

The year's best verse

NICHOLAS REID celebrates 10 of the best poetry collections of 2021.

GHOSTS by Siobhan Harvey (Otago Uni Press) A recalling of an abusive and unloving childhood in England, but totally without self-pity and finding a sane reconciliation with the past. Its many comments on the New Zealand scene bring fair and acute satire into play. It's haunting on how houses are shared or destroyed.

UNSEASONED CAMPAIGNER by Janet Newman (Otago Uni Press) A female farmer produces a vivid account of rural realities, which is compassionate without being sentimental and thoughtful without being preachy. Farm animals are treated with respect, but they're still part of the food chain. A very relatable collection that deserves to be an instant classic.

RANGIKURA by Tayi Tibble (VUP) It's almost

a sequel to her debut collection *Poukahangatus*. Tibble charts the way urban life can be a culturally confusing mess for young Māori women. Funny, irreverent in its handling of sex, and sometimes tearful, this collection is built on the tension of enjoying an urban life while being separated from iwi roots.

THE SEA WALKS INTO A WALL by Anne Kennedy (AUP) A refreshing collection of individual poems, some making social protests, but the best taking a long view of the relentless forces of nature. There is an ecological theme here, but it is implied rather than shouted. A poet in control of both short satirical jabs and long-form verse.

READING THE SIGNS by Janis Freegard (Cuba Press) Perhaps arcadian, perhaps halfway to

hippiedom, but also creating its own credible world of pacifistic wonder in a series of controlled prose-poems. You do not have to share the poet's essentially Buddhist world view to see the strength of this. Strongly imaginative.

THINGS OK WITH YOU? by Vincent O'Sullivan (VUP) Hard to beat a past master as skilled as this one. Unlike others of his years, he does not dwell on old age but dives into the whole problem of perception and epistemology. There is much irony and wit here, but also genuine philosophical reflection.

BRASS BAND TO FOLLOW by Bryan Walpert (Otago UP) The American-born New Zealand poet produces empathetic and wry observations on coming to terms with being middle-aged. Walpert avoids solemnity with

neat, self-referential postmodern jibes and wraps it up with intriguing imagery related to classical science.

HOW TO LIVE WITH MAMMALS by Ash Davida Jane (VUP) In free-form poetry, Jane addresses a veritable menagerie, contrasting human consciousness with the instinctive lives of other animals, from whales and dogs to aphids. Never anthropomorphising, she cuts human beings down with acerbic irony.

SHELTER by Kirsten Le Harivel (Cuba Press) An impressive debut collection, offering prose poems, confessional poems, aphorisms and poems in more traditional stanzaic form. Uneven in tone, especially when it touches on youthful angst, but it is lifted by Le Harivel's lively accounts of her youth in Glasgow.

ALL TITO'S CHILDREN by Tim Grgec (VUP) Another excellent debut. An insightful bricolage of documents, prose statements and short lyrics showing what it is like to live in a closed society. Fear, fantasy and uncertainty rule when the truth cannot be stated and propaganda is the only permitted "news".

AND OTHER HIGHLIGHTS

David Eggleton's capacious career collection **THE WILDER YEARS** (Otago Uni Press); Ian Wedde's historical reconstruction **THE LITTLE ACHE** (VUP); many poets riffing on the genius of Dante Alighieri in **MORE FAVOURABLE WATERS** (Cuba Press); Sam Duckor-Jones' take-down of cant in **PARTY LEGEND** (VUP); and Fleur Adcock's modernist mental toughness in **THE MERMAID'S PURSE** (VUP). ■

