

Face to Face

Israel Cooper

Sarah Lang talks to cult survivor Israel Cooper about a life very much stranger than fiction.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JANE USSHER

Israel Cooper with son Zion and wife Jess.

KIDNAPPINGS, brainwashing, suicide, sexual abuse, false accusations, prison, punch-ups, disguises, alcoholism, anonymous benefactors, banishments, secret babies, deprogramming... There's more mind-boggling drama in the story of the Cooper family than you'd find in the collected works of Jerry Springer.

You've likely heard of Neville Cooper, convicted sex abuser and controversial leader of the West Coast-based cult the Gloriavale Christian Community, often dubbed the Cooperites. The 400-strong sect lives in a largely self-sufficient "utopia" and shuns the outside world and any contact with often-troubled former members.

In the mid-90s, it made for magnetising headlines when Neville Cooper was arrested for sexual violations, then sentenced to five years' imprisonment. Freed 18 months later, he assumed the mantle of leadership again, taking on a new name, "Hopeful Christian", and a new teenage wife. The sect's still following the leader, who's now 82.

But although the press clippings fill a fair few folders, it's only now that gaps in the story are being plugged by a tell-all book, *Sins of the Fathers* (Longacre, out April 20, \$29.99). Written by teenage-fiction doyenne Fleur Beale in consultation with Neville's son Phil and grandson Israel, it's the tale of three generations, although Neville – not surprisingly – didn't want a bar of it.

Neville started out virtuously enough, as a town-hopping, hellfire-and-brimstone preacher in Australia, then New Zealand. In the 1960s, he established the Springbank Christian Community in rural Canterbury (it later moved to Haupiri, inland of Greymouth, and was renamed after Neville's baby-factory wife Gloria). But with his "12 shepherds" effectively yes-men, Neville's unchecked power took him down a path of megalomania and perversion.

One of 16 children, Phil was abused by and frightened of his father. As a teen, he fled to Australia, only to return under intense paternal pressure and remould himself as the prodigal son. Hard-working and business-minded, he started a family at 19, only to flee again at 27.

Returning to abduct his five children at midnight, he later made three more raids to abduct/rescue wife Sandy ("Prayer Darling").

Each time, torn between her husband, children, leader and community, Sandy returned grief-stricken to the sect, for the

final time from the US when baby Andreas was six months old.

Phil moved the rest of the family to Australia and buried himself in work while Israel, his elder son, filled the bellies and changed the nappies.

Don't take that deep breath yet. Allegedly egged on by her ex-nanny and Phil's ex-girlfriend, Phil's daughter Dawn accused him of sexual abuse (she later retracted the claim and wrote to him that she'd been lying). Dawn chose to return to the community and still lives there, as do Sandy and youngest daughter Cherish, a child whose existence Phil and his other children knew nothing about for years.

With two business degrees and some impressive-sounding finance jobs under his belt, Israel is currently director of finance at visual-simulation company Massive Software in Auckland. A boyish-looking 27 with the Coopers' trademark blond locks, he's father to 15-month-old Zion; his second child with wife Jess is due in August. With a touch of Aussie twang he speaks about the saga, which continues to unfold.

NORTH & SOUTH: Your family's story could be straight out of a Hollywood thriller. Do people gape when you tell them?

ISRAEL COOPER: Yeah, I always think my life's been like that Steven Spielberg quote, "The movies are like life with all the boring bits taken out." Sometimes it seems slightly unreal, and reading the book was like reading someone else's story.

N&S: How did the book come about?

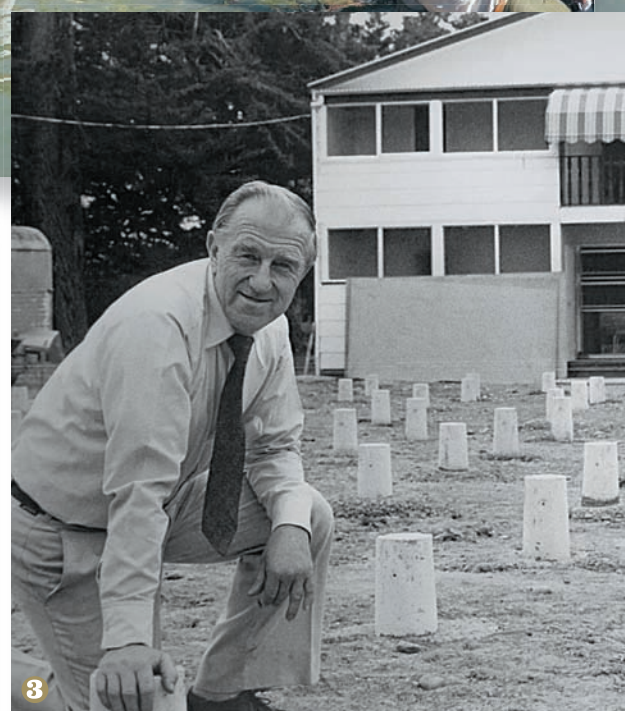
COOPER: So many people have the wrong idea about this story, about our family, that Dad and I wanted to tell the story from start to finish, with as many perspectives as we could. And because it's never a simple thing to say, "Oh, I come from a cult," I wanted to be able to say, "Here, read the book."

