

## Migrant journeys



*Helmi Al Khattat, who tells his story in Migrant Journeys, was one of the speakers at the launch of the book.*

"I am lucky to still be alive, and I am really lucky to be in New Zealand. It's a beautiful country with beautiful people, but there's a big 'but', and it's about jobs. That's why I became a taxi driver."

In November, Helmi Al Khattat, until recently a Wellington taxi driver, was one of the speakers at the launch of Migrant Journeys: New Zealand taxi drivers tell their stories.

He had flown back in from Sydney, where for the past three months he had been looking for more fulfilling work and opportunities to improve himself, and looking down on Wellington as the plane came in to land, he found himself near tears.

"I love New Zealand," he told the audience at the National Library in Wellington.

Iraq-born Helmi Al Khattat is one of 14 migrant taxi drivers in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch who have told their stories to co-editors Adrienne Janssen and Liz Grant.

The story of how he came to New Zealand includes bomb injuries, death threats, a near-shooting, and more than a year as refugee in Malaysia, and some of the other drivers' stories are equally traumatic. Sunny Kong, with whose story the book opens, narrowly escaped death at the hands of the Khmer Rouge.

But there is no template. Some of the stories in Migrant Journeys are those of refugees, others are of migrants; some of the drivers turned to taxi driving as a fall-back occupation, others chose it as a flexible way to bring in an income and support their families.

Universal to the stories is the drive to do well and to contribute. In her address, co-editor Liz Grant described them as stories "of courage, tenacity and good humour, often in face of great challenges".

Taxi Federation Executive Director Roger Heale praised the contribution migrants are making to New Zealand.

"From experience I can tell you that a team that includes migrants tends to be far more productive than a team that does not."

But he also observed, partly drawing on his own experience, that New Zealand is not always good at integrating new arrivals into its professional workforce.

Arriving as a refugee, Helmi Al Khattat, for example, had completed a mechanics course at the local polytechnic. Despite doing well, he found that his classmates gained positions, yet he did not.

(The situation that led to skilled migrants driving taxis has changed significantly since a change to immigration policy in 2003. Skilled Migrant Category residence visa applicants must now have an offer of skilled employment.)

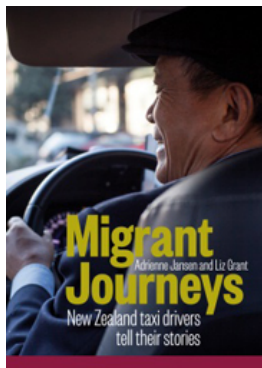
On the other hand, said Roger Heale, once someone has entered the New Zealand workforce at a relatively low level it is possible to rise quite rapidly within it.

One of the threads that runs through Migrant Journeys is, unfortunately, the casual day-to-day experience of racism, often from late-night inebriated customers.

Perhaps Migrant Journeys will help counter this.

"How do we cultivate curiosity and an understanding of those of different cultures, faiths and ethnicities and build a well-formed, wise and inclusive society?" co-editor Adrienne Jansen asked the audience.

"Listen to each other's stories."



Migrant Journeys is available in paperback and ebook formats from booksellers, with a recommended retail price of \$39.99 for the paperback edition.

It can also be purchased directly from the publisher:  
<http://www.bwb.co.nz/books/migrant-journeys>,  
Migrant Journeys: New Zealand taxi drivers tell their stories  
Adrienne Jansen (ed), Liz Grant (ed)  
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*Left to right: Co-editor Liz Grant; Taxi Federation Executive Director Roger Heale; Co-editor Adrienne Jansen; former banker, now taxi driver Vinod Kumar; Tom Rennie of Bridget Williams Books; Helmi Al Khattat.*

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