

[Eye of Dog](#)

[Or](#)

[Like an opera quartet](#)

Gabriel's Bay by Catherine Roberston

Published by Penguin Random House/ Black Swan, New Zealand, 2018

Reviewer: Gail Pittaway

Any reader drawn to this first edition's cover image of summer catalogue pastels, sand dunes and deck chair, or by Catherine Robertson's happy association with the romance genre, is bound for a deeper, richer read than expected. Bookended by a literal eye of dog, from the perspective of King, the resident black Labrador of Gabriel's Bay the township, 'Gabriel's Bay' wisely refrains from the picturesque or breaking wave scenario so popular in beach art. Robertson's town is an anywhere and everywhere coastal New Zealand settlement; familiar ribbon development along the stretch of bay, with supermarket, two pubs, one closed, a petrol station, doctor's surgery and pop-up café. The nearest town is Hampton, just 'over the hill', by a windy and precipitous country road.

So far, so conventional. However, the rotating point of view narrative offers a wider sense of perspective than the simpler focus of escapist fiction and in its shifting viewpoints we meet background detail, motives, decisions — flawed and sensible — which make for the generation of more than one narrative focus. Like an opera quartet, Gabriel's Bay offers a complex multilinear approach, where each character has her or his own preoccupations and unique inner dialogue, with idiomatic voice. This dialogue, both inner and articulated, gives the novel its breadth combined with moments of sheer humour.

Even the most flawed and hapless characters are presented with a credible sense of motive; there is no evil in Gabriel's Bay, only ignorance and deprivation. At the heart of the novel are the everyday concerns of small towns anywhere — shrinking population, poor infrastructure, isolation, urban drift and an aging leadership, most strongly identified in the character of Doctor Lomas. Now well into his 70s, Lomas' compassion and patience have nourished his clients for decades, but Mac, his receptionist, who knows the secrets of most of the patients and has few good words to say about most, is concerned about succession. Not only is his personality irreplaceable; he will be impossible to find a substitute for, from a practical viewpoint, given the difficulties in attracting a new professional to their remote back water. Unlike many summer holiday beach hamlets, Gabriel's Bay does not seem to have the accordion-like capacity to expand and contract in population. It is where it is; take it or leave it. And many seem to have left it.

Into this sedate settlement comes Kerry Macfarlane, escaping a jilted bride and disappointed families back in the United Kingdom, and a trail of short jobs that have brought him across the world, to accept a role as care-giver and housekeeper for the Bartons, Meredith and Jonty. He has been employed under the misapprehension that Kerry is a woman's name, and is put on trial, to prove his domestic capabilities. Given a living and brief reprieve from travelling,

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he finds himself in a complicated household dominated by a man who refuses to turn away from the wall, let alone recognise the many decades of love and sacrifice of his intelligent and sensitive wife.

Through Skype and phone calls, Kerry resumes contact with his Irish mother, the source of his first name, and more remote father, back in England, as he gradually builds networks in this community which, though superficially friendly, has its own complex depths for him to discover. His mother works as a strong off-stage voice, giving him advice down the phone lines from her years of nursing, to guide him to break through the dome of inertia which sits over his employers' household and the strange hold over the emotional climate of the house held by its invalid owner.

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Kerry is ready for a change — for a pause in his recently nomadic lifestyle and finds himself drawn into the larger community actively, through his own initiatives, also at the request of others who warm to his energy and sincerity. There's Bernard whose decades long unrequited love for Meredith has impeded any joy in his marriage to Patricia. Jock and Gene entertain readers and characters alike as the older 'blokes' whose café offers their own hunting and fishing produce and is the 'Rover's Return' of the novel — the fulcrum of community and a fine eatery. The younger generation are also well depicted, especially the young men, Sam, Barrett (Brownie), Deano and Tubs whose incoherent amity is threatened by the impending break up of their gang, as Sam prepares to leave The Bay for an apprenticeship in the city, while Barret's smart future has been diverted by his father's chronic illness. Each of these seemingly minor characters generates unexpected events that braid through and push along the many lines of story.

Then there's Sydney, a female with an equally androgynous name as counterpart to Kerry, but she is not entirely willing to play the leading female in a romance novel. Most touchingly there's 9-year-old Madison, whose yuppie parents, Rick and Olivia, can't keep their money or their marriage tight and whose rows and absenteeism are cause for concern. But Madison's love and loyalty for her selfish parents is heartbreakingly expressed in the chapters ferom her perspective. From breadline poverty to excessive over-spending, the range of social classes is intensified and apparent in such a small locality, and Robertson's management of these tensions is comprehensive and admirable.

The author's style is crisp, sharp, with this strong shifting point of view narrative, including King: the first mentioned eye of the dog. However, Robertson is not above the odd slip into metaphor and irony, giving her dialogues a brisk freshness that contributes considerably to the charm of the novel. Her characters are not small-town simpletons, and this is not a simple story. It shows the catalytic impact of a stranger upon a small town, and the consequences of well-meaning enthusiasm as being complex and long term. Despite her well-established reputation with success as a writer of lighter fiction, with 6 previous novels and short stories, Robertson swerves across the white lines into a bigger causeway with 'Gabriel's Bay', and all with great effect.

[Bio for Gail here](#)

Gail Pittaway is a Senior Lecturer at Wintec, Hamilton. She has published poetry and short stories as well as articles, chapters and papers on creative writing, New Zealand literature, the history of food writing, New Zealand cookery books and crime writing. She is a regular theatre critic for Theatreview website.