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David Kelly
Russell Shakespeare

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Anne-Maree Lyons
Georgie Smith

Subeditors

Michael Gruenbeck
Caitlin Smith
Catherine Smith

Editorial Qweekend,

The Courier-Mail,
PO Box 130, Brisbane,
Qld 4001

Phone: (07) 3666 6338
Fax: (07) 3666 6693
Email: Qweekend@qnp.
newsitd.com.au

Advertising Director

Stephen Tait

National

Advertising Manager
Phil Jennings
(02) 9288 1401

QLD

Group Sales Manager
Paul Eteen-Bliss (07) 3666 6117

NSW

Advertising Manager
Patrick Harrington (02) 9288 8495

Account Manager
Sophie Georgiou (02) 9288 8496

Sales Co-ordinator
Lisa Panarello (02) 9288 8498

VIC

Advertising Manager
Sandy Smircic (03) 9292 1793

Account Manager
Carlie Monasso (03) 9292 1820

Sales Co-ordinator
Kerri Benton (03) 9292 1820

Assistant Prepress Manager

Grant Fleet

Digital Imaging

John Bee

Advertising Production

(07) 3666 6744

Advertising

GPO Box 130

Brisbane 4001

Phone (07) 3666 6491

Fax (07) 3666 8520

Email: jenningsp@qnp.
newsitd.com.au

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on the cover



Little Britain's David Walliams (left) and Matt Lucas. © Celebrity Pictures LA



regulars

08 onthecouch

Rodney Chester psychoanalyses Suncorp CEO John Mulcahy

10 thebigQ

Are right-handed people superior? Plus Kim Sweetman lists nine things women still can't do in 2007

11 jukebox

Setting the record straight on Ian Dury's 1977 anthem *Sex & Drugs & Rock 'n' Roll*

12 hotticket

New York's Scissor Sisters turn Brisbane's RiverStage into a gigantic dance club for one night only: tonight

35 fashion

Put the wardrobe workhorse to the style test with the latest range of T-shirts in any combination of colours and shapes

38 chefschool

Sausages need not be a mystery wrapped in an enigmatic skin. Try Andrew Mirosh's ideas for some handmade cylindrical delights

40 reviews

Des Houghton heads to Southport for *classico Italiano* at Fellini Ristorante; Ken Gargett sings the praises of Queensland merlot, particularly from the Granite Belt



features

14 yeah but no but yeah but no

As *Little Britain Live* descends on Brisbane, David Walliams double-talks in *Qweekend*

18 starve yourself for life

Devotees of the Calorie Restriction diet say it helps you live longer and ramps up the romp

24 life and times of a life model

Pearl Goldman, 88, recalls her years as a star of stage, screen and Norman Lindsay's studio

28 lights, colour, reaction

Photographer David LaChapelle utilises celebrities as models in his stunning still-lives

32 with love from london

His first novel is a hit in Britain but Brisbane writer Jonathan Drapes has no local publisher



43 escapes

Qweekend takes in the mountain air at a luxury resort with a difference: Peppers Spicers Peak Lodge, Maryvale

44 space

Stovetop coffee makers and plungers that not only do the job but look good while they're at it

45 timeout

Ponder our puzzles, compose a cartoon caption or just potter about in the garden

46 backchat

Mike O'Connor encounters the oxymoron that is the modern convenience store

from cavill ave to earls court

He's a Queensland writer based in London with a hit new novel set on the Gold Coast – but don't expect to see Jonathan Drapes on local bookshelves anytime soon.

Story Jane Cornwell Photography Tim Anderson





I love the Gold Coast,” says Jonathan Drapes, sitting in London literary haunt the Groucho Club on a grey Saturday afternoon. “I love the kitsch, the seediness. The poker machines and the strip joints. The way the high-rises cast shadows on the beach.

“I spent a lot of time on the Gold Coast as a kid,” he continues, flashing a smile. “It was only a 50-minute drive from Brisbane but it never felt like the real world. It was this hyper-real place which crammed an unnerving amount of energy and diversity onto one thin strip of sand. The perfect place, really, to set a book.”

That book has been a few years in the writing – 34-year-old Drapes’s CV boasts jobs as varied as copywriter, restaurant reviewer, bus-counter, personal trainer, cartoonist and model – but its time has come. Published in Britain by Macmillan New Writing, a prestigious new imprint for tyro novelists, *Never Admit To Beige* is a rollicking comic yarn about Trigger Harvey, an Englishman who has lost his job, flat, friends and trousers. An insecure, irresponsible wastrel, he attributes this run of bad fortune to his Fijian figurine Roger, a gift from a Polynesian shaman. The only way to lift the curse and recover his luck, “Trigg” figures, is to find Roger’s blessed twin – hidden somewhere among the neon, concrete, sun and money of Queensland’s very own Las Vegas.

