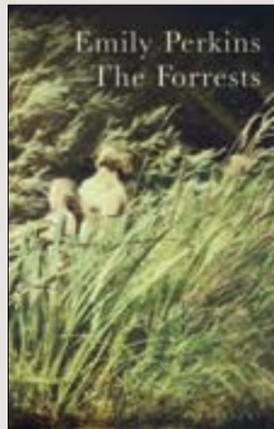


New Zealand Books * BY PAUL LITTLE



The Forrests
Emily Perkins
(Bloomsbury, \$29.50)

ALTHOUGH IT MAY suggest novels by Jonathan Franzen, Christina Stead or even Virginia Woolf, Emily Perkins' deftly written new book could only have been penned by the author of *Leave Before You Go* and *Novel About My Wife*.

It's a mature story about grown-up things – notably, growing up. We follow the lives of the Forrest siblings, Dorothy, Evelyn, Michael and Ruth – focusing particularly on Dorothy – from early childhood through life's landmarks of parenthood, marriage, divorce and death.

The book is if anything stylistically more exuberant than Perkins' previous work. Unfashionably, she is not afraid to let adjectives carry some weight in a sentence. There are paragraphs so concise they seem to contain whole stories within themselves. The narrator uses the sort of neologisms normally confined to conversation: a character is "rootling in her... bag"; another "smoodged her body" into that of her bedmate; the inside of a wood burner is "shardy with charcoal".

Things happen in *The Forrests* the way they do in life. That friend you heard was pregnant suddenly has a one-year-old child. You knew that person was unwell, but you only heard much later they had died.

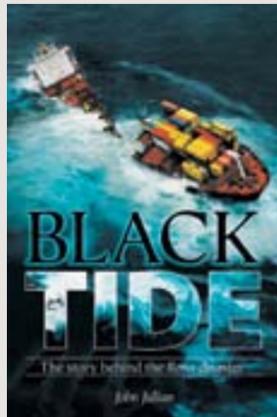
Among many highlights is a set piece describing a school reunion in which Dorothy sees her old schoolmates simultaneously as they were and as they are, "past boy faces floated somewhere beneath the surface of their current faces".

The book abounds in quotable lines: "the short bran muffin hairstyle of the forty-plus"; a woman's voice is "moneyed and sounded like a lifetime of polished floors".

An important thread is Dorothy's unfulfilled love for childhood friend Daniel, who she is not pleased to learn had an affair with her sister. Dorothy marries the wrong man and the right man will never cease to be a regret-inducing presence in her life. It's this situation that lies behind the novel's wisest line, when Dorothy ruefully observes of herself, "If only she had made more mistakes."

Black Tide: The Story Behind the Rena Disaster
John Julian (Hodder Moa, \$39.99)

Surely John Julian was faced with a task of titanic proportions in trying to tell the story of the Rena's grounding. The incident is so recent that fingers must have flown across the keyboard to get it out so quickly. Julian has also consulted a large crew of experts, salvors, insurers, master mariners, lecturers and others to



collect his material.

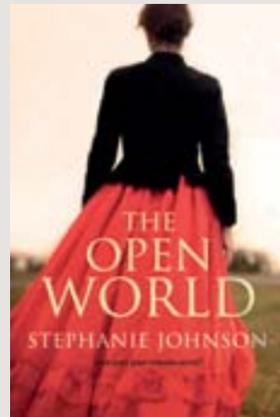
Unfortunately that is not enough to make for an adequate or readable book.

It is not without its strengths. The author understands the international shipping industry. His summary of the Rena's provenance is instructive: built in Germany for an Israeli company to American dimensions, registered in Liberia, owned by a Greek concern, chartered by a Swiss multinational, insured by the Swedish P&I Club and crewed by Filipinos.

With that much going on, what could possibly go right?

Julian certainly helps explain what went wrong – clearly there were numerous small errors that in other circumstances would not have had such disastrous consequences. There was also the captain's decision not to alter course when a hazard ahead was indicated. Equally clearly, there was an early failure of leadership. The Awanui, which could have been immediately requisitioned to start unloading the Rena's oil, was instead hired to do the job at eight times the Rena's own hire fee.

Amid other bureaucratic



inaneities, it's hard to beat Immigration telling some salvors they faced prosecution as overstayers unless they left vessels they were working on immediately.

