


Here we are read us

Women, disability and writing



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See page 22 for information about accessible formats.

Introduction

Here are eight writers. They include novelists, poets, essayists, playwrights, memoirists and bloggers. Some are emerging writers, others well established. They come from throughout New Zealand.

They are spinners of stories, holders of mirrors and openers of doors.

Their lives are diverse and influenced by many factors. They also have something important that connects them—the lived experience of disability.

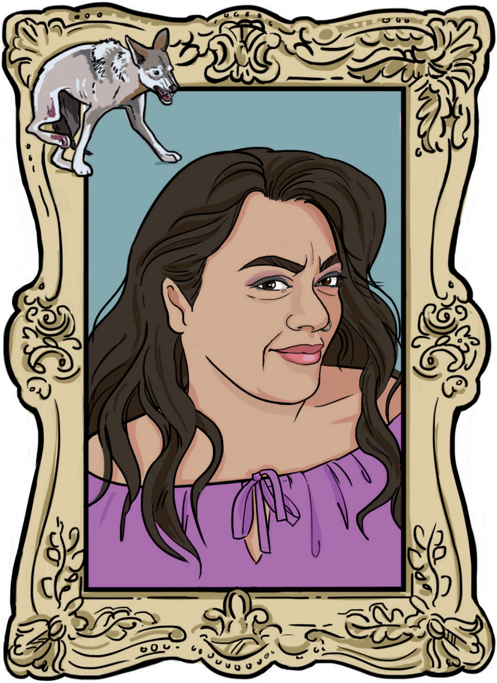
That experience has an impact. It takes root, pushes its way into consciousness and into words on the page.

In this pocket book you get to meet them through their unique symbol, the genres they write in and their take on the intersection between writing and disability.

When the voice of disabled writers is strong, their words, our words, can transform worlds.

Those voices are often missing from mainstream New Zealand writing and we want to change that.

Robyn Hunt and Trish Harris
Crip the Lit



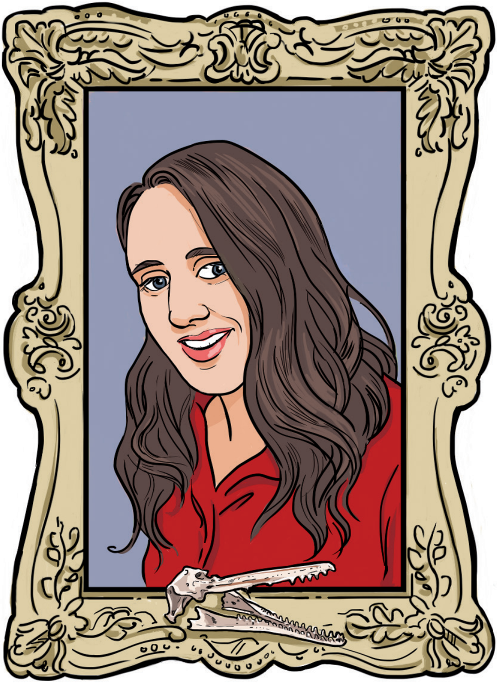
Tusiata Avia

The dog in the corner of my frame is wild, howling, closely connected to the spirits. She is also wounded, but when she needs to, she walks on three legs, lies down to rest and licks her wounds to heal them.

My ‘wounds’ are mostly invisible, except when I’m having a seizure. Epilepsy is not what I would choose if I was ordering what to have in my life, but it is what I have.

I mostly write poetry. I’ve also written and published children’s books, creative non-fiction, a radio documentary, and a one woman show called *Wild Dogs Under My Skirt*—now a play for six women. There is also a novel bubbling away.

My epilepsy used to be fairly under control with meds. Now I have seizures often. I have injured myself many times including breaking bones. Recently, I wrote and performed a series of ‘coming out’ poems. Previously I hadn’t written much about epilepsy except in veiled ways. Writing helps me say: Epilepsy is not shameful. It too, is part of my life. Being in this publication is part of that.

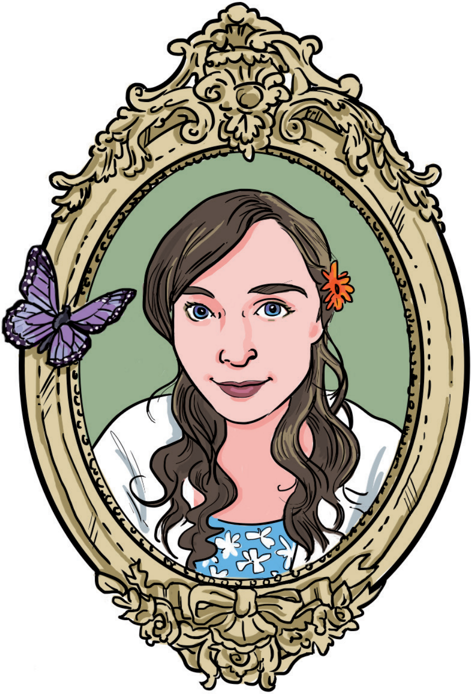


Steff Green

As a kid, my wonky eyes made me different and I was a victim of bullying. To escape the world I lived in I turned to books and obsessive interests—dinosaurs first off—that's why I chose the skull for my frame. In a way, the dinosaurs became my friends. They featured in my first science fiction series and to this day I'm still fascinated by them.

