

Fight to publish 'long and bloody'

Winner of the \$65,000 Prize in Modern Letters, novelist Carl Shuker tells **Siobhan Harvey** of his struggle to gain recognition in New Zealand, his success abroad, and his dark new novel, *The Lazy Boys*.

"I WROTE THIS book during a very dark time in my life, and when it was finished, I was a very dark person," says New Zealand writer, Carl Shuker of his new novel, *The Lazy Boys*. He's standing on the roof terrace of his apartment-complex, smoking a cigarette and staring into the night sky.



Carl Shuker

"I'd spent a long period drinking a lot and doing a lot of drugs. The novel had been such a trauma to finish that when I did so, I still remember counting the hours of peace. Sixteen hours of peace, and each of them felt very, very sweet."

Dark times are something Shuker has known a lot of during his short life.

Today, the 32-year-old writer of two critically acclaimed novels can boast about winning the world's richest prize for an emerging author, New Zealand's \$65,000 Prize in Modern Letters for his first novel, *The Method Actors* (Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005).

But life wasn't always so rewarding. "I was a bit precocious when I was growing up. By the time I enrolled to study an English literature BA at Canterbury University, I was extremely unfocused. I remember having a dream at that time in which I was driving a Trans Am and holding a briefcase. I thought that meant that I should study law, so I enrolled in first-year law and took a part-time job working in a laundry in St George's Hospital, Christchurch. I did that for 14 months and stopped going to lectures. That was enough of a wake-up call to force me to finish my literature degree."

When confessing to such alienation, Shuker might just as well be describing *The Lazy Boys'* anti-hero, Richey Sauer. He's an 18-year-old Otago undergradu-

"I got very pissed off with various editors' lame opinions of my book. I knew how good it was."

ate who spirals out of control when drugs, alcohol and violence start to become more important to him than pleasing his middle-class parents.

"It's a satire on a milieu," claims its author, though early reviews of the novel have called Richey a nihilist and disturbed.

Not that Shuker is bothered by what book reviewers have to say.

"To me, book reviews are less than useless in terms of feedback and developing your craft. I think the whole process of book reviews is bankrupt." From a man who used to review books for a number of New Zealand magazines, this is a pretty uncompromising statement, but then *The Lazy Boys* is a

pretty uncompromising tale.

"Richey's a real and recognisable type — sensitive, shapeable and troubled. He represents a whole generation of young men and women whose lives people rarely take a stake in because they don't feel they have a mandate, authority or knowledge to help," Shuker says, bluntly.

"If kids like Richey aren't assisted then of course they're going to go off the rails, or worse. The youth suicide rates in our country are obscene, the fourth highest in the OECD. It's kids like Richey who are killing themselves for want of more options. That's what drove me to write this book."

If Richey's personal journey in *The Lazy Boys* is fraught, so too was its author's professional journey into publishing.

There have been the undoubted highs, such as Shuker's completion of an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Victoria in Wellington in 2001. "That course was great. What I got, as a writer, was something that I'll never get at any other time in my life — 10 people who were all gifted in their own ways, commenting directly and forcefully and at length on my work. It taught me how smart people read and react to my work." Constructive criticism wasn't the only benefit of taking the course. It was there that Shuker met his girlfriend, poet Anna Small. "We argued constantly on that course, so I knew there was something



PROPHET ABROAD: Carl Shuker could not find a New Zealand publisher for his first novel, *The Method Actors*.



going on between us," he observes, wryly. If those were the highs, the lows soon came thick and fast. Having completed the country's top course for aspiring writers, and having picked up a \$9000 grant from Creative New Zealand to help him complete *The Method Actors*, surprisingly Shuker found it impossible

to get the book published in his homeland. "It was a long and bloody fight. A lot of publishers in New Zealand showed interest but everyone fell away. I got very pissed off with various editors' lame opinions of my book. I knew how good it was," he confides.

"So I said to myself, f*** this small-mindedness, and I sent the book to agents and publishers in the US."

That brave decision earned Shuker the services of influential literary agent William Reiss, of John Hawkins Associates; a publishing contract with US publisher Shoemaker and Hoard followed.

"After all the rejection in New

Zealand, it was so heartening when the head of Shoemaker and Hoard said he wanted to publish *The Method Actors*."

It's this determination which was so richly rewarded when Shuker beat off stiff competition, including novelist William Brandt and poet Kate Camp, to take out the 2006 Prize in Modern Letters. "It was cool to win that prize for my publishers, to show them that they did the right thing in believing in me." Fortright as ever, he continues, "But it's not like getting the Booker Prize or anything; it's not a passport to big things. What it is, is a tremendous help to being able to work."

Work is something Shuker is cur-

rently immersed in. For a start, he has relocated to London with Small.

"I'm looking for a new agent here," he confides. "That could be your scoop for the article, if you need one."

I don't, I want to tell him, though he's too busy acquainting me with his next novel to pause for breath.

"It's called *We Are Monster*. I've written 40,000 words of it. It's set in Tokyo and Cannes, and it's turning into a very strange and interesting novel."

Strange and interesting; sounds like Shuker, given his past exploits.

"Yeah, as long as it's helping me find a way to produce brilliant novels, it's all good."

unkempt, book-lover. If you manage to make it through

name, you should be attracted to the incessant literary references throughout

consumed by his impending, imagined death, sliding into despair. *A Spot of Bother*, the follow-up novel

cast of characters airborne. The dialogue is swift and true, the many plots interweave seamlessly. It is light-weight

English summer in 1976, Ruth Gilmartin uncovers the tale of her mother Sally's role in British counter-espionage in America prior to its entry into World

revenge against the double agent who betrayed her. Eva's story begs the key question: if someone is a professional disinformant,

The master of the disturbing has pushed beyond his own boundaries in his latest, most disturbing novel, *Winterwood*. Redmond Hatch, the narrator, who is 40 in 1981 when his story begins, has