N&S: Dredging everything up – was it hard, cathartic?

COOPER: It was really hard. Some parts I'd never heard before, especially about my Dad, like that really difficult situation where his father abused him. I knew vaguely but not the latent details so they were quite shocking.

N&S: When did you first realise there'd been sexual abuse there?

COOPER: That came with the court case, being in the news. I felt a lot of internal conflict because I have happy childhood memories of the community, and my grandfather was this figure of awe, so



suddenly to hear what had been going on was really challenging. I feel Neville knew some of those sexual things were wrong. But there was no accountability, and with human lusts and a position of power you can get what you want.

N&S: How do you feel about two of your sisters living there?

COOPER: It's sad. I feel slightly better about Dawn because Dawn knows the outside world. Cherish doesn't. Part of me wants to bring her out and let her see for herself, like Dad did with us. What saddens me most about the community is this whole generation of kids brought up inside, always told one side and not having a free choice.

N&S: Are you concerned about whether abuse is still going on?

COOPER: People say leopards don't change their spots but my feeling is

“What saddens me most ... is this whole generation of kids brought up inside, always told one side and not having a free choice.”

1. A baptism in the duck pond, Springbank, 1980.
2. Gloria Cooper, Neville's first wife, with their six oldest children, c.1962. From left: Hope, Charity (with toys), Faith, John (on Gloria's lap), Grace and Mercy.
3. Neville at Springbank by the first accommodation block (Phil later abducted his children from this building) and the foundations of the second, 1983.
4. Sandy and Phil on their wedding day shortly after Phil's 19th birthday, May 1981.
5. Israel holding baby brother Andreas, 1991.



now Neville's been outed publicly, he's stopped. When my grandma [Naomi] left the community, I asked her, "Grandma, do you know if any of that stuff's still going on?" She said, "Israel, not to my knowledge."

N&S: I assume your mother didn't want to be interviewed for the book?

COOPER: She absolutely didn't. My grandma provided a light on the times when Mum went back, how she felt and how she dealt with it.

N&S: Neville told her that if just one parent remained in the community, her children would earn eternal salvation over hellfire, right?

COOPER: Yeah. Mum made a decision 100 per cent believing it was the best thing to do. She would have gone through hours, days, months of indoctrination at community meetings, being told Philip was the

evil one and she was the martyr. It's the same process by which fundamentalists sacrifice their lives.

N&S: Did the book give you a stronger sense of her anguish?

COOPER: After I finished the book, I cried for Mum. She's an incredibly tragic character, stuck between two powerful, forceful men. At stake were her children and her community; whatever she decided, she was losing out. She sacrificed the most; my Dad made hard choices but he didn't have to give up his kids for what he believes.

N&S: What do you remember about being kidnapped by your Dad at seven?

COOPER: I remember it vividly. It still surprises me that not a single one of us cried out, as you'd think any kid would, suddenly being picked up in the middle of the night from their bed. But it was just Dad coming to get us. We were reunited and Mum would follow soon.

N&S: Can you tell me about the day your mother left for good?

COOPER: When I saw her crying and the look on my Dad's face, I realised she wasn't coming back. I had these feelings of rejection: is there something I've done wrong? We kept the hope alive that she'd come back, but she never did, which made us all so sick and depressed, emotionally and mentally. When we left for Australia, that's when it really hit us, and we all broke down. All those nights the kids would cry for Mum; I tried never to cry in front of them.

N&S: Your Dad was working, so you effectively became a parent to your siblings. How hard was that at 10?

COOPER: It was full-on. But my Mum left us a letter and her parting words to me were, "Look after your sisters and brother." I thought if I fulfilled that maybe she'd come back.

N&S: How hard was it to keep your stomach pains to yourself for years?

COOPER: It was very hard, incredibly painful. I'd go for nights where I'd be up vomiting, but Dad had too much to worry about and there was no money for a doctor. If I could sit somewhere quietly and breathe through it, I could deal with the pain. Maybe if I'd told someone I wouldn't have developed a [now-removed] stomach ulcer.

N&S: You kids wrote your Mum letters every night, which she never got because Neville intercepted them. How do you feel about your Dad letting you think she was receiving them?

COOPER: I can understand why. He knew we wouldn't have been able to handle that, so it wasn't out of control or manipulation. But again it comes back to the book's central premise, freedom of choice: when you're making decisions for other people you're effectively doing things the same way as Neville. Neville believes he's doing the best for his community; add his will and charisma and that's pretty powerful.

N&S: When you'd visit, Neville would rail about your father's evilness. How much of an ordeal was that?

COOPER: It's made me good at dealing with conflict! It was incredibly emotional and something we'd spend days recovering from. We chose to go, though. I wanted to see Mum; part of me thought that if we kept seeing her enough, something might break eventually. We were hoping against hope that maybe we could un-brainwash her.

N&S: How important was it telling your mother you forgave her?

