

# FEATURE

weekender.

## Little things worth noticing

Popular Newcastle writer and editor Mark MacLean puts his work together from the bottom up, writes ELVIRA SPROGIS.

**S**MALL things matter to author Mark MacLean. He gathers observations and bits of information with care until he can build them into a bigger picture.

"I have to notice things, I have to make that effort to see what's in the world around us," the Novocastrian says. "What I am seeing are these small things to build the bigger picture. I write about small things then look for the overarching narrative."

"I can't do that big thing to begin with. I can build from a small thing but can't build a gigantic narrative arc and work from that."

Some things I have seen can help make things clear about other things but I don't know what the book is about until it is nearly finished."

His book *A Year Down The Drain* was one such example. He gathered observations during his walks along a concrete canal in suburban Newcastle about places and people. In the end, MacLean says, the character was the creek itself.

"I make myself vulnerable as a writer so readers can empathise with me and have a connection with what I'm writing. They may agree or disagree but whichever it is, they have an opinion that they share with me."

And wherever he goes, here or overseas, MacLean tries to read the environment.

"It's why I like walking places. I break things down to small component parts."

"Some people do it by drawing or painting. I do it by writing."

"By seeing the small things, shapes emerge and then I can describe that big thing. If I could paint that's how I would look at the world but I can't, so I do it with words."



NON FICTION SPECIALIST: Newcastle writer Mark MacLean. Picture: Simone De Peak

MacLean, who has been in Australia almost 30 years, came here by chance.

"There was this book, *Working Around the World* that my mates and I used to talk about. 'Let's get a working visa to Australia', someone said. Australia had no real attraction for me but it turned out I was the only one in our group who obtained a visa and went," he says.

When he finished working in Australia, MacLean left for Auckland, Hawaii, Los Angeles and intended to hitchhike north, turn east and fly out of Washington back home to England,

But he met his future wife Christine, an Australian, in Hawaii, got as far as Los Angeles and went south with Christine to Mexico and further. They went back to England together but when Christine had to return to Australia MacLean came with her.

"We'll give it a year," they said. That was in 1987.

MacLean, former electrician, bookstore owner, publisher, editor and now high school history teacher, will feature in the Newcastle Writers Festival, launching a group art exhibition *Beyond The Print* (5pm, Friday, April 1, 57 Bull Street, and be a

speaker in *On The Fringe: Life As A Writer In Regional Australia* (1.30pm, Saturday, April 2), and *Mothers And Fathers: Why So Complicated?* (3pm, Saturday, April 2).

Regional writing, MacLean said, gives a real sense of place when done well.

"Cormac McCarthy and Tim Winton are excellent examples of this," he says.

"You don't have to know a lot of the local terminology in any of their books but they give that immediate sense of place through their writing."

"There are people everywhere who feel they are on the edge to everybody who has some creative input - they feel they are on the margin."

"For instance, in the Northern Territory, Alice Springs is where it's at; Tennant Creek is regional by comparison but to a yet smaller place, Tennant Creek is where it's at. Regional writing is a bit like that - the fun is always elsewhere."

The author of *Five Boxes* has been writing and editing for 25 years but still harbours doubts about his talent to write.

"I don't think I have any kind of gift at all," MacLean says. "Every time I write something I think it might be the last thing I ever write."

If I put something out and people like it that's incredibly rewarding.

"But then I also think that I might have been at my peak and that everything after won't stand up to scrutiny. So, if anything, having good feedback makes the next bit of writing even harder - can I match it?"

"Is it easy? Not at all. I often hate it but then if I don't do it I get twitchy."

MacLean has written fiction but gave up on it because, as he says, for him at least, it demanded a level of selfishness he couldn't maintain.

"I find that it's so hard keeping the imaginary world that I've created alive and in my head while I'm writing that I can't think about the real world of family, friends and work," he says.

MacLean is soon to embark on another adventure, teaching in a high school in Lightning Ridge until the end of the year.

"I had been editing for years but it is a very isolating experience and I wanted to get back into the world with people around me," he says. "I felt I had something I could give and I enjoy the subject I teach."

Newcastle Writers Festival, April 1-3. [newcastlewritersfestival.org.au](http://newcastlewritersfestival.org.au)



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