

Stout Centre forum

A secular life

Ann Beaglehole talks about the themes in her writing.

I have a Jewish background, yet feel uncomfortable in the Synagogue. *Rosh Hoshonah* (New Year) and *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement) pass by and I barely notice. I do not participate at all in the life of the Jewish community. Most of my friends are not Jewish.

The reason for my distancing from Judaism is probably that I grew up without strong traditions of religious practice in a family that had renounced most religious observances a generation or two earlier. My mother was one of those who suffered persecution without the comfort that faith could perhaps have provided. Nevertheless, writing about Jewish and other immigrant history in New Zealand has been a way of connecting with my family's background and a secular means of expressing my Jewishness.

While I have discarded most aspects of Jewishness, my feelings about the Jewish past – about the experiences of persecution, loss, displacement associated with it – remain strong. Particularly I was aware that most countries had severely restricted the entry of refugees escaping Nazi Germany's anti-Jewish policies. I wanted to find out what New Zealand's immigration policies had been like during the 1930s, why these policies and practices were in place, and what had happened to the people who succeeded in finding refuge in New Zealand.

These topics were the subject of my first book, *A Small Price to Pay*. *Facing the Past* is about children of immigrants. *Far from the Promised Land?* is about being Jewish in New Zealand. These two books grew out of my earlier interests in the history of immigration to New Zealand and in the lives of immigrants who have settled in this country.

Ann Beaglehole completed Far from the Promised Land? while a Claude McCarthy Fellow at the Stout Research Centre in 1992–93.

Goldfish

My son doesn't go to school
any more he goes somewhere
else. He goes out walking alone
with his hat on his head,
lies on a bed, where they slip
a drip to the vein and
he has his body pumped full.

Funny how they grow up
says the woman who is the chemist,
Is it your only one?
It's harder then, because you've spoilt them
here's your prescription, forty nine dollars.
I try to pretend
she doesn't know a thing, a thing that she's saying.
Here's a red light outside
and I have to stop, and everywhere there's children
a reminder of the way we come
into the world: birth, growth,
and end up fat or thin.
He, my own, was thin before
the drugs set in and made him fat,
now he looks like a frog.
There's a dog on the way home
so I pat it, sign of the hope
I have for the future.
When I get in he's on the bed
I can tell he feels bad, *don't*
he says. He often says that.
Or *come here* and he holds my
hand and there we are, two
tiny pebbles perched on the edge,
with the silvery sand far below us.
We don't like to use the C-word
says one white coat.
They prefer the ambiguous
nodes to tumours, or even
bumps and lumps, if you were dumb
you might think you had mumps.
In ward one he starts to tell me
his dream: we are chased
by a giant goldfish, we reach
a cellar, we are trapped
by the goggle eyed fish in a dead
sea end, and then suddenly
he is all alone with an enormous
tome on his lap, the words *medical*
dictionary are embossed on its cover,
and he opens it, and he begins to read.

VIVIENNE PLUMB

Vivienne Plumb's play Love knots, on which she worked as a Reader's Digest/NZ Society of Authors Fellow at the Stout Centre, won the 1993 Bruce Mason Playwriting Award.