I'm a writer of the strange and fantastical. Under the pen names S C Green and Steffanie Holmes, I am a *USA TODAY* bestselling author with more than 30 science fiction and paranormal romance novels and novellas to my name.

In one of my books I created a character—a very flawed character—with a disability. It was hard to write but I was determined to make the character nuanced because usually disabled characters are portrayed narrowly as either a victim or a villain. I use characters and plot to find a way to articulate my own experiences, partly so that I can help myself to become a better person, partly so that I can help others to survive difficult situations and understand themselves better.



Helen Vivienne Fletcher

When my mum was dying of brain cancer, she asked for butterflies in her room. Butterflies are also a symbol for lupus.

Because of this, butterflies have become a reminder to me that there are still beautiful things in dark places. They are a symbol of change—transformation—and show that a different life doesn't always mean a bad one.

I write children's and young adult fiction, spoken word poetry, plays and a blog called *Little Miss Autoimmune*. In each of these genres I write on a wide range of themes, disability included. I have a very black sense of humour and my writing is often quite dark. In my young adult novels especially I enjoy exploring dark, twisty stories.

Being a writer has taught me the perseverance to keep going in a body that doesn't always work. Or perhaps being disabled gives me the patience to write? Either way, my disability inspires my writing in many ways and my passion for writing keeps me going.

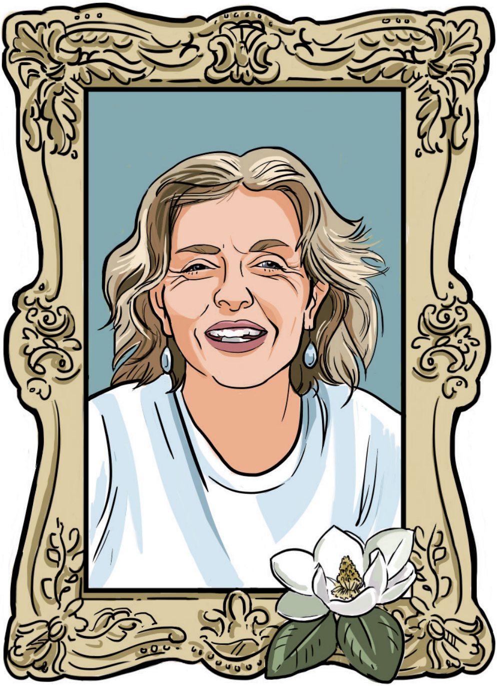
Charlotte Simmonds

‘Shallot’ sounds like Charlotte. I wish I was the only Charlotte in the world and had a copyright on my name and all variations of it.

(But I would not ban the eschalotte, canola or turnip—those little rapscallions.)

I write self-satire, poetry, plays, performance pieces, short fiction, non-fiction, theses, reviews, the English versions of German websites and Russian MMORPGs, and transcriptions of your conversations with Alexa and Google.

The biographical note on my 2008 poetry collection says I have bipolar and the writing within implies this. Now, in 2019, it is rather ‘autism spectrum disorder (level 1)’ or Asperger syndrome. Whether it will still be this in 2029 remains to be seen. The implicit autism and neurodiversity I write about is more real and lived than any explicitly autistic character by a non-autistic author.



Michele Leggott

From November to February grandiflora magnolia flowers perch on the deep green foliage of the trees at our place in Auckland.

Doves koo-roogh in them and as my sight faded it was entrancing to imagine the flowers as birds. My 2008 Poet Laureate tokotoko incorporates the magnolia/dove motif.

I write poetry that aims to recover voices that have disappeared from the main narratives of Aotearoa New Zealand writing. At the moment I’m tracing the work of artist Emily Cumming Harris who was writing poems in New Plymouth during the war of 1860-61.

I’m a writer and I’m also losing my sight. When I write from the personal it’s as a witness for others who are in the same situation and can’t speak about it. I, like other writers who do this, become a conduit for those experiences moving from the invisible to the visible.

Trish Harris

I am a part-time crane operator. Every time I unload my power chair from the car, the tilt of the ground affects the swing and balance of the hoisted chair. Sometimes I manoeuvre it easily, other times with difficulty. Tilt and swing and balance. Living in an unconventional body demands much the same skill.