Julian is diffident about whether an on-call salvage tug would have made a crucial difference in this case, although, given that the cost of chartering one for 10 years would be less than that of the Rena clean-up, it would seem to be a good idea.

This book would have been better if delayed until a clearer view was possible. It would also have benefited from being told from the perspective of two or three main sources. As it is, the sheer number of voices makes for a cut-and-pasted read.

The Open World
Stephanie Johnson
(Vintage, \$39.99)

From William Colenso to Henry Williams, 19th-century New Zealand clergymen have come in for more than their fair share of literary attention lately. Bishop Selwyn – or "Bip" as he's irreverently called here – is a minor but memorable character in a book that mixes fact and fiction with

ease. (Selwyn is a prig and a bully, for your information.)

Johnson has written a crafty novel built around metaphors of pretence and artifice. It tells the story of Elizabeth Smith, who has returned to England late in life leaving two sons behind in New Zealand. Her early biography is a mystery to many, not least her boys, who enlist the services of

an English acquaintance, Mr Griggs, to have their questions answered.

An early scene in which Elizabeth faints in the presence of Griggs and the mysterious Miss Tripp – who is not all she appears – hits Dickensian notes both in the situation and the language used to describe it.

Given contemporary writers' fondness for setting

their books in the 19th century, it's surprising more don't avail themselves of Dickens as a model. Here we have characters with names such as Horelock and Hogg that easily match Heep or Scrooge. There is even a Dickensian mystery about paternity at the heart of the plot.

Smith and many of the other characters existed, but Johnson has been free with minor details and, most importantly, with allowing herself to imagine why they might have acted the way they did when the record fails to show this. Her always incisive understanding of human nature has never been more clinical nor, at the same time, more full of sympathy.

Johnson's carefully crafted sentences are beguiling in their rhythms and the novel is carefully paced and structured, alternating between Old and New Worlds and first- and third-person narration.

Again like Dickens, Johnson is fascinated by the question of people "knowing their place" – in both senses of "place". Selwyn frequently prays that God will grant Elizabeth the wisdom to know her place. Readers will enjoy one of the country's favourite writers working at her best.

The Spaces Between
Russell Haley (Adastra Productions, \$24.99)

Jervis Kraik wakes up in... a hospital? A "facility"? A bad dream? He has no idea how he got there or how he sustained the injuries from which he is recovering. He can remember bare details of an assault in Auckland's Britomart but the injuries don't seem to align with his memories.

Given the building where



he is surprised to find himself is called Whare Moemoea – house of dreams – it would seem Kraik has indeed stumbled into a nightmare.

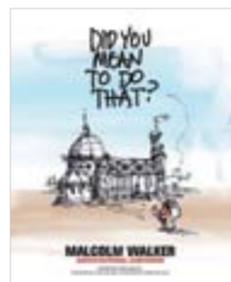
An Australian, Kraik doesn't talk at all, apparently because when he does he sounds South African. Instead, a writer by profession, he communicates with his devoted nurse, Moira, via pad and pen.

In prose that's occasionally hallucinatory, Haley takes us inside Kraik's head as he drifts between fantasy and reality. He is not convinced his daughter is his real daughter or that his parents, when they come to visit him, are his real parents.

This is a novel out of Kafka (the protagonist shares his initials with *The Trial's* Josef K) via Patrick McGoohan's *The Prisoner*. It combines subtle unease with some almost-broad comedy: "Endless pinus radiata. The most boring tree in the world... Talk to you at a party and tell you how many rings they've got."

Never far away is the author's gift for describing the familiar in new ways – early morning means "dawn must be gaining out there".

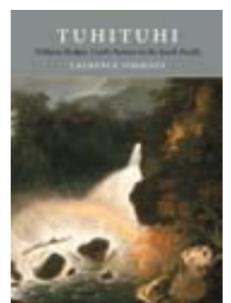
Ultimately, it's a bazaar of a book, full of treasures but with patches that may frustrate those readers who aren't willing to sift through them for the good stuff. Those who are willing will find themselves amply rewarded.



PICTURING IT
Did You Mean to Do That?
Malcolm Walker
(New Zealand Architectural Publications Trust, \$49.99)

If God didn't exist, architects would have invented him so they could tell him what was wrong with his designs. Most architects'

humour is best observed in the designs they foist upon clients and helpless passersby. Malcolm Walker, on the other hand, is a genuinely funny man, as well-known for his frequently lacerating, grotesque cartoons as he is for the stylish buildings he designs in his architectural practice. A keen observer of his profession and its extremes, he has collected several decades' worth of cartoon commentary in this cleverly titled volume. For anyone who has ever fallen victim to – or narrowly escaped from – the self-aggrandising clutches of an architect, this is a must-have.



