



UBER COOL AND HAS A SOCIAL CONSCIENCE?

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Murdoch Stephens is fashionably late. Then really quite late. Then ridiculously late. But it turns out he got the days mixed up. He calls to apologise and power-walks from Victoria University down to the Abel Smith corner of Cuba Street in an impressive 12 minutes, with rivers of sweat colonising his forehead.

A boyish-looking 32, Stephens is the editor-in-chief of Wellington non-profit publishing collective Lawrence & Gibson (L&G). It began as a one-off thing in 2005 when he and five Aro Valley friends teamed up to release Richard Meros' first book *On The Condition and Possibilities Of Helen Clark Taking Me As Her Young Lover*. No one was over 25. No one had any specific publishing experience. "We thought no publisher in their right mind would release it," Stephens remembers. "It seemed too insane for a bookstore to even stock it." But after *The Guardian* interviewed Meros, a torrent of attention saw the book become a cult hit. It was eventually adapted into a successful stage play, as were Meros' subsequent books *Richard Meros Salutes the Southern Man* and *Privatising Parts*.

With eight books of political and cultural satire to his name, Meros is easily the collective's most prolific and successful author. But L&G isn't just a Meros vehicle. Up-and-coming authors, including Brannavan Gnanalingam and William Dewey, have penned 11 of

the collective's 19 books to date. Think "experimental non-fiction and heavyweight literature" that traditional publishers probably won't take a risk on, but deserve an audience.

"Our books tend to be either more experimental, cross-genre or explicitly political than other local publishers," Stephens says. "For a political city like Wellington there is a surprising dearth of literature that is political." He means political both in a strict sense – such as Meros' explicit political satire – and in a wider philosophical sense, such as Thomasin Sleigh's incisive debut novel *Ad Lib* with its contemplation of privacy in the age of reality TV (it centres on Kyla Crane, who inherits her dead celebrity mother's reality show).

At *Ad Lib*'s March launch, Sleigh read a passage to a crowd of student-chic literary types. The event doubled as the launch of Meros' latest: the mildly amusing satirical guidebook *Dating Westerners: Tips for the New Rich of the Developing World*. With its tip boxes and learning outcomes, it carefully positions Westerners under the East's voyeuristic gaze rather than vice versa. Meros didn't make it to the launch, but Stephens spoke for him.

Then, and when we meet, it feels like Stephens is trying to project a certain version of himself. But perhaps he is just as he appears: an intellectual, uber-cool boy-about-town with a social conscience. Though he may also be someone else.

See, Richard Meros is a pseudonym. "Much of the media around him has hinted this way and that way as to who he is, most of them concluding that he is me, which I must say is a rather scurrilous conclusion," Stephens says. "Well, not scurrilous really. People would assume that [it's me] just by the amount I'm involved." Yes, and when Kim Hill interviewed Meros in 2012, he sounded an awful lot like Stephens.

He's not going to definitively admit anything, so I change tack and ask what Meros is like. He laughs. "Pretty tall." (Stephens isn't.) Okay, so why would someone create a pseudonym rather than use their own name? "With his first book he thought he would get sued for defamation. Now, there's been some talk about discarding that pseudonym, or just stopping writing altogether."

But if Meros stops, the collective will continue. Sales of new titles and back copies are strong. Priced comparatively cheaply at between \$15-28, the majority sell online (at lawrenceandgibson.co.nz), but they're also stocked around the country, most notably by Unity Books. Currently the collective has a healthy surplus: money that's poured back into producing visually appealing books, using New Zealand-made recycled paper. "That's an aesthetic choice,

work for future releases.

But the collective would exist without him. In 2009, after L&G had released six books, Stephens spent two years travelling overseas. When he moved back, the collective had released two more books and another was in progress. Now the other founding members have all left Wellington. "Some still help as mentors to check, say, the design and PR," Stephens says. But acquaintances, especially new authors, have filled the gaps. They don't have formalised meetings like the old days. "We do a lot online then come together to physically produce the book, but we also see each other round." Either they were already friends or they are now. "Everyone has other jobs and other things to do so everyone's just in it for the love of literature."

Stephens certainly has plenty on his plate. In February, he began a fulltime, three-year PhD studying rhetoric through Massey Albany's communications department. The working title sounds like a Meros book: "Who believes in the Internet? Cynicism in the digital/media age with constant footnotes on Peter Sloterdijk." Between publishing and study, how does he pay the bills?

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an environmental choice, definitely not an economic choice," Stephens says. "The paper costs at least five times as much, but we have basically no labour costs."

The collective's financial secret is simple. "We aim to have no – well, very low – overheads." There's no office. Stephens, the six other key members, and various mentors/helpers work unpaid. Plus the authors help the collective physically make their books, using the premises, printer, guillotine and binder at anarchist publishing collective Rebel Press (which gets a minimal fee). "A cornerstone aim [of the collective] is for writers to be involved in every part of the book-production process, so they have an intimacy with the finished product. Rather than being alienated [from production], you're there at the moment the first book is guillotined. The look on Thomasin's face when she saw the first copy..." And, extremely generously by publishing standards, the author-cum-labourers get half of their books' profits.

Stephens, who works long hours unpaid, does it because he enjoys it. In new-release mode, he puts in around 30 hours per week, doing text layout, design, and binding books; one day recently he worked 15 hours. At quieter times he works 10-15 hours per week, including editing, dealing with orders, and provisional

"I live simply and cheaply." But, to eat, he sporadically does research and tutoring at Victoria University.

Somehow he finds time for other involvements. While travelling in Iran, he found photographs of Afghan refugees in an old detention centre, brought them home, and exhibited them at Pataka in Porirua. In June 2013 he launched (and is still spearheading) the Doing Our Bit Campaign, which wants New Zealand to double its annual refugee quota from 750 to 1500. "The quota hasn't increased in 27 years, and Australia takes 4.7 times as many per capita." Recently, he's met with politicians who have pledged support. And, with Wellington-based artists' group Concerned Citizens Collective, he's helped set up 19 Tory St as a space to hold free artistic events, which often raise funds and awareness for social/political causes.

Lawrence & Gibson is a cultural cause. As the new-release list and local content of the big publishers keeps shrinking, collectives like this are one way of publishing books and authors that wouldn't otherwise reach eyeballs. Richard Meros has said the future for publishing is creating music's version of vinyl: beautiful objects that "can sit on their shelves, spines facing outwards, and look sexy". Perhaps unsurprisingly, Stephens agrees. ■