

Not a 'lazy boy' himself

Former city boy turned novelist Carl Shuker finds the Timaru he grew up in has changed, that "it feels like a completely different city actually, I don't feel the history there anymore". He talks to Emma Bailey about his latest novel, *The Lazy Boys*, and the part Timaru plays in it.

Good fiction should disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed, an idol of Timaru born novelist Carl Shuker once said.

Advice he has taken to heart with his second novel, *The Lazy Boys*, being compared to *A Clockwork Orange*, as it puts the cultures of Otago University and the central character's home town of Timaru under the microscope.

"I don't quite see the *Clockwork Orange* angle myself. I wanted to write a nihilistic, punky white novel which was uncompromising and was about the things around me that troubled me and that I loved," Shuker said.

"I wanted to do a first person novel where the narrator was quite unreliable."

The setting of the book runs close to Shuker's life too. He attended Otago University after finishing at Timaru Boys High School.

"I knew I did not want to write an autobiographical novel, but I did write about things that I knew."

The main character, Richey "Souze" Sauer, is caught up in a debauched first year. With a sexual harassment charge pending, he leaves his hall of residence "Unicol" and moves into a flat called "Strangeways" with two of his mates.

"What kind of man's going to be sitting on his arse, smoking dope and drinking beer with those losers and picking holes in his arms," the character's father says of his decision to shift.

Academia does not feature largely in Richey's first year as he misses most of his classes, and drinks and takes drugs through his student loan, making an art form out of beer "bongs".

Set in 1994, the dark side of Otago University emerges as Richey's grip on reality becomes even more tenuous, and he struggles to identify with the all-consuming rugby culture. He even asks Marc Ellis for advice at "Gardies", a student bar.

"I am sick and tired and bored of rugby," Shuker says down the phone from London.

"We are so saturated in it. The characters in the story know they are just being lazy for going along with it. They mock it, but they don't go the next step and develop their own language."

Otago wasn't the only place where Richey struggled with the culture. Memories of Timaru Boys High are also bleak, and Shuker too recalls it as being a constrictive "mind set".

"Boys that came out of the school at that time had a really constrictive mindset because they weren't exposed to enough, probably true of most single sex schools."

Reading the novel you worry about others who might have struggled with the same demons as Richey, but interestingly, Shuker found writing the book liberating.

"It sort of romanticises some of the darkest stuff about the south in New Zealand."

"Writing it I am inventing it rather than writing about me."

"The book is not about solutions, but it is does put some of the problems out there for people to see."

His parents still live in Timaru and his latest book has not led to his "excommunication".

"My father doesn't read books and my mother has read it but they know it is not personal, it is art. But it is hard for them."

"However, you can't make art to keep your parents happy."



CARL SHUKER: "I knew I did not want to write an autobiographical novel, but I did write about things that I knew."

Fourteen years have passed since Shuker called Timaru home. He has since completed a BA at Canterbury University and spent long periods of time in Japan.

"My parents have shifted house so it (Timaru) feels different now."

"It feels like a completely different city actually, I don't feel the history there anymore."

His first published book, *The Method Actors*, is set in Tokyo and won the 2006 Prize in Modern Letters.

The award earned him \$65,000 and has given him time to work on his third novel, which is nearing completion.

"I actually wrote *The Lazy Boys*

first, I started it when I was 24 and out of frustration did Bill Manhire's creative writing course at Vic to try and get it published."

He wrote *The Method Actors* while on the course and sought out an American publisher.

"I was talking to a few New Zealand publisher but thought New Zealand was too small an audience for the book so it was published in America."

"I told them (the American publishers) I had another book I had written, which was *The Lazy Boys*, and they read it and said 'how the hell are we going to market this?'"

The publishing house was quite

"author-centric," he said, and eventually they settled on selling it as a modern-day *Clockwork Orange*.

"Penguin have picked the book up and they have rushed the publishing ahead in New Zealand, they wanted to get it out for Christmas. I'm not sure it is quite the right book to appear in someone's stocking," he joked.

He has been in London for the past eight months and spent most of it writing.

"I am miserable when I don't write and I am enjoying writing full time."

With his second book attracting strong reviews, he looks set to ward off misery for a long time to come yet.

From The Lazy Boys

Excerpts from *The Lazy Boys*:
Boys:

■ Seeking advice from Marc Ellis:

I put my mug down on the bar and follow him and just outside the toilet door I say, "Marc".

He turns to me and says in a kind of sigh, "Yep?" My heart's beating hard and I try and look him in the eyes.

"I was wondering if I could talk to you," I say.

