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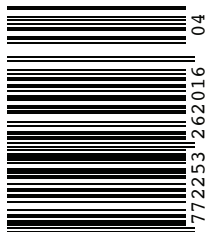
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It's 1866 and the three-masted sailing ship *General Grant* is on the southern route from Melbourne to London, with gold from the diggings secreted in returning miners' hems and pockets. In the fog and the dark, the ship strikes the cliffs of the Auckland Islands, is sucked into a cave and wrecked.

Only fourteen men make it ashore and one woman – Mrs Jewell. Struck on a freezing and exposed island, the castaways have to work together to stay alive, but they're a disparate group with their own secrets to keep and their only officer is disabled by grief after losing his wife in the wreck. A woman is a burden they don't need.

Meanwhile stories about the gold grow with the telling: who has it, where is it and how much went down with the ship.

*Mrs Jewell and the Wreck of the General Grant* is a vivid imagining of the story behind the enduring mystery of one of New Zealand's early shipwrecks, by the author of the best-selling *Jerningham*.

"It's intriguing how many ways the novel overlaps with the way I imagined the story, and humbling in all of the many ways in which it far exceeds the scope of my own imagination. Breathtaking."  
– John McCrystal, author of *Worse Things Happen at Sea*

"An accomplished, vibrant and historically grounded novel which deserves a big readership." – Lydia Wevers on *J*



MRS JEWELL AND THE WRECK OF THE GENERAL GRANT  
CRISTINA SANDERS

# Mrs Jewell and the wreck of the General Grant

CRISTINA SANDERS

## Artists in residence

Our ongoing series exploring the diverse creative talent of Hawke's Bay.

Story by Rosheen FitzGerald

Photo by Florence Charvin

On Havelock North's low rolling slopes, a cosy open plan home turns to face the sweeping vista of the suburban canopy below, bathing blond wood furnishings in abundant sunlight. A vast bookshelf dominates the living room, crammed to bursting, attesting to the passion and profession of the home's owner.

Cristina Sanders has books in her blood. Growing up in Wellington her family owned the Gateway Bookshop, breeding an early love of reading. In an age where attention spans, diminished by the internet, leave many unable to digest much more than a media article, Sanders remains a rare and vociferous reader, finding time not just to read but to review several books a month on her personal blog.

From the family business of bookselling, she moved to publishing, but just a mere five years ago she took up her pen to transition from reader to writer, immortalising her own words in print.

In 2018 she enrolled in a Graduate Diploma in Creative Writing at Whitireia, and credits her tutor, celebrated New Zealand author, Mandy Hager, with teaching her the mechanics of writing. "She was very clear on how to set out a chapter, the curve of what's happening, how to construct a plot ... the dynamics of it, how it's meant to fit together," Sanders recalls with fondness.

From the diploma process, using her new found tools, came *Jerningham*, her debut novel, a lively tale of colonial Wellington seen through the eyes of her eponymous flawed hero. It hit the shelves in June 2020 and was shortlisted for the New Zealand Heritage Literary Awards.

That same year her unpublished young adult manuscript, *Displaced*, exploring the lives of immigrant families in the 1870's, won the Storylines Tessa Duder Award. When it went to press the following year it too made the Heritage Literary Awards shortlist as well as being a finalist for the New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults.

Last year's *Mrs Jewell and the wreck of the General Grant* was not only shortlisted for the New Zealand Booklovers Awards, but was a finalist for this year's prestigious Ockham prize. Clearly Sanders has tapped into something people want to read.

# LOOKING TO THE PAST TO UNDERSTAND THE PRESENT

I wrote Mrs Jewell several times from different characters' points of view then matched it all up together ... it takes me so long. I'm very slow."  
Cristina Sanders

Though she mines the past for inspiration, Sanders, "hated history at school. It was all so dull - places and names and dates ... it was all white men in England or the Romans and I thought, 'so what?'" There's certainly a qualitative difference between the dry, dusty, rote learned tomes often associated with history, and the warm-blooded stories filled with drama and intrigue that delight Sanders' legions of readers.

When she debuted, historical fiction was a hard sell with publishers, but today's bestseller list tells a different story. Sanders admits being drawn to the genre, "trying to work out who we are, and what we are, what my place is here, how we mix together." It's a feeling echoed in the zeitgeist, a sense of looking to the past to understand the present and imagine the future. Sanders believes, "The renaissance Māori are having leads people to wonder how it was when the Europeans came over - what did it mean and how did it feel? Historical fiction is less about what happened than how it felt, on the ground. It gives you more of an insight into people's ideas."

