

The Spine

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANNA BRIGGS

With her encyclopaedic knowledge of books and her distinctive fashion sense, Unity Books' manager and co-owner Tilly Lloyd is as much an institution as the bookshop that turns 50 this month. She talks to SARAH LANG.

Tilly Lloyd likes to keep you on your toes – and doesn't like to talk about herself. She meets my questions with pensive pauses, with a throaty, rumbling laugh, and with replies that are sometimes answers, sometimes tangents, sometimes quips. She subcontracts some answers to colleagues dashing in and out of Unity's back office. When my questions get too personal, she shooes me back into line, in an amused, authoritative way. She's great fun.

Lloyd wants to talk about Unity's 50th birthday – and its first foray into publishing. *Unity Books At 50: excerpts by authors/booksellers over half a century of trading* (\$8) is fairly self-explanatory. It's an anthology of poems and excerpts from fiction and non-fiction, drawn from the stand-alone books of 16 former and current Unity staffers, including Nigel Cox and Damian Skinner.

The project began last year when Lloyd and Marion Castree (Unity's New Zealand-books buyer) were hunting for a poem to read at the funeral of Coleen Wilkinson, Unity's book-keeper of two decades. They came upon one by Jenny Bornholdt, one of many poets who'd worked with Wilkinson, and thought why not mark Unity's 50th with an anthology? 'Bookshops don't usually publish books but we thought it would work,' Lloyd says. Jane Parkin edited the book and Whitireia publishing students handled the production.

Lloyd's introduction to the book is called 'Islands/Moutere'. 'Because the pieces don't relate to each other, I began thinking of them as islands. Then I realised that two contributors who are also painters had painted islands.' That sparked her idea for a glossy centrefold of

two paintings: Hilary Relvyn Robson's *Mana*, of Mana Island, and Steven Hemmens' *Island*, of Tapu te Ranga Island (Rat Island) at Island Bay. The original *Island* hangs in Lloyd's lounge.

The book launch/birthday party is at 6pm on Tuesday 12 September. Is the public invited? 'Of course,' Lloyd says, looking at me quizzically. 'Because how else have we lasted 50 years?' Expect nibbles, wine and very short speeches, as per Unity tradition.

Many traditions have been forged in the half-century since Alan Preston opened Unity in Willis Street's Empire Building lobby. People often stumbled upon the tiny space without a street frontage but with books you couldn't find anywhere else, including serious non-fiction and New Zealand fiction. It would be the first of four locations on Willis Street, a central-city route taken by both suits and op-shoppers.

In 1989, longtime Wellington staff members Jo McColl and Nigel Cox opened Unity's only sister branch in Auckland. Lloyd, who had worked as a publishing-house rep and run the now-defunct Women's Bookshop, was hired as Unity's Wellington buyer in 1990, and has managed it since 1993. Preston worked from the shop until 2004, when he died. To ensure Unity continued, and continued to be itself, Lloyd bought a half-share of both shops from his estate, alongside Jo and Lawrie McColl.

How is Unity different now? 'Double the size, double the people, a thousand times more tech-y, but the same essential ingredients. You're nothing without the people. And we choose the best books.' She reads about three-

FICTION



and-a-half books a week, sometimes one a day. Recently she read 67 novels in 69 days as a fiction judge for the Ockham NZ Book Awards. 'I earned just enough for these,' she says, flashing her blue ankle boots.

She's not interested in the recent survey finding that nearly 400,000 New Zealanders don't read books, pointing out that's less than 10%. 'Our job is to be the best we possibly can for the folks who are crazy about books – or even just mildly interested.' And Unity has adapted to the times. Selling e-books online is only a small part of the business. But people around the country and the world order hard-copy books through Unity's website, and staff track down hard-to-find books on request.

Symbolically, the door is always wide open, even on the chilliest days. Inside, where it's somehow kept toasty warm, Lloyd is standing behind the counter, below a framed photograph of Alan Preston. She's hard to miss with her spiky peroxide hair, thick glasses, and all-black outfits. Castree dubs Lloyd's fashion sense 'literary industrial' to a loud guffaw from her boss. The pair half-joke about failed attempts to leave Unity. 'It's like the mafia,' interjects international-books-buyer Marcus Greville.

Lloyd, like every staff member, works the floor. 'It's important to get to know customers. We build a memory: perhaps someone buys New Zealand fiction, but their side interest is Japanese biography. Often customers want to be entertained and to entertain us. Sometimes they want to confess something.' When I'm there, an old man doubles over with laughter while telling Lloyd a story. Lloyd enjoys all that. 'Every hour provides a vignette. The ones that leap to mind, you just can't use. They might offend someone. Author Danyl McLauchlan came in recently needing a Nancy Drew for his daughter. But to our disbelief, we were out of all 15 titles. Danyl said, without malevolence, striding manfully towards Arty Bees, "It's our dirty little secret."

There has been many a shop romance. 'When we're hiring,' Lloyd says, po-faced, 'we think "would anyone on staff fancy this person?"' 'We do not!' Castree interjects. Lloyd laughs. 'I'm kidding. It's

lovely when people fall for each other. James Brown and Catherine Hill have been together about 25 years.' Lloyd has a rule, though. 'The affair must be invisible on the shop floor, and so must any divorce.' Lloyd, who has no children, enjoys it when former staff visit with 'shop babies. We measure their height on the door here. Some shop babies have even worked here. Some of the shop babies are nearly 30!'

Lloyd is evasive about her past, but I don't buy that it's as boring as she says. She grew up in 1950s and 1960s Otago, where her parents worked on farms, and she and her two sisters did correspondence school. Did her father's alcoholism impact her? 'Yeah, but everyone's childhood has been impacted by something. We forget people are amazingly resilient.'

She didn't read for leisure until she discovered feminist books and travelogue, aged 24. 'Not everyone who works in a bookshop lived in houses full of books.' She worked briefly as a psychiatric nurse, and as an abortion counsellor at then-controversial Parkview clinic with Dame Margaret Sparrow. In 2014, Unity's launch of Sparrow's book about 19th-century abortion in New Zealand doubled as a Parkview reunion.

Lloyd identifies as a lesbian feminist. A market Marxist. She and her partner have lived in Mt Victoria for two years, but will eventually return to their rented-out house in Paekakariki. They're fixing up a big shed with its glasshouse and old grapevines, and go there weekends, sometimes midweek. 'It's partly plumbed but we still pee on the lawn. We spend evenings having a whisky by the fire, practising guitar, reading. It's a good balance to the social, busy shop.'

'But get back to Unity now. Please mention the spine. The shop's stock is displayed "spine-out", we use spine images for marketing, and remembering those images helps us find books faster.'

Will Unity, the spine of Wellington bookshops, turn 100 one day? 'Wouldn't that be amazing? The 50th-birthday party is really about the next 50 years. Bookshops will definitely change a lot. But if a bookshop is an oasis for congregation, intellectual sustenance and social warmth, we'll still need that in the future.' ■