

Keep the faith

Marty Smith on the long haul of researching and writing *It Gets In Your Blood*.

Marty Smith's poetry collection, Horse With Hat (Te Herenga Waka University Press) won the Jessie Mackay Award for Best First Book of Poetry in 2014.

In late 2014, she was awarded an arts grant to be released from teaching for six months to do research in the racing world. Eleven and a half years later, the research turned into [It Gets In Your Blood](#), published by THWUP in 2026. Some of those years she describes as 'carrying around the whiff of rotting albatross', the undertang of dread that walks around with a writer who got a big grant and isn't delivering. Parts of those same years were a joy. Read on if you're in it for the long haul, and take heart.

I started thinking of this book as a PhD project for the real reason that Phil and Henry are both Dr. Schofield, and Max was muttering about doing a PhD. I didn't want to be the only one in the family who wasn't Dr. Schofield. I have absolutely no use for a PhD, I'm afraid, but once I had hold of the idea, I could see how I could use the making of it as a way to get to the track. And I was a poet poking around in prose so I was relying on input from other writers; it was how I was used to working.

It was never going to work. I couldn't do NZ racing literature, the cupboard is bare save for a few tinned ghost written biographies, and some dusty old stories about the hit and run raids to Australia for a big sting in the fifties and sixties. I wanted to write about a subculture, and not in any anthropological or scientific way. I don't like their words, I'm not a fan of Latin constructions in sentences. And the ethics forms for interviews to be filled out in triplicate, well. I thought of whipping them to mud-spattered jockeys, or trainers bending to go up girths and I laughed. I told Damien it couldn't work. I thought of it when I ducked out from the 2017 Hawkes Bay Writers Festival to go to the Livamol Classic. It was raining hard and the track was slipping, and the officials were standing round, peering at the track and discussing ground hogging (breaking it up with a small stabbing tractor). Kirsty Lawrence, a local trainer, was coming towards me, dripping rattails under her fascinator, and said, 'Yeah, they'll try it, and then what will happen? You don't want to slip with 600 kilos under you.' She was cold and pissed off, and I thought in passing of the problem of whipping out a form and asking her to sign it in triplicate. I told Chris Price, a guest at the festival, back in the post-event warmth. She could see what I meant.

I applied for an arts grant from Creative New Zealand, to take six months off school. I wasn't bothered that the book was barely started when the time was up, I said in my grant application I'm not the kind of person who can write a book in a year. I was perfectly happy, in my innocence. I was unbothered when I got to the end of 2016 and I had to write my report. It said I was collecting material. I started to get bothered around 2017, when I was collecting far too much material, and waiting for the idea of how to organise it to come into shape. I hadn't written prose, or long form, and the grasp of what I wanted to do was huge.

Kirsten MacDougall has *Keep The Faith* taped on her desktop. I muttered it when I was feeling like Sisyphus and my words turned to clay, then dried out and broke as I pushed shit uphill.

Interviews were boring me; I started following the seasons and cycles and the most talkative people. In the horse world, you have to read the wind; I was only ever one mis-step away from the disaster of getting in the way of a horse and/or rider, causing an accident, or getting hurt. I didn't mind getting hurt, it would be the embarrassment. And worse, they would tell me I wasn't allowed in the tie-ups. If I upset or annoyed someone enough to lay a complaint, I'd be done and dusted, along with my book.

Bill Manhire emailed me– always a pleasure, they're their own short poems – to tell me Kathleen Scanlan was working on a book entirely spoken in racing vernacular, based on interviews with an older female trainer in the US. He knew I was thinking about the language of racing as a sub-culture. I told him I hate US racing and I was doing the vernacular on the fly and sent him a couple of pieces. He said, 'Ha! These are great!'

I collected more and more material, which really means – I went to the track and hung out with my mates. I worked in the garden and waited for the pattern to play out. I mixed up a variety of short and long pieces while I dug up and rearranged my plants; I studded in my people, and jammed it all together to see if the glue of accumulated mass could hold. It couldn't; it lay around as a series of small pieces, alive, and inactivated.