Tuhituhi: Hodges, Cook's Painter in the South Pacific
Laurence Simmons
(Otago University Press, \$60)

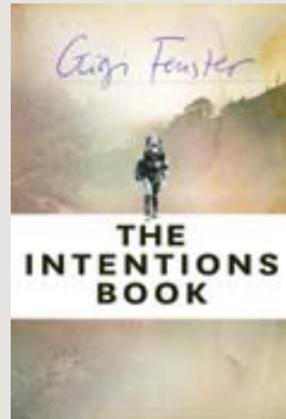
The explorations of James Cook continue to fascinate and yield new stories about how these islands were perceived in the 18th century

by eyes half a world away that hadn't yet learnt to see them. The artist William Hodges played a large part in presenting the Pacific to Europeans.

Hodges accompanied Cook on his second Pacific voyage and recorded landscapes in New Zealand, Antarctica, Rapa Nui and elsewhere. Simmons examines how Hodges tried to force what he saw into the aesthetics he brought with him from the Old World. In a useful piece of structuring, the book follows Hodges from destination to destination, focusing on one key painting from each and examining it in detail. Throughout there is a tension between 18th and 21st century views that makes for always stimulating reading.

Notes & Queries

Wellington lawyer and debut novelist Gigi Fenster's *The Intentions Book* (Victoria University Press, \$35) centres on Morris Goldberg, who is facing two kinds of loss – that of his wife Sadie, who has died, and his daughter, Rachel, who's gone missing while tramping. South Africa-born Fenster has a Masters in Creative Writing from Victoria University and spoke to *North & South* from Singapore on the way home from her 77-year-old mother's wedding.



North & South: The characters in *The Intentions Book* are Jewish. Is this the first Jewish-themed New Zealand novel?

Gigi Fenster: I don't know. I was a bit naive about this. The whole idea of it being Jewish-themed came as a bit of a surprise, both in the writing and in the response to it. I spoke to my sister about this and she said, "How can you have been surprised?"

N&S: Was the focus on Jewishness something you found happening as you went along?

GF: Yes. It wasn't what I set out to do. I had the character Morris before I knew he was Jewish, then he became Jewish and that seemed to develop. It was very much the character who came first. You know the feeling when you walk into a room and forget why you've gone in there? The book started with that character and that feeling.

"It was very much the character who came first."

N&S: The Jewish community in New Zealand doesn't have an especially high profile – perhaps that's why the theme in the book is so conspicuous.

GF: In some ways I'm struggling with the focus on the Jewish aspect. I would be concerned about the book being pigeonholed. Readers come to books with their own histories and baggage and emotional reading history. I wouldn't want to say it must be read as a Jewish book or a tramping book. What you said about the profile of the community – I think of people in other parts of the world where Jews are not such a small minority. They may not focus on that aspect so much. I've been discussing it. Some friends have said, "Play it up. Enjoy it. Go for it." But I don't want it to be cute. My mother feels very strongly there is no such thing as a Jewish novel.

N&S: It's very much a book about loss.

GF: For me it's a lot about absence and missing and loss. Initially the title was *Leaving Morris*.

N&S: How did you start writing it?

GF: With the character. I wrote a short story about him and his wife. Subsequent to that, there was an incident where my child's teacher cancelled a lesson because his sister had gone missing. She was found. I knew I needed to shock this character in some way. From that came the story.

N&S: How was the writing process?

GF: It took such a long time to write. I was working, so it was done in fits and starts. The first short story was written in 2005. I wrote other bits and pieces in between. I wonder a bit whether the structure had something to do with the fact I kept leaving and going back. But my other writing has followed the same structure, so I don't think so.

N&S: When you could work on the book, did it come easily?

GF: The writing did. The structure was hard. There was a lot of moving and shifting. I told a friend it wasn't writing, it was twisting things. In retrospect I really enjoyed it. At the time it felt a bit like it was never going to come right. Also, I lost a lot in the process. A lot didn't fit in. There was a lot of repetition I cut.

N&S: You have a wonderful Jewish joke in there about two mothers and a son in psychoanalysis.

GF: My father was a psychiatrist.

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