"Piss, mate" he says pointing to the toilets. "Piss now, talk later," then he disappears into the toilet.

I light a cigarette and smoke it hard, wondering what the f&*k I'm doing, wondering why I'm here, what I'm looking for, what am I going to say to him?

There are chants of "Taaa...go" over the song the band is playing now, "There is no Depression in New Zealand", and I see Jeff Wilson at the far end of the bar surrounded mostly by girls, not boys, and it seems as if it is getting darker in here, maybe they're dimming the lights as it gets later, to generate a mood.

I run a little personal inventory that tells me I've drunk 11 or 12 cans and one and half jugs but towards this figure I can't say what I feel either way.

Then he's there, in the door to the toilets, and he sees me waiting and walks vaguely in my direction, adjusting his fly with one hand, sipping beer from the jug held in his other hand.

"So what's your pressing problem then, mate?" he says standing feet wide apart alongside me, assessing the crowd like he owns it . . .

■ Timaru Boys High School:

Another memory. Matt in third form being held by one of the prefects over the banister of the balcony outside one of the prefabs, his art folder ripped and pictures blowing away over the concrete.

He was reaching back, trying to grab the railing when the senior boy dropped him, but he had reached back too far, his hands going past the banister, and when he fell the banister caught him up in the armpits and wretched both his arms up behind him and he fell forward onto the concrete, his gray shirt actually ripped under the arms. I remember the white threads, Matt crying, amazed.

Rowling names last book in Potter saga

British author J.K. Rowling announced on Thursday that the seventh and final book in her wizard saga will be called *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*.

But fans of the series that has already sold an estimated 300 million copies worldwide were kept guessing the publication date has not been set.

The intriguing and ominous title had Potter aficionados puzzling over what might happen to the bespectacled hero.

"Will a favourite character die? Could Harry himself face a grisly demise? How will it all end?" asked Sam Harrison, children's buyer at the British bookchain Waterstone's.

"But surely the question all Potter fans will want answering as soon as possible is - when can they get their hands on a copy?" he said.

Rowling, whose creation has turned her into one of the world's richest and most successful authors, revealed on her website this week "I'm now writing scenes that have been planned, in some cases, for a dozen years or even more."

"I am alternately elated and overwrought. I both want, and don't want, to finish this book (don't worry, I will)".

She said in the diary entry on her official Website (www.jkrowling.com) that Potter had now inveigled his way into her dreams.

"For years now, people have asked me whether I ever dream that I am 'in'



JK Rowling

Harry's world," Rowling wrote. "The answer was 'no' until a few nights ago when I had an epic dream in which I was, simultaneously, Harry and the narrator."

Rowling described how, as Harry, she was searching for the Horcrux (a magical object), while as the narrator in the dream she knew where it was all along.

She saw waiters and waitresses from the cafe where she has been writing the book walking on stilts making them "at least 15 feet high. Perhaps I should cut back on the caffeine".

She gave no clues as to what will happen at the end of the upcoming book, amid speculation that some of the characters, possibly Harry himself, will die.

The Potter books have a huge influence on the financial results of their US and British publishers, Scholastic and Bloomsbury.

Though it published the paperback edition of the sixth book this year, Bloomsbury warned on December 11 that profits could widely miss analysts' forecasts because of sluggish pre-Christmas book sales and other factors.

This wiped out nearly one-third of its market capitalisation.

Kyle Good, spokeswoman for Rowling's US publisher Scholastic Corp, said they had not received a date for when they would receive the manuscript nor when the book would be published.

Rowling's last novel, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, was her most successful book in the US, she said, selling 6.9 million copies in the first 24 hours.

The book series has sold an estimated 300 million copies worldwide, making Rowling one of the most successful authors of all time. A film franchise has also taken the box office by storm, earning billions of dollars from four films made so far.

Rowling, 41, said she had seen a 20-minute clip from *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, the fifth film based on her series due out next year, which she called "fantastic".

Earlier this year Rowling said at least two characters would die in the final book, but she did not name them.

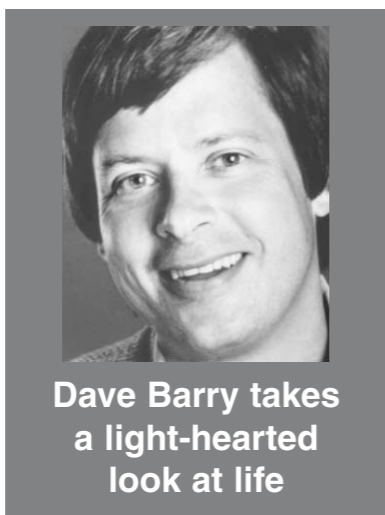
Beware – it's the revolt of the rodents

Once again, we are forced to ask ourselves, as a society, whether nature should be legal.