The waiting became tinged with the rotting albatross you start to carry when you've been backed by a grant and you're not delivering, the whiff of low decay that walks around with you all the time. We don't talk about it much, until someone does. In four years, I spoke to three writers who spoke privately, and very quietly, about the secret burden of guilt and shame that they weren't getting far with the book they pitched for. I told them about Kirsten's message and said, *Keep the faith*.

I had a go at writing prose when my closest friend died in lockdown, coincidentally when I started working with Florence Charvin on running written essays alongside photo essays. We don't tell each other what we're doing, we each make what we want to out of what's in front of us.

['I hope to make six good friends before I die'](#) (Verb Wellington essays)

Steve Braunias asked me to write about what happened to us in Cyclone Gabrielle, and the cyclone happened to Syd too. I wanted him to be able to read what I wrote. Syd is entitled to a Reader/Writer; he was in my Year 10 class ten years or so ago, he and I sweating through hideous High Interest Level/Low Reading Level non-fiction texts from Learning Support.

I reckoned I could write it so he could read it himself. I used almost all single syllable words, good strong Anglo-Saxon verbs, and moved very fast from short piece to short piece. Syd read four double-sided pages of A4 without blinking, while I leaned on a tractor and watched him. He found the one word that I put there for him, a word that was out of place. It was technically correct, but it had the wrong number of syllables, and it broke the sentence pattern. He frowned, and said, "You should have said *diff*," and then went on reading. I was enchanted.

['Diary of a flood'](#) (Newsroom, 20 February 2023)

I hope writers will consider writing for non-readers. If anyone is willing to help the poor kids and teachers in Learning Support, write short non-fiction that's neither thin, nor patronising, and able to be read out loud. The teachers read aloud, and the kids listen while they follow the words along the lines. Spare a thought for them. It's really fun to write something better, and it's not as easy as it looks.

And for what it's worth: I had a practice run reading *It Gets In Your Blood* at Matahiwi marae and the kids were on their phones. They were half-listening, but not, then I heard their breathing change when I got onto Sue telling me about the gruesome detail of Mick's injury. They were off their phones entirely when Mick started talking about getting impaled, staring at me with their mouths open. They love stuff like that.

As a small aside, my favourite lesson at school is the one where I announce with gravitas, 'The most powerful unit of sound in the English language is the single syllable word ending in a consonant.' And then wait. They *would* switch out or glaze over, but the overly dramatic wait is enough to get them. Then I say, 'Think of all the best swear words you know,' and then quickly, 'Don't you dare say them out loud – not here,' and I watch their faces as they struggle not to blurt out the words, as they work out, for once, how syllables and consonants work, while they think their way through the list of the worst words they know.

'Then,' I say, 'They are doubly satisfying because they are plosives, which is like explosive without an e, which means you have to shoot them up into the roof of your mouth and spit them out your teeth.' They are fit to bursting with wanting to plosive all over the place, and I remind them, they are not to shout them in the stairwells.

'And if you do, and you get overheard by a staff member, what do you say?'

"It was Mr. Crafar," they chant, because they like playing this game.

I hope we are kind to ourselves, we writers with a grant and a guilt. It'll work out, or, like my PhD project, it won't. It was the wrong idea I caught hold of. It may be helpful to remember what my friend and HOD English, Hamish Crafar, told me: all grants are a punt, just like the scholarships the kids win. The awarders are not expecting a guarantee, and they might not get a result. But they might.

Keep the faith.

More flood writing:

['When the water rushes in: a dispatch from Hawkes Bay'](#) (The Spinoff, 2 April 2023)

['Goodbye, Swamp Road'](#) (The Spinoff, 26 March 2023)

From *It Gets In Your Blood*:

[The precarious nature of the track: a day in the life of a racecourse](#) (The Spinoff, 14 August 2026)

['The horses of Hastings'](#) (Newsroom, 11 August 2026)