

flat out

Sarah Laing has got a lot going on, as she explains to **Sarah Lang** (no relation)

I first heard of Sarah Laing when I got a shower of texts, calls and emails congratulating me on winning the 2006 *Sunday Star-Times* short-story competition with the New York-set tale 'The Wrong Shoe'. The shoe was on the wrong foot, given my last short story was a fourth-form flop about a pig in a pram. The actual winner was a literary wordsmith, not a magazine hack, with a surname pronounced identically to mine.

From then on our lives kept tripping over each other. When our dentist got us mixed up, when I was ushered toward the stage at a book festival, when Laing got a drunken call one night, we had to explain about the other Sarah.

Curiosity about my double was the reason I picked up her first book, *Coming Up Roses*, a short-story collection. But it's not why I guzzled it in one go. The rhythmic, spare stories upset your expectations, distil a moment and conjure up whole worlds you don't want to leave. *Coming Up Roses* did well. The critics, too, were impressed by the "rising star" (*North & South*) with *The Listener* dubbing her "our next great short-story writer".

With her debut novel due for release on April 10, eyes are peeled to see how her talent translates to feature form. Two years in the writing, *Dead People's Music* doesn't disappoint. The tongue-in-cheek title refers to protagonist Rebecca's conclusion that classical music is karaoke: "covers of dead people's music". At least that's what this restless cellist tells herself after sabotaging her scholarship at a London music school. As the book opens, she's dragging graphic-designer boyfriend Toby to New York so she can reinvent herself as an underground musician. There's a parallel story that rewinds to the 1930s and a third story strand set in 90s Wellington.

A Palmerston North and Wellington alumnus,

Laing's lived in Auckland for almost a year to be closer to her parents, who help out her and policy-adviser husband Jonathan with Otto, five, and Gus, three. Their 1940s ex-estate house is a bright welcome mat to a cul-de-sac in Mt Albert. But while Laing spends her days in suburbia, this is no desperate housewife.

When she opens her door, the swelling of her belly is a clue to an "accidental" third child, due in July ("They couldn't see any boy parts, so I'm hoping for a girl"). Softly spoken and quietly funny, the 35-year-old comes across as calm, centred and undeniably sweet, with precise, evocative answers.

Her house suits her, or the other way around: it's awash with colour and retro quirk, from the vintage-bag collection to the pink-and-orange lampshade she made herself. In a corner, her husband's red ukulele is propped atop a piano. Beside it, a cello case with its "fragile" travel tag – Laing has had an on-off relationship with the instrument – looks like it's been conjured straight out of her novel. Nearby, beer bottles dressed up in tea cosies vie for attention with drawings of 50s and 60s beauty queens, all artworks by her mother/"creative role model" Robyn Laing. Interspersed are paintings by sister Melissa and herself. "I really should get some art that doesn't come from my family."

Although she's just started introducing herself at parties as a writer, Laing's bread and butter is her award-winning graphic design and illustrative work. Design clients range from an olive oil company to Telecom, schools to wineries, while her quirky

illustrations enliven the likes of Paula Green's recently-released children's book *Macaroni Moon*.

After Laing designed the cover for *Coming Up Roses*, Random House put her on the payroll designing others' covers – though it's harder doing her own. She mocked-up six *Dead People's Music* covers before finally choosing one. Its filling was finally ready. A six-week, \$6000 residency at the Michael King Writers' Centre in Devonport late last year gave her the space to polish the prose.

To someone who "thinks in images", writing and design are deeply intertwined, to the point where she draws detailed plans of the houses and spaces her characters inhabit. And while she gets creative satisfaction from both media, writing's stuck up neck-and-neck with design in the race for favourite. Even when she has big design jobs on she tries to write "at least a little every day, regardless of whether the mood has struck". At other times she writes

"full-time": meaning four to five hours clear a day, when Otto's at school and Gus is in daycare or with her mother. "I know there's this mad little window, so it's 'quick, quick, must get everything done.'"

You can see what she's up to on her website Poppyshock. On her homepage blurb she writes: "I believe in the narrative bloom. Content must be pollinated so it can burst with seeds of meaning. Raw material must be rendered into opiates. Poppyshock." Though Laing laughs about trying to justify the website's name, she was referring to the fact she has "a few means of expression".

Others are painting, printmaking, poetry, singing

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(she's performed arias at friends' weddings) and "making things" (clothes, cards, cushion covers), though currently there are not enough hours in the day. To deal with competing claims on her time, Laing's always making to-do lists. "But I always feel compromised in some way and feel bad about the things I never get around to, like my graphic novel, a food blog, the new compost heap, a children's book, cushion covers, a floor-to-ceiling-bookshelf. I have these slightly guilty thoughts in the evenings on the sofa, and I also get the am-I-pushing-myself-too-hard thoughts."

Much like perfectionist character Rebecca. Writer and protagonist have plenty in common. One personal theme was "the identity of diabetes". As well as injecting herself five times a day, Laing constantly analyses her diet for GI (glycaemic index), carbohydrate and fat content. "To keep on top of it you always have to have incredibly active management and, at the moment, being pregnant, I'm ultra monitored and analysed."

Dead People's Music was also a forum to indulge her New York obsession. After marrying, she and Jonathan shifted there on the first plane into the US after 9/11. Not wanting to postpone the long-planned move, she reasoned that "with everyone on high alert" it'd be a safe time to travel. They arrived to a state of grief and shock. "Everybody seemed on the verge of tears when they told us their 'where-I-was-on-9/11' stories."

While Laing got ample work, including doing online graphics in the MTV towers for an alien-encounter show, after 18 months the couple came home. "My mother-in-law was dying, my husband was unemployed, and I was having a baby so... it seemed impossible for us to stay. I always felt we came home too early, so this book's been an escapist fantasy back there, into a parallel reality."

She's working on a new novel, but not expecting to be New Zealand literature's it-girl forever. Although her stories appeared in magazines, journals and anthologies before her competition win, Laing thought getting published "was a lost cause", so pleasure in her success is tinged with surprise and "imposter syndrome". "Though I do feel like less of a fraud at dinner parties." Her worst bout of imposter syndrome was at the 2008 Auckland Writers and Readers Festival, on a panel alongside Booker prize-winner Anne Enright. "It felt completely outrageous to be there." Then she reminded herself just to enjoy the ride. ■