In Britain, the book has been heralded as the arrival of a vibrant new voice – BBC Radio Five Live made it Book of the Month last November, sending sales soaring. In Britain, that is. For the time being, the novel will be distributed in Australia as an imported trade-paperback; it won’t have the visibility of Australian-published novels but will be available to order from bookshops and online.

Being an Australian author with a book set and written in Australia but published exclusively in Britain feels a little bizarre, Drapes admits. “Someone might still buy the rights,” he shrugs, casually optimistic. Having started writing the novel back in 1997 and having dealt with the usual round of rejections from literary agents, he is sanguine about its fate. He doesn’t believe in fate, fortune or even karma, mind you (as Trigg says, “fate is just religion for atheists”) but they fascinate him just the same. All are themes examined in the novel.

“I wanted to explore the lack of responsibility that goes with thinking someone else will sort things out for you,” says Drapes. “Trigg comes to realise that you have to do things yourself. And that bad things happen to good people and good things to bad people. That there is a lot of dumb luck in the universe.

“That sounded a bit wanky, didn’t it – ‘I wanted to explore’?” He grimaces at the thought of appearing pretentious. A darkly handsome yet modest and decent bloke – the sort mothers would adore – Drapes is at pains not to come over too literary. (The Groucho Club was my choice, not his; we agreed that his local pub in Earls Court would be

too noisy.) “I’m pretty cynical about people who go on about the fact they’re writing a book. I wanted to do it rather than talk about it,” he says. His writing prowess, too, is instinctive rather than cultivated. He says he’d love to be a full-time writer one day. His job as creative director at respected London advertising agency CDP feels almost incidental.

In 1997, Drapes was runner-up in the Queensland Young Writers Awards at the Brisbane International Writers Festival for his short story *Naked Ambition*.

“It was about a guy going for a job in an ad agency. It went from him getting in the shower to arriving at the agency to having panic attacks in the lift and sweating all over his light blue shirt. An introspective, anxious, angst-ridden guy, not a million miles away from the character of Trigg.” And perhaps the author as well? Drapes laughs. “I’m sure I’m in there,” he says, gesturing towards the novel on the table between us.

“It was a huge buzz being shortlisted,” he adds. “I met the judges for morning tea at the State Library. [Brisbane-based novelists] Nick Earls and Sue Gough were among these people who were talking about my ‘writing style’. All I could think was, ‘I’ve got a writing style? Wow!’”

Gough, long a champion of young writers, told him how refreshing it was to read a piece of work that was light and witty, not self-conscious and writerly. The other judges told him how much like Earls’s work it was (well, apart from Earls, who was supportive nonetheless). “I didn’t know his work then, but I love it now. I think it was Earls who said, ‘The best thing about being a writer is you get 12 months to tell a joke’, and that’s kind of where I’m at. I’m not that spontaneous, not that good at being off-the-cuff. I like to observe things, see the humour in situations. So when Katherine saw this pamphlet at the library for this short-story competition, she gave it to me. And I had a go.”

DRAPES PEPPERS OUR CONVERSATION WITH

references to his longtime girlfriend Katherine Cullerton, a dietician/nutritionist specialising in indigenous health. “Katherine sat me down and said, ‘So what do you want to do?’” he says. “Katherine has a contagious enthusiasm. She and I take it in turns with career hits.”

“Katherine has been incredible throughout the whole thing,” he reiterates in an email the next day. The couple has been together since Drapes was 19, back when he was still living at home in Alderley in Brisbane’s inner north and studying sports science at the University of Queensland. The youngest of four children to John, a PE teacher, and Margaret, a primary schoolteacher, Drapes had grown up playing basketball, tennis, soccer and rugby union, doing laps in the backyard pool.

His creative streak was there, though. At the age of nine he was awarded a Golden Rough by his Marcellin College Primary School for the best story about going to the moon. A keen surfer, he read *Tracks* and snickered at the adventures of its tube-►

authors.

riding pig, Captain Goodvibes. He doodled in class and tuned into '80s comedy sketch show *The D-Generation*, delighting in the japes of Magda Szubanski, Michael Veitch, *et al.* He soaked it all up.

"Comedy was important. When I was doing sports science presentations I'd always include a Gary Larson cartoon, or a bit of quirky film footage, to make them more interesting." The folly of his original career choice became apparent once he found himself standing on gym floors with nothing to do. Which is where Cullerton comes in again: "Katherine helped me realise that I was craving something more creative, something in advertising or journalism." He enrolled in a postgraduate degree in communications.

That same year, Cullerton encouraged him to enter the short-story competition. He also started his novel. "After *Naked Ambition* did well people were telling me to write more short stories, to take time finding my voice. But I was like, 'No! I'm going to write a book!'"

And without really knowing how to craft one, he jumped straight in. Armed with a title, *All That Glitters* (later changed to *Never Admit to Beige*, a line lifted from one of Trigg's musings), he developed his plot simply by putting himself in Trigg's shoes and wondering what he'd do next. He created secondary characters: menacing yet vulnerable Yakuza boss Mr Somatsu, laid-back world surfing champion Ian Berrisford, savvy schoolgirl accomplice and love interest Karen ... He worried about how they'd come across. One element, however, was a given.

"The Gold Coast was the perfect veneer for all sorts of dodgy goings-on. I remembered sneaking into the casino as an underage kid, being there among the bright, gaudy lights and slightly sinister-looking people."

To make ends meet while he wrote and studied, he turned to modelling. "I was rubbish at it," he says, clearly embarrassed. But not that rubbish: Drapes shimmied down catwalks in a host of Brisbane shopping centres and also in Sydney, where he lived while completing the intensive AWARD advertising course. He got a job as a copywriter and stayed on for two years, writing short stories and his novel in the evenings and at weekends, and listening to a lot of Powderfinger. Two stories, *The Pros and Cons of Dating Wildlife* (about one girl's encounter with a seagull) and *McFilthy* (about one man's foot race with a homeless alcoholic) came first and second in the 2001 Federation of Australian Writers Moocoooola Short Story Competition. "So I knew I was doing something right. I sent the first draft of the book off and finally Sue Gough's agent said he'd represent it. I thought I was there!"

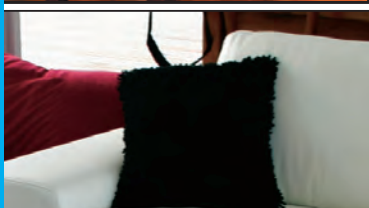
He wasn't. Drapes and Cullerton were in Mexico, at the start of a round-the-world adventure, when news came that his agent Tony Williams, who died in October 2002, was suffering from cancer. It would be more than a year, with a seven-month live/work/surf stint in Costa Rica (where his cartoons were published in the English-language newspaper), before Drapes thought about his novel again. The

couple was travelling in and out of Europe when Cullerton accepted a job in Cardiff, Wales. Unable to find gainful employment – his stint as a bus-counter lasted one freezing winter's morning – Drapes went with her. For weeks he sat inside and rewrote Trigg as an Englishman. When they moved to London, the "we-like-it-but" responses of British literary agents to *Never Admit to Beige* turned Drapes's attention to cartooning. He sent his manuscript off to Macmillan New Writing anyway, then returned to Brisbane, taking a job in advertising, renting a flat in St Lucia and doing up a Queenslander in East Brisbane.

Drapes and Cullerton have been back in London for eight months now, by choice. Aside from their regular side-trips (including a surfing break in Gambia over Christmas), they're staying put for the foreseeable future, making the most of their child-free status until the time is right.

Drapes glances at the cover of his novel, which depicts a wooden figurine on a long golden beach. "If this book does well, great," he says breezily. "If it opens doors, that's great, too. I'd love to write for a living. That way I could live anywhere I want. I'm halfway through a second book, which I'm really pleased with so far, so you never know."

So what is this second book about? Does it involve the Gold Coast, Brisbane, or at least Queensland? Drapes is silent, takes another long sip of his mineral water. I'm not going to tell you, his smiling eyes seem to say. Now that *would* be unlucky. ■
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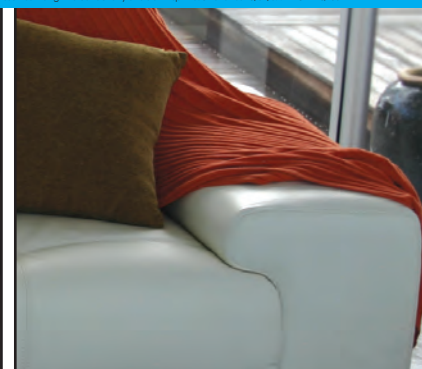
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