

## Poets to the People

Gill Ward 2009

Lembas Café has fast established itself as a generous and affable supporter of local arts on the Kapiti Coast. In 2006 the local poetry group who had begun to meet at Lembas discussed new ways to enliven poetry on the coast. For many years poetry groups had met in Kapiti at pubs, cafes and latterly at Mahara Gallery. There was a strong and loyal following but they felt they needed something more. Kapiti poet Lindsay Rabbitt suggested inviting well established poets out to read to an audience of local poets and interested people. He described these poets as 'stellar'. Yes we thought - that's what we needed - a good solid shot in the arm for poetry in Kapiti.

**Poets to the People** evolved. Gathering a wish list of poets and their email addresses poets were approached. It had been resolved that poetry lovers in Kapiti needed to be provided with access to poets whom they would not normally have the chance of hearing. The tenet established was that the readings should be profit free and any koha taken would be to cover costs and pay the poets. Lembas agreed to stay open late one Sunday a month, one of the group donated the use of their sound system and another took over the publicity.

The response from poets contacted was immediate and very encouraging. The first poet was Dinah Hawken, a Wellington poet and award winner with six published collections. Dinah read from old and new collections and told the stories behind many of her poems. Several in the audience were familiar with some of her poems and it was good to hear people asking questions about poems of Dinah's they already knew. It was particularly moving to hear Dinah talk about her connections with Taranaki and her reading of some of her Parihaka poetry and her experience of writing these poems.

Hearing the poet in her own voice was a new experience for some and many people present lingered on to talk about poetry and Dinah Hawken's reading. Dinah had been asked to bring along copies of her latest collection 'One Shapely thing'. She had been hesitant, wondering if people would be interested enough to want to buy them and brought only a few copies. These quickly sold out.

Later we were to learn that this collection was one of 3 finalists for the 2007 Montana Book Awards Poetry Collection.

Following Dinah it was with huge pleasure we were able to welcome Bill Manhire, surely the face and soul of New Zealand poetry today. By now the word was out and people had begun to hear about the readings. As more and more eager listeners arrived there was scramble to move tables and bring in extra chairs. Before Bill Manhire's reading there was an open mic and members of the audience read their own poems. The attentiveness Manhire gave to each reader was a palpable indication of his role as a teacher and literary educator. We did, however, learn that it was wiser to restrict the open mic to one poem each...

Again after the reading finished we had to gently remind people that the café staff did need to go home at some point!

During 2007 and 2008 we have been able to hear some of New Zealand's finest poets. We have featured Dinah Hawken, Bill Manhire, Martyn Sanderson, Wanjiku Kiarie, Andrew Johnston, James Brown, John Ansell, Glenn Colquhoun, Vivienne Plumb, Stephen Oliver, Richard Langston, Geoff Cochrane, Julie Leibrich, Denis Welch, Richard Langston, Hinemoana Baker, Kate Camp, Harry Ricketts, Jenny Bornholdt, Gregory O'Brien, Mark Raffills and Lynn Davidson. We look forward to Vincent O'Sullivan appearing next year and a return visit from previous guests.

By setting up these poetry events it was our ultimate wish that our listeners would adjourn to the library, the bookstores, and their own or friends' bookshelves to read and reread poems and poets they had heard and extend their repertoire to other New Zealand poets. In 2009 we published a book of our poetry. Several of our guest poets gave us poems to include and we published one poem each from people who had read at Lembas. This book has sold well and our plan was to break even as we are a profit free enterprise. We are slowly reaching our goal. We have almost finished paying for our own sound system which we bought last year.

In this brief account of **Poets to the People** I have only been able to give you an outline of this poetry project. It is not possible in a short information sheet to adequately convey the stimulation, inspiration, and community warmth these afternoons bring . We have an exciting line up of poets still to come and it is our earnest wish to carry on the series into 2009 and beyond.