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## THE MAGUS

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Take a Las Vegas gambling magnate who believes in the usefulness of books, add a distinguished poet and a betting pool of natural talent. What do you get? A literary renaissance that has floored critics in the land of the long white cloud.

The three gaming resorts that make up the Mandalay Mile on the Las Vegas Strip seem to take the imagination about as far as it would ever want to go. A 36-storey smoked-glass pyramid shoots a brilliant beam of light 16 kilometres into space. Talking animatronic camels guide visitors to a full-scale reproduction of King Tutankhamen's tomb. A multi-tiered restaurant tower houses some 10,000 bottles of wine, plucked by bungy-jumping sommeliers.

However, the extracurricular activities of the Mandalay Resort Group president, Glenn Schaeffer, deal in imagination of a very different order.

Two years ago, Schaeffer underwrote Las Vegas' successful bid to become the first US city of asylum for writers fleeing repressive regimes. He also founded the non-profit International Institute of Modern Letters (IIML) to promote, protect and publish emerging writers.

Literature may seem an unusual interest for a magnate from capitalism's most surreal city, but there is no questioning his passion. "Literature is a form of social capital and an agent of social change," says Schaeffer, who prefers the designation "activist" to "philanthropist".

In fact he once dreamed of being called a writer. With a summa cum laude degree in literature from the University of California in Irvine, Schaeffer secured a place at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, America's most prestigious creative writing incubator. But he abandoned his first novel for a stockbroking job in Beverley Hills. "I needed the money," he recalls.

Working on Wall Street, Schaeffer was headhunted by Mandalay (then called Circus Circus) and in 1984, at the age of 30, became the group's financial head. Two decades on, the executive decided to recycle his gaming dollars to fund literary risk taking. "Wherever you've had free literary expression, you've had a progressive society," he says. "And what city better represents imaginative freedom in the new millennium than Las Vegas?"

Schaeffer found his answer in the city selected as the IIML's co-headquarters: Wellington. It's difficult to conceive of a more unlikely sister city for Las Vegas than the New Zealand capital, but Schaeffer insists "it's a natural place for me to be. By many measures, New Zealand is the freest nation in the world."

The gaming executive first came to New Zealand on a holiday eight years ago. He now co-owns a winery, Woollaston Estates, and a second home in the south island city of Nelson. But the key location factor for the IIML's southern hemisphere headquarters had nothing to do with New Zealand's usual bucolic lures. It was the creative writing program at Wellington's Victoria University.

Established by poet and English professor [Bill Manhire](#) in 1977, the program's list of alumni reads like a who's who of contemporary New Zealand writing. Between them, graduates have won all of

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the nation's major literary prizes. Some, like The