

Author Q&A

Aid work helped me write crime

For nearly 20 years Chris Stuart lived abroad, working as a humanitarian worker, a nurse and consultant, with Red Cross, Oxfam, the UN and AusAID. Now, she's written her second crime novel, *The Glasgow Smile* (Original Sin Press, RRP \$35).



After the success of your first crime book, how difficult was it to write another?

My debut novel, *For Reasons of their Own*, won the Ngaio Marsh award, was shortlisted for the NZ Booklovers award and long listed by the Australian Davitt Awards, so I was thrilled at the recognition. Picking up the pen was easy and necessary, because I felt accountable to the readers who had embraced the lives and struggles of my characters, and they deserved a satisfying conclusion. My heart and imagination still lingered in the tempestuous, but flawed world of the tenacious DI Robbie Gray and her indigenous officer Mac. I also felt the pressure to produce an even better second book if I wanted to prove myself as a credible writer. It has taken me a lifetime of experience to trust my judgement and, as a consequence, my writing has grown in strength and depth, as has my confidence.

Has your experience overseas informed your writing?

Overwhelmingly. Firstly, it has influenced the content... especially around the complex issues of injustice, cultural inequity and the tragedy of powerlessness. The social and political context within which a murder occurs is always a crucial element for me, as is having a keen awareness of bias, identifying vested interests and the importance of perception. My aid work has also been very influential in sharpening my observation skills and highlighting the importance of research and details. Secondly, my experience played a huge factor in the writing process: in my ability to remain focused and disciplined, to be resilient, to weather the slings and arrows and to dig deep to find ways to circumvent barriers. Perhaps most importantly, I've learned to never be afraid of the unknown, but embrace the uncertainty and the volatility of life, including going down those dark scary paths of the creative process.

What are you reading now?

I am re-reading Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, set during the unsettled period of the breakdown of colonial Vietnam. It resonates with the smell of expatriates, foreign intervention, cultural misunderstandings, the dangers of idealism as well as the difficulty of remaining neutral and impartial, a challenge I frequently used to face.

# Don't make pasta if you're in a bad mood

Pasta, says Bossi executive chef Shaun Dowling, has to come from the heart, as he gives Craig Hoyle a hands-on demonstration of his new Italian menu.

**M**aking pasta when you're in a bad mood is, says Shaun Dowling, a waste of time.

"You have to be in a good place," says the executive chef of central Auckland Italian restaurant Bossi. "You have to be happy."

Dowling's giving me a hands-on cooking lesson – instead of just tasting Bossi's new menu, I'm in the kitchen actually making it – and he tells me that pasta must be enjoyed from the heart. "If you're having your friends over, and you're not feeling very well, and you've had a bad day at work, just order a pizza," he says. "You've got to have a laugh."

Dowling describes how his own love for pasta began in the kitchen with his grandmother while just a boy on Auckland's North Shore.

"I really enjoyed making dough, and it was hands-on. There

were no cylinders, there were no pasta machines, it was all done by hand. We threw flour at each other, and just had fun in the kitchen.

"I was always full of energy, and it was the way she got me in to get rid of that energy, and then also kill two birds with one stone, and make dinner for everyone."

That hands-on philosophy is key to Dowling's role at Bossi, which he helped launch with owner Jenna Carter in December 2022.

"Opening a space like Bossi has been a dream of mine for years," Carter said at the time. "Born out of pure passion and fond memories cooking with my nonna, this is an ode to her and her legacy. I'm delighted to finally welcome Aucklanders and visitors alike to enjoy the many dishes my family has grown up with for decades."

These are big boots to fill as I don a khaki apron and head into

the kitchen with Dowling. We're about to make two dishes – agnolotti ripieni con ossobuco and spaghetti vongole – and Dowling reassures me no experience is necessary.

First, using sheets of twice-rolled pasta, he guides me through stuffing the sheets with ossobuco, folding it over to create envelope-shaped parcels, leaving one end slightly open for sauce to seep inside.

Next, we make spaghetti using a chitarra – an Italian device that takes its name from a guitar. Sheets of pasta are gently rolled across fine steel strings until strands of spaghetti fall through to the tray below. Once we're done, Dowling tells me it's tradition to "strum the guitar" for good luck.

By now the agnolotti's bubbling away in a creamy mushroom sauce, and Dowling walks me through creating the sauce for our spaghetti



vongole. I tip some Cloudy Bay clams into a waiting saucepan, and we build a white wine and butter sauce with lashings of garlic and chilli.

Is there any such thing as too much butter? "Absolutely not,"

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I loved Stephanie Bishop's novel *The Anniversary*. A literary page-turner with a man-overboard set-up, it unpicks the relationship between a female writer and her older husband – who is also a writer and her former teacher. Bishop delves into the gendered power dynamics between the creative couple and within the literary world at large, and plays with the unreliability of memory and perception. It's intimately domestic with a meandering reveal.

Claire Keegan blew me away with her pint-sized *Small Things Like These*, so I was keen to get my hands on her earlier, equally concise novella *Foster*. It's just as brilliant. The young narrator's growing affection for the older couple she is sent to stay with is described so movingly through simple gestures of care, and daily routines carry an unspoken grief. The story contains a condensed emotional intensity that stays with you.

I'm a big reader of historical fiction and by my bedside is Maggie O'Farrell's *The Marriage Portrait*, which imagines 16th-century Italy and the short life of Lucrezia de' Medici. I love the way O'Farrell uses lyrical prose to write into the gaps in history.

There are a heap of amazing debuts just out or coming up soon, including Vidya Madabushi's *The Days Toppled Over*, Alexandra Collier's *Inconceivable* and Anna Kate Blair's *The Modern*.

I'm also eager for Joanna Cho's *People Person* and Catherine Chidgey's *The Axeman's Carnival*. Janika Oza's *A History of Burning* sounds amazing, and I'm looking forward (albeit with some trepidation) to Tracey Spicer's *Man-made*, an investigation into historic biases being built into AI.

## What I'm Reading Susan Paterson



Susan Paterson is a writer and editor. Her debut novel, *Where Light Meets Water*, draws on the history of her great-great-great grandfather, Thomas Robertson, a master mariner and maritime artist whose paintings can be found in museums and galleries across Australia and New Zealand.

## What to watch this week

**Hugh's Huge Homes** (8.45pm, Tuesday, TVNZ 1)  
Actor and comedian Hugh Dennis gives viewers an inside look at some of the UK's most incredible dwellings, uncovering hidden rooms and ingenious design features while talking to owners, historians and architects. Those featured range from an ancient Scottish castle to a splendid (but haunted) Jacobean stately pile.

**Secret Invasion** (Wednesday, Disney+)  
This six-part Marvel series picks up a thread from 2019's *Captain America*. When Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) learns of a clandestine invasion of Earth by a faction of shapeshifting Skrulls, he joins forces with a small group of allies, including Martin Freeman's Everett Ross, Cobie Smulders' Maria Hill and "friendly" Skrull Talos (Ben Mendelsohn) to attempt to thwart it. The impressive cast also includes Kingsley Ben-Adir, Emilia Clarke, Dermot Mulroney and Olivia Colman.

**Class of '09** (Wednesday, Disney+)  
This eight-part crime drama focuses on the reunion of a group of a graduating class of FBI agents after the death of a mutual friend. The series takes place across three distinct time periods and focuses on the transformation of the US criminal justice system, as it is altered by the rise of artificial intelligence.

- James Croot