

# Pushing out the margins

Adrienne Jansen

Let's suppose you want to publish an anthology of poems about rubbish. You send out for submissions in the usual way, you get lots of poems from people like us (me, and you, the reader of this book). There are many good poems. You could settle for that—a solid anthology. But the more you think about it, the more you realise you've only got part of the picture. You want the bigger picture. You want poems from drivers of rubbish and recycling trucks, from people who work at the tip, who sort the recycling, who dig into rubbish bins looking for discarded food. People who will never hear about this anthology and have probably never had an opportunity to write.

How are you going to get those poems?

That's the question Landing Press has been asking for several years now—for our last three anthologies, in fact, and for the fourth that we're working on now.

Landing Press is a small Wellington publisher established in 2016 by three women: Milena Stojsavljevic, carina gallegos and me. We wanted to publish poems that many people could enjoy, and we wanted the press to pay its way. It's now run by a highly skilled team of volunteers, who all have writing or publishing experience.

So, again, how to get those poems?

We first asked that question in 2019 when we were working on *More of Us*, poems by migrants and refugees. From a call for submissions through ESOL, migrant and writing networks, we received many poems. But there were poems missing—from newly arrived migrants, from English-language students, from people who didn't speak English well. We realised that if we wanted these poems, we would have to create them. Not write them, but actively find the right people and give them the opportunity, the tools and the encouragement to write. So, we began running workshops with organisations like English Language Partners, and in several high

schools, and we started to mentor individuals. I'm a poet optimist. I believe that almost everyone can write a poem, given some starting points, guidelines, encouragement and belief in themselves. And with a couple of simple editing tools, they can really improve their poem. Decades of working with both writers and 'non-writers' (starting with students in a small, rural high school in Alberta in the 1970s) have proved that to me, time after time.

*More of Us* was a key step for Landing Press in defining our territory—we wanted to include voices rarely heard. But our next anthology, *Somewhere a Cleaner*, poems by cleaners, threw up new challenges. A call for submissions resulted in about two hundred poems, many of them excellent and by experienced writers. We value these poems: they 'anchor' each collection, giving it a weight that allows us to be lighter around the edges.

But the vast majority were from Pākehā writers, and didn't represent the largely migrant cleaning population. How were we going to get poems by on-the-ground cleaners that more accurately reflected that diverse workforce? We were very restricted by COVID-19. We couldn't run workshops. Instead, we set about finding individual cleaners. We talked to the union E tū. We sent information to cleaning companies (one company ran a competition for their employees!). I went to the information kiosk at Wellington Railway Station and asked to speak to a cleaner. I was directed to a woman who turned out to be a gift. After we discussed the project, she talked and I wrote down verbatim what she said. I typed it. Then we talked about what a poem was, that sense of rhythm or music, how line breaks contribute to that, how a poem can create a picture in the head for the reader, how poetry is a concise form and that we can get rid of unnecessary words. Over several meetings, her words shaped themselves into a poem.

Then she introduced me to another woman, who worked three cleaning jobs in Wellington. She lived in Porirua, where I live, so I met her several times at 6am at Porirua Railway Station—that was the best time for her. If you want to know what it was really like working as a cleaner during that first lockdown, read her small prose piece 'The Lockdown'. Prose was the form that best captured her voice, and I think it's one of the most illuminating in the collection.

We talked to cleaners between shifts in offices and rest homes. I spent a morning walking in the rain around a boatyard talking about cleaning boats, and an early morning with a high-rise window cleaner before he began his first job for the day.

Other writers around the country were also working with us, mentoring individuals. Our small team needed them. The word ‘diversity’ is used often, and loosely, but actually creating an authentically diverse and inclusive collection is hard and extremely time-consuming work.

By 2021, when we began to work on our next anthology, *More than a Roof*, poems about housing, we had a clear vision of what we wanted: poems from the housed (whether in houses, boats, caravans, etc.), the renters and the genuinely homeless. About two thirds would be submitted work, and the rest would be written specifically for the book. We had a better understanding of working with wide community networks and had excellent support from Community Housing Aotearoa—a collective of over 100 community housing providers and related partners—from other social housing providers, and from a homeless collective in Auckland. I ran a workshop during that year with the men in one of the Wellington City Mission’s transitional housing facilities, and another with ESOL students in a high school. As before, we had mentors working with other people around the country.

And, of course, we now had a large pool of writers from previous anthologies to draw on. They are our best resource. We keep in touch with them, sending reviews and occasional updates. Before we began our newest anthology (on ‘generations’), we asked them all what they thought our next book should be about.

Because, for us, it’s never only about the poem. It’s also about the writer. With all our anthologies, we put the writer’s biography on the same page as the poem. We’re big on launches, which give the writers the chance to celebrate (and us the chance to sell a lot of books!). We launched *More of Us* in the National Library of New Zealand in Wellington—coincidentally, a week after the Christchurch mosque shootings. Two hundred people came to this locked-down under-armed-guard event, which was extraordinary and poignant. With the launch of *Somewhere a Cleaner*, we thought, as cleaners have no

status, what's the most high-status place we can think of? Parliament! So, we launched the book in the Great Hall of Parliament House.

But why put so much effort into including these mostly unheard voices? And that effort is not only in finding the writer or poem. It's also in the editing—we pour time into careful and collaborative editing, particularly with new writers. Then there's the book production—we're committed to publishing excellent books with high production values.

So why bother?

Because these books bring into the literary landscape a group of people who've never seen themselves as part of that world. Who knows what doors that will open?

Because poetry is very adept at offering small insights into experiences that may be unfamiliar to us (the readers of this book). Poetry can shift our perspectives.

Because to be a non-writer and to see one's poem holding its own in a book alongside well-known writers can be transforming. 'Transforming' is like 'diversity'—an over-used and weakened word, but it's the right word. If there was more space here, I could tell you many personal stories about that transformation.

Producing these collections, which range from beautifully crafted poems to poems an inch away from doggerel, isn't going to win us any 'literary brownie points', as I think of them. But that's not what we're about. These books have won a lot of support otherwise. Plenty of people share our vision—in particular, people who teach writing to prisoners, to refugees, to the mentally ill—they've all been walking the road that we're walking. We simply want to make these voices part of the mainstream. We sell 600–800 copies of each of our anthologies—not bestsellers but not bad for poetry in Aotearoa.

So, back to that anthology of poems about rubbish. Now there's an idea.

**Adrienne Jansen** is a writer, editor and publisher, and writes fiction, non-fiction and poetry for both adults and children. She was the founder of the Whitireia Creative Writing Programme, and co-founder of both Escalator Press and Landing Press, which now takes most of her time. She lives in Tītahi Bay.