating with an MA in Creative Writing from Victoria University in 2006.

He wrote a satirical novel for his MA - about the members of an indie rock band who are all trying to become famous behind each others back - which is yet to be published.

He has had several pieces of short fiction published gratis in student journals.

Prior to leaving for Europe on his 'OE', Craig worked for a finance company in Brisbane. He admits now, that he wrote the first draft of *Another Language* on a quiet afternoon at work!

He plans to continue travelling and working for another couple of years and hopes to do something 'much more creative' than his previous commerce-related jobs on his return to New Zealand. Writing is his passion and he plans to write another novel over the next 12 months.

### Another Language

When I was seven I asked my grandfather why he was always so quiet, and he said, 'Because I am always sad.'

I asked, 'Why are you always sad?'

'Because I always miss Yugoslavia.'

I was alone in the lounge with Dedo – which is what I called my grandfather – because it was just me and Dad visiting this time. Mum stayed home to look after Daniel, my baby brother, who was sick. Dad was with Baba – which is what I call my grandmother – still at the dining room table, even though they had stopped eating a long time ago.

'Dedo,' I asked, 'why did you leave Yugoslavia?'

He growled a little, as he sometimes did to Baba when she made him wash up before lunch. 'Because of my stutter,' he finally said, and placed his hands on the armrests of his La-Z-Boy.

I knew what stuttering was because when I saw Open All Hours for the first time I asked my dad, 'What's wrong with that man?' pointing at the shopkeeper, Mr Arkwright.

'You don't stutter,' I told my grandfather.

'I do in Serbian,' he said.

'Really?'

He nodded, and went back to being sad and quiet.

All week at school I thought about whether a person could stutter in one language and not in another. I tried to get close to Marcus Collins because he was the only kid at school who stuttered, but it was hard because it wasn't cool to be seen with M-m-marcus. Three lunchtimes in a row I sat near enough to him and Ricky Wong so I could overhear their conversations, but they never spoke in another language.

On Thursday after school I decided to follow Marcus Collins and talk to him when no one else was around. This happened sooner than I expected, in the alleyway between Rutland Place and Milson Line, only a few hundred metres from the school gates. Marcus was running his fingers along the corrugated iron fence and making a br-br-br-br noise so he didn't hear me catch up to him.

'Do you speak another language?' I asked when the corrugated iron ran out.

Marcus jumped a little. When he turned around, he still looked surprised, but surprised like no one had ever spoken to him on the way home before. He didn't talk for a while, although it looked like he was about to try. 'Nnno,' he finally said, which wasn't really a stutter, but it sounded like the word weighed a hundred kgs and he had to heave it out of his mouth and push it all the way to my ears.

'Bummer,' I said.

'Why?'

'Because I want to know if you would stutter in another language. What about Māori?'

'What about M-māori?'

'Say kia ora.'

'Kia ora.'

'You didn't stutter!'

'I don't always stutter,' Marcus said, proving his point with a stutterless sentence.

'Oh. Why don't you say something longer in Māori?'

'Like what?'

I thought for a moment, then asked, 'What about the haka?'

'You mean ka mate, k-ka mate?' It was only a small slip but his face sank.

'You stuttered!' I was excited by my discovery, but Marcus must have decided I was doing this to tease him.

'I'm going home,' he said and walked off.

So Marcus stutters in Māori too, I thought, and walked back up the alleyway because my house was in the opposite direction.

'Dedo, do you really stutter in Serbian?' I asked my grandfather when we visited the next weekend.

He nodded.

'Say something in Serbian.'

'You won't understand. How will you know if I stutter?'

I looked around for someone to help. It was just me and Dad visiting again, even though Dad promised Daniel was better. He was in the kitchen helping Baba do the dishes and it was just me in the lounge kneeling in front of Dedo's La-Z-Boy.

'Do you stutter in other languages?' I asked.

'I only know English.'

'And Serbian,' I added.

'Yes, and Serbian.'

I desperately wanted him to tell me a story like my other grandfather, my mum's dad, but Dad's dad never seemed interested in stories.

'Did you learn English in school?' I asked.

'Yes.'

'And you found out you didn't stutter in English?'

'Yes.'

'And you moved to New Zealand because we speak English here?'

He nodded.

'You must have stuttered pretty bad if it made you move.'

My grandfather said nothing.

'But you miss Yugoslavia,' I said.

My grandfather said nothing.

On the way home from Baba and Dedo's house, I asked my dad why Dedo never told stories.

'I guess he doesn't like stories.'

'Everyone likes stories,' I said.

'Maybe he only knows sad ones.'

'Oh,' I said, and thought about how my grandfather must have been the Marcus Collins of his school, and how this would make me sad.

The next week at school I decided to be nicer to Marcus Collins. At first Marcus was worried that I was just setting him up so I could make him stutter, but when I just talked about cricket and Malaysian Sun Bears, he decided I was okay. I actually ate lunch with him and Ricky Wong on Tuesday, and even though Shaun Riggs called me a h-h-homo, I didn't care.

Ricky Wong hung out with Marcus because he sniffed everything before he ate it. Back in the new entrants he ate a sandwich, which had been in the bottom of Joanna Richardson-Toa's school bag since kindergarten, and got really sick. So now he sniffed everything and no one except Marcus would be his friend.

Ricky said I should go to choir with them on Friday lunchtime, and I said okay because I wanted to see if Marcus stuttered when he sang, but also because Shaun Riggs was already calling me names so it didn't matter if I got called a girl for going to choir.

On Friday, Mrs Green, who ran the choir, stood at the door to the school hall greeting everyone as they came in.

'James,' she said with a big smile when she saw me. I was surprised she knew my name because she taught standard three and I didn't have any older brothers or sisters she could know, but then she said, 'Marcus told me you were coming.' Mrs Green smiled at Marcus, and he smiled back.

As we entered the hall, the older kids all said hi to Marcus, and one even offered him some Rashuns. It was like he was a celebrity. I thought maybe it was because a lot of the other kids in choir looked like losers and nerds, and Marcus looked normal, he just had trouble speaking. He even got to stand in the middle of the back row when we sang (Mrs. Green told

me to stand on the end of the second row). We started off singing 'Where The Streets Have No Name', and I had to look at the overhead projector to read the lyrics so I couldn't watch Marcus to see if he was stuttering, but then, in the middle of the song, Mrs Green lowered her hands to her knees and everyone else started humming, and Marcus sang by himself:

We're still building then burning down love

Burning down love

He was so good at singing it made everyone smile, which made it hard to keep humming.

After choir I said, 'You don't stutter when you sing!'

'Yeah.'

'That's so cool.'

'I wish I didn't stutter at all.'

'You should live in a musical,' I said, and thought of my grandfather. Moving to New Zealand would have been like coming to live in a musical for him. Except he was sad and quiet. I thought, what's the point in moving somewhere you can talk without stuttering if you aren't going to talk?

Just me and Dad went to Baba and Dedo's again that Saturday. I forgot to even ask why Mum wasn't coming.

When Dad was out inspecting Baba's herb garden, I asked Dedo, 'Do you stutter when you sing?'

'I don't sing,' he said.

'What about when you had to sing at school, like for Christmas assemblies?'

'We didn't sing at school.'

That seemed weird to me.

'I made friends with this kid at school who stutters but he can sing like an angel. No stutters!'

My grandfather nodded.

When we got in the car to go home, I asked my dad, 'Do you think Dedo regrets leaving Yugoslavia?'

'He didn't have a lot of choice.'

'Was his stutter really that bad?'

'What stutter?'

'When he spoke Serbian.'

'Dedo doesn't stutter when he speaks Serbian. He speaks it fluently.'

'What does that mean?'

'It means he speaks it like I speak English. It's his first language.'

'Yeah, but English is Marcus Collins' first language and he stutters, but he can sing like an angel.'

'Dedo doesn't stutter. He speaks to Baba all the time in Serbian. He spoke Serbian at home when I was a child.'

'But Dedo said he left Yugoslavia because he stuttered so much.'

'Oh,' Dad said.

'Oh, what?'

Dad flicked on the indicators to turn left out of Baba and Dedo's street, and we waited there for ages, even though there were no cars coming. Finally we pulled onto Ruahine Street and he said, 'Dedo had to leave Yugoslavia because of the Ustaše.'

'The what?'

'The people that wanted to kill Serbs, like Dedo. During World War Two.'

'But why would anyone want to kill Dedo?'

Dad took a deep breath, and said, 'I don't really understand.'

'So Dedo doesn't stutter?'

'No.'

'Why did he lie to me?'

'He doesn't talk about his life back then with anyone, not like Baba does.'

'Does she?'

'Sure, ask her about the spring dances she went to as a girl, or the way her mother plaited hair, and she'll talk for hours. But Dedo,' he said and took off his glasses even though we were still driving, just passing the hospital, 'he's my dad and he doesn't even talk to me about the past, y'know?'

'But why did Dedo lie?'

Dad sighed, and put his glasses back on and I sat with my arms crossed the rest of the way home.

When we arrived, Mum was sitting at the kitchen table flicking through a recipe book. I asked if Daniel was asleep, and she said yes.

'Can I sit beside his cot and wait until he wakes up?'

'What are you up to, mister?' Mum asked.

'Nothing,' I said.

Mum looked at Dad, who said, 'It's okay Anne,' but there was a tiny stutter in his voice, like my mother's name was made of corrugated iron. He swept me up into his arms even though I wasn't a baby any more and carried me into Daniel's room.

We both sat there watching my baby brother sleep for a long time, until Dad asked, 'Do you remember when Asterix died?'

Asterix was the kitten I got for my fifth birthday, but it had asthma so bad it had to be put down after one month.

'Of course I remember,' I said.

'And do you remember how, when we told you Mummy was pregnant with Daniel, you said it was better not to tell the baby about Asterix because it would just make it sad?'

I didn't remember saying this exactly, but I nodded.

'Dedo was just protecting you.'

I had almost forgotten about Dedo lying to me, but this reminded me and I felt angry again.

'I don't need protecting,' I told him.

My father put his hand on my head, like he sometimes did in the supermarket to steer me away from the lolly aisle, but this time he didn't steer me, he just left his hand there.

'Should I tell Daniel about Asterix, do you think?' I asked my dad.

'Maybe you should tell Dedo.'

Daniel rolled over onto his back and his face went red and I could tell he was about to cry because I had watched him sleep before. For some reason Dad didn't try to shush him, though. We just let him cry. When Mum said something from the doorway I kept watching Daniel, but when Dad turned to explain, his hand, still on my head like an octopus, turned me as well.