

USPTWO

Elizabeth Knox, 58, is an award-winning writer of adult and young adult fiction, including her bestseller, *The Vintner's Luck*. Her husband, Fergus Barrowman, 56, is the publisher of Wellington's Victoria University Press.

Interview/ Sarah Catherall
Photograph/ Kevin Stent

FERGUS/ I met Elizabeth when I was editing her first book. *After Z-Hour* was published 30 years ago, on November 11. Bill Manhire gave me the manuscript to read, and I rang her up, and said that if she finished it, I would publish it.

Bill introduced us again at Rackets, the coffee bar near Victoria University in Wellington, and we had lunch there. She was completely wild. She was energised and restless and talked fast. She knew a huge amount about all sorts of things, music and film, and there were lots of commonalities. I wasn't single at the time, but I became single over the following months.

We got together quite suddenly, in the course of proofreading. It was one of those things, which I really hadn't seen coming.

I thought her first novel was brilliant. It's a novel about some young people who get stuck on Takaka Hill waiting to be rescued in a storm.

What thrilled me was the writing. The wisdom. So much was going on in each book.

I've published all her books. It took all the pressure off when she got an overseas publisher too, and it was also validation for what we were doing.

I'm a lark and she's an owl. She often really hits her stride after dinner and works in the evening, and into the small hours, and then she will watch TV to relax. I can't stand TV. I listen to music. I always turn it down when it's bothering her.

The Vintner's Luck was interesting. I remember her telling me the dream she had, when she had pneumonia, and I said: "That's an amazing story. You should write it."

There's a point in that story where she wondered whether she might give it up, and whether it was silly



to continue with, and she had to find that next stage. I do credit myself with encouraging her to keep going.

She's got into the habit of writing more than one book at once, because of illness and family, and so on, and that means she can bounce from book to book. She got occupational overuse syndrome some years ago, so she talks into her Dragon Dictate, or writes longhand, and then this voice activated software puts it on the screen.

Elizabeth became coeliac a couple of years ago, so that has changed things. We've also built gardens – we've got 10 metres of garden bed. Between us we have 100 years of unexpressed gardening. Elizabeth gardens very successfully. I build things like the planter boxes.

He's the master of understatement. I've had other authors who have said to me: "But does he like it?"

ELIZABETH/ When I met Fergus, I was being strung along by a man who was already in a relationship. Fergus was very shy. I walked into the café and he immediately blew his nose. I thought of him as this shy, nasal guy. I thought: "Rats, this isn't someone who will distract me from X." So he became my editor, and it was six or seven months after that, that I fell for him.

Fergus is always the first person to read what I've been writing. We don't talk about the ideas because they manifest themselves in the narrative. You build this thing, and it's like growing the plants that attract the bees.

Fergus understands my writing. He knows where I'm coming from. He's the master of understatement. I've had other authors who have said to me: "But does he like it?"

If we are walking together, and I need to solve a problem, that's often when I'll talk to him.

What I really appreciate is living in an environment where books are celebrated. Fergus is a reader of fiction essays and poetry. It's great living with someone who is part of the process. And it's been very good for me to be part of the VUP crowd, with so many people who care about writing, being with somebody who is facilitating the careers of so many other writers. I wouldn't have that if I wasn't married to Fergus.

He's very affectionate, conscientious, and he's very intellectual. He's also a creature of habit. It's partly to do with his diabetes. Fergus was 31 when he was diagnosed.

He was fading away and not going to the doctor. Damien Wilkins said to me: "What's wrong with Fergus?" So that means we now have to have regular meal times.

Because I live such a quiet life at home, I don't think I feel particularly interesting to myself or others around me. It's that process of postponing the idea of being valued as company. Sometimes I think: "Oh well, I'll appear to him again once I've given him a book to read." Even though I'm there all the time and we talk about our son, and our gardens, and the cats, but there's a point where he'll say: "Oh yes, that's right, there's this person who I live with and they also do this," and I get that reaction out of small things, but whenever I fire a big novel down the pipe, he'll go: "Oh wow, we've been talking about that forever, but it's different to what I imagined it would be." ●