Consider a story from the June 22 *Manchester (New Hampshire) Union Leader*, written by Paul Tracy and sent in by alert reader Arnie Alpert. This story states that on June 20 a Laconia, New Hampshire, police officer was called to the municipal water-treatment facility in response to - and as you read this column, please bear in mind that I am not making any of these newspaper quotations up - "a report of a suspicious-acting woodchuck that would not let people out of the building".

The officer sized up the situation and, according to the story, "determined that the animal needed to be euthanised and tried to run it over with his cruiser". So far, so good. Law-enforcement experts will tell you, after they've had a few belts, that in a situation where a member of the marmot family is holding people hostage in a sewage plant, the textbook response is to drive a police car over the alleged perpetrator, then, if necessary, advise it of its rights.

Unfortunately, things did not go exactly according to plan. The story quotes a plant employee as saying, "When he got out after running over it, I think he thought it was dead; then



Dave Barry takes a light-hearted look at life

the thing sprung up and attacked him."

At this point, the officer - and if you have never been attacked by a woodchuck, then do not second-guess this decision - pulled his 9mm revolver and commenced firing.

"We think he emptied a clip," a plant employee is quoted as saying, "but we could only find eight casings on the pavement."

The story states that during the battle, the officer, seeking to escape the woodchuck, "jumped up on the cruiser and injured his knee".

Fortunately, before anybody else could be hurt, the woodchuck went to that Big Burrow in the Sky.

I wish I could tell you that this was an isolated incident. I wish I could look you in the eyeball and say, "This was just one lone disgruntled woodchuck, possibly a former postal employee, who fortunately will never again terrorise humanity, thanks to a quick-acting police officer, who, fortunately, was not carrying nuclear weapons".

But I cannot say that. For one thing, I lack the lung capacity. For another thing, I have here an article from the *Gaithersburg (Maryland) Gazette*, written by April E. Fulton and sent in by several alert readers, which states, "Nine residents of the South Village area of Montgomery Village - two adults and seven children - were playing near Docena Court on the morning of June 15 when they suddenly were charged by a band of about a dozen squirrels".

The article quotes one of the women - who was bitten on the foot - as saying: "We were just playing in the yard, like we do every day, and suddenly, out of nowhere, about 12 squirrels started charging us, making these high-pitched, shrill noises."

A neighbour is quoted as saying: "The squirrels that day went crazy."

The article states that on June 21, a representative of the Maryland

Department of Natural Resources inspected the area and "found no abnormal behaviour from the squirrels".

Of course not. They may be squirrels, but they are not stupid. They're not about to go after a government official, not after what happened to the woodchuck. No, they put on a cute little Walt Disney show for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, squeaking and scampering around with acorns in their cheeks. But you may rest assured that as soon as the coast was clear, they resumed smoking tiny cigarettes and planning their next attack.

They will stop at nothing, as we can see from the following headline from a September 2, 1994, front-page article in the *Missoula Missoulian*, written by Michael Downs and sent in by many alert readers. Headed **FLAMING SQUIRRELS IGNITE FIRE**, the story states that "two electrocuted squirrels fell from a power line Thursday morning, their flaming bodies igniting a small grass fire near Tarkio".

A fire official is quoted as saying that it could have been a male and a female squirrel engaged in an act of "burning rodent passion". (The fire official does not point out that both "Rodent Passion" and "Flaming Squirrels" would be excellent names

for rock bands; this was probably just an oversight.)

At this point, you're saying: "Dave, you have presented ample journalistic evidence here to prove that the animal kingdom is attempting, for whatever reason, to wipe out the entire human race. But at least members of the news media are safe!"

I wish I could agree, but, tragically, I cannot - not in light of a recent Associated Press item from Kennewick, Washington, sent in by several alert readers, which begins: "A TV reporter's hair gel apparently attracted a swarm of bees that stung him more than 30 times yesterday."

The reporter was doing a story about beekeeping when the attack occurred; the story states that the beekeeper, in an effort to help, covered the reporter's head with a protective hood, but unfortunately, the hood "also turned out to contain bees".

I am sure that you, as a person concerned about the First Amendment, have the same reaction to this story as I did, namely: How come this never happens, on-camera, to my local TV reporters?

Until we get solid answers to this and many other questions raised by this column, I am urging everyone to avoid all contact with nature in any form, including vegetables. Speaking of which, you should also write your congressman.