COOPER: When we visited she'd always be very distant, holding herself back, maybe as a coping mechanism. But when I told her I forgave her, the mask slipped for a second and I saw a deep sadness in her eyes and behind that sadness was my Mum. And longing, hurt and pain. That reinforced to me that there's no black and white here.

N&S: During your early childhood in the community, things were black and white. Did it take you a while to see the shades of grey?

COOPER: Totally. It's been a long, hard process to accept the grey areas, that the community's not totally bad and people aren't either good or bad. I believe people are inherently good but, like Neville, they make bad choices.

N&S: If you could say something to Neville, what would it be?

COOPER: "Granddad, I love you and honour you because you're my grandfather. I'm not going to judge you based on what I've heard from others, but I'm sad for you. You have potential for such goodness, but you weren't accountable to anyone, your power grew, you let your vices get the better of you and you went so far off course."

N&S: Not all your siblings feel as compassionate towards Neville. Crystal sees him not as her Granddad but as a life-wrecker.

COOPER: Yeah, my sisters are at different stages of dealing with everything, especially my Mum's rejection. Most of them haven't read this book yet, and truthfully I'm hoping it'll change some of their perspectives: on Mum, Granddad, the community.

N&S: Last time you visited the community, you almost felt you could live that way, aside from the lack of freedom?

COOPER: Yeah, because it appeals to our human condition: here's an idyllic, seemingly peaceful community where everyone shares, everyone seems in harmony; people work hard but things are provided. But the flaws in utopia are everywhere.

N&S: You and your siblings clearly think your Dad did the right thing by taking you, but he still struggles with his decision?

COOPER: Yes, as my Mum probably does. But there wasn't a right or wrong decision in those circumstances. He's coming to accept he did what he thought was best, just as my Mum did.

N&S: The relationship between you and your father blew up at one point. Why?

COOPER: Dad basically told me, "As long as you do what I say, you're my son; if you don't, you're not." That moment made us both hear the echoes of the past. It was hard for him to admit to himself he was like his father, with love conditional on obedience, but he did. Until then, I hadn't realised I'd inherited that conditional love either, so breaking that mindset is what's behind the book's title.

N&S: At one point at university, you felt you'd lost your family, your faith, your hope. What happened?

COOPER: I started thinking, "How can there be a loving God when there are all these skewed teachings of Christianity? And if the community is evil, by virtue God's evil and the *Bible's* evil, right?" It was like my whole life was a lie, just a big conspiracy. How could I be so stupid to believe in all this hogwash? I was desolate, drifting, anchorless. I read about Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, meditation. I went through a three-month period where being continuously drunk meant I didn't have to think about anything. Basically, it has required a large dose of faith for me to say, "No, one man's deed doesn't negate everything else."

N&S: At your wedding, you said your Aunt Faith "saved your life" when you went to live with her for 18 months?

COOPER: Knowing how dark those times were, if it hadn't been for Auntie Faith I could have lost, if not my life, my hope. So many others who've left the community have committed suicide, like my Uncle Michael, or gone to jail or into drugs. They're told, "Once you leave, you're damned forever," so they think, "OK, I'm already going to hell, why don't I indulge in these vices?"

N&S: You're using the book's proceeds to fund a charitable trust which will help "repatriate" runaways into the outside world?

COOPER: I feel a responsibility to inform them, because you come out so ignorant and naive, and just a little advice and a helping hand can make a vast difference.

N&S: Why do you think you, Dawn and Justine have followed the community tradition of getting married and having kids young?

COOPER: We've wanted to recreate the family stability we lost. I'm making sure my son has a stable, loving mum and dad who won't let anything or anyone come between us. It's something I'm so careful of, now that I'm aware of manipulations, and wedges that can get in between people.



N&S: Are you nervous about the book coming out?

COOPER: Yeah, incredibly so. I'm always nervous when I tell people my story. I'm wondering, "Is this going to affect my career? Are people going to react differently to me?"

N&S: People are more likely to be amazed at how well you've turned out.

COOPER: Maybe, but I'm nervous about my Mum's and sisters' reactions, terribly nervous. I don't want them to feel ashamed about this book. I called them two weeks ago to tell them about it.

N&S: How did they react?

COOPER: They were upset and disappointed. Dawn said, "What right do you have to tell my story?" I said, "Yes, but who would you rather have telling it? You know me, you trust me, you know I love you."

N&S: Will you send the community a book?

COOPER: Yep, I intend to send my Mum, my sisters and my Granddad a copy each.

N&S: How do you think Neville will react?

COOPER: This is how I envisage it'll play out: he'll get up in front of the whole community and say, "This is propaganda and blasphemy, this is all lies," because there'll be copies circulating, I know.

N&S: Why does the book use the word "community" rather than "cult"?

COOPER: I know it could be described as a cult, but it has such bad connotations and most cults end badly, and I don't want to presuppose that when it's got my Mum and sisters. Maybe when Neville dies or whatever, it'll crumble and they'll see the light.

N&S: Can you ever leave the community behind when people you love are inside it?

COOPER: No. People have said, "Leave the past alone," but this will always be a part of me. I've come from being ashamed of my past and hiding it to being proud of it, and our family, because it's made us who we are.