Sanders' lifelong love of books gives her a keen nose for a story. Inspiration for her latest publication came when sailing. A regular crew member on the tall ship, *The Spirit of New Zealand*, she was offered the opportunity to man the replica of the Endeavour, "a huge big bellied tub of a thing with square masts."

The reenactment of Cook's landing, met with protests at Gisborne harbour, was already an emotional, exhausting experience, even before the persistent seasickness that plagued her. While unromantically retching over the edge, a fellow lady sailor attempted to entertain her with the tale of the wreck of the General Grant, whose gold-loaded hull was London bound when it was dashed against the remote and desolate Auckland Islands.

That one of its few survivors was a woman, existing alongside rough sailors for eighteen months before



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rescue, captivated Sanders' imagination. She had already "done all this research into Victorian women, and that horrible condescending attitude everyone had towards them that they sort of embodied. A lot of them did overcome that, but we don't often hear about them." Looking further into the story of Mrs Jewell, she discovered the all too common erasure of the feminine experience from history, and sought to give her voice.

Sanders is meticulous in her research and deep in her process. Once a story has come to her she finds the crisis point, the exciting part - the shipwreck, the landing, the murder - and uses that as a central anchor for an intricate timeline. She speaks with experts and reads extensively around the topic, time and setting, trawling through first hand historical accounts, archives, photographs and ledgers, not just online but making use of the excellent resources at Wellington's National Library. Her multitude of admittedly "scruffy handwritten notes" are distilled onto her laptop in a series of folders. The parameters of her research spread far outside those of her narrative but the wealth of information gathered informs her writing, immersing her in time and place.

Armed with this literary time machine, Sanders "draws a line through it to trace where I can find the story, then find the people. If I don't have the right people I can invent someone but I prefer to use a real character if I can. Jerningham walked through that whole story. I thought, 'there's my man.' Mrs Jewell obviously was a starter. For my next story I'm going a bit wider. A historical character is more interesting because they're more real."

Compelling characters will make or break a story. Sanders recently shelved a project years in the making because, "It just doesn't sing ... it had a good base and a good place but I couldn't find the characters."

When she does find her cast, again Sanders dives deep into each character's back story, figuring them out individually. "Even if it doesn't make it into the book you need to know who they are so they're behaving in context. I wrote Mrs Jewell several times from different characters' points of view then matched it all up together ... it takes me so long. I'm very slow."

Sanders delves into her characters' experience, making every effort to put herself in their shoes. "I like to walk

**"I like to walk it all, the geography of it. If I say they walked from Porirua to Wellington I will walk from Porirua to Wellington and see how that feels. If I say they were on Somes Island looking out, I will go up there and see what they could see."**

Cristina Sanders

it all, the geography of it. If I say they walked from Porirua to Wellington I will walk from Porirua to Wellington and see how that feels. If I say they were on Somes Island looking out, I will go up there and see what they could see." Although a trip to the Antarctic was off the cards, she mined members of the sailing community who had visited the Auckland Islands for vital detail.

Characters' mental and emotional states too are scrupulously thought out. For *Mrs Jewell* she extensively researched post-traumatic stress disorder and survivor guilt, each expressing the toll of their experiences in ways congruent with their complex back stories, all layered with pervasive Victorian mores, so unlike today's.

In contrast to structured plot and research, Sanders eschews explicit themes in her planning stages, preferring an intuitive approach. "I don't like books that are trying to be didactic, to teach you something. I find themes develop as I'm writing."

When the drafts are done, Sanders consciously takes space, changes her location and the spacing of the manuscript to view it with fresh eyes. The creative and the editing brain are discrete with different requirements. From there publishers and editors make their tweaks, cutting certain scenes, encouraging a change in tone, but the process is collaborative.

Her current project, brought to her by a fan, examines a colonial Wellington murder, a wealth of character and narrative ripe for the harvest in the court documents and newspaper archives of the day. Here she experiments with several lead characters, changing voice and viewpoint for maximum intrigue.

Eager readers await the latest fruits of her diligent hours of immersion in the past, knowing we will be right there beside her in her latest tale. ●