I've written two books—a memoir with essays and a poetry collection. I love the way words and images can enhance each other. Maybe that's why I'd like book number three to be a children's picture book!

I was cautioned in my 20s not to write about disability related things because I would become pigeon-holed as a writer—as if my visible disability was so loud that to write about it as well would obliterate all other aspects of me. But for me, writing in this area is like dipping a bucket down into a well. What you haul up is often deeply personal yet has a strong universal connection.

Te Awhina Arahanga

When I turned 50 I wrote a note to myself: blow bubbles, buzz with bees and dance in the clouds. My head has always been in the clouds with way too many internal conversations. It makes it hard to concentrate, so I tend to drift. Or procrastinate—eyes looking upward towards the streaks and puffs, time capsules of the past and what could be.

I’m a professional graffiti artist who is also a poet. I write on walls in museums and exhibitions, and on interpretation panels. It’s an odd genre. The words begin flat as if sleeping on paper, handwritten with a Black Pilot V5 or Lemy fountain pen with an extra fine nib—always black ink, never blue. The finished versions are typed and mounted.

I was once embarrassed to admit I’ve been legally classified as insane. You end up with scar tissue—mentally, emotionally and physically. Every now and then you get some peace. It’s not often, but when it comes it’s usually because you have a black pen in your hand and a cloud overhead.

Robin Hyde

(Iris Wilkinson) 1906—1939

‘I am caught in the hinge of a slowly opening door, between one age and another. Between the tradition of respectability…and the new age.’

Robin Hyde was a poet, novelist and pioneering woman journalist from the age of 17. Her work took her not only throughout New Zealand but to China (during the Second Sino-Japanese War) and on to England where she died aged 33.

As an unmarried mother and working woman Robin struggled against the social mores of her time, intensified by her gruelling experience of disability and mental illness. She wrote frankly of her ‘lameness’ and pain, describing herself as a ‘be-crutched writer’, the effects of a permanent knee injury resulting in a lifelong relationship with opiates. She wrote of loss, consolation and ‘painful experiences of dislocation and states of near death...’ She said time spent in asylums (she preferred this name to mental hospitals) gave her rest, freedom, independence and space to write: ‘I needed madness if I were to survive.’

Her life was short, but her body of work substantial. It has found a welcome home among readers of this age.

Why do you write?

Tusiata I write because there's an itch or a spangle and when I give it attention and space it expands to something full blown. It teaches me something. I write because sometimes the spirits are whispering and if I put pen to paper they will speak.

Steff For me, the best moments are when I get fan mail from readers who say, 'Thank you for allowing me to see myself in your books. Thank you for getting me through this difficult time in my life.'

Helen I write simply because I love stories. It's most rewarding when I feel someone has connected with what I've written—when it's changed the way they see something or has made their own experience feel validated.

Charlotte When I was younger, writing felt compulsive, but much less so now. My last decade has been filled with rejection. Art needs an audience or it dies. Perhaps I keep writing because I'm so angry; perhaps it's one of the few things I can control. Comedy is increasingly important to me and I write the humour I personally need to survive.

Trish I love playing with language. As a writer I use words to stretch reality and grab it back, re-imagined. I am so grateful when other writers have done that for me.

Te Awhina The rewards can be very personal. When my son was interviewed for a prestigious overseas scholarship the panel asked what he'd take. He said a rugby ball and a poetry book called *Darkness in Light*. When your son chooses your poetry, other accolades are insignificant.

Michele Poetry is a language to hang on to when other languages start to disappear. I want to join those who travel light and lift darkness.

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TE AUAHA
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This pocket book is available

- in large print format
- as an audio book
- as an e-book
- as individual social media files (one on each writer)
- and in Braille and DAISY audio.

To order print copies and for downloadable files visit Crip the Lit's webpage: https://artsaccessadvocates.org.nz/Crip-the-Lit-telling-our-stories-our-way

The Braille and DAISY audio books are available on loan from the Blind Foundation library, Auckland.

In 2016 Robyn Hunt and Trish Harris formed Crip the Lit to celebrate and foster the work of Deaf and disabled writers.

It’s vital that disability is represented and celebrated as part of the richness and diversity of humanity in all genres of literature and in film, television and video.

Crip the Lit has run panels at Disability Pride events and Wellington’s LitCrawl weekend. At LitCrawl 2018 it presented ‘The Great Debate’ with participants debating for and against the moot: There is no such thing as a disabled writer. We are all just writers.

Eight women shine a spotlight on writing and disability through their beguiling portraits and thought-provoking words.

When a skill with words and the lived experience of disability meet head-on —what's the outcome? These writers get to the heart of the answer, exposing creative potential, nuance and an edge.

In the wake of *Suffrage 125* their words extend the story of women's experiences, this time through a disability lens.

Here we are, read us is produced by Crip the Lit. It is available in a range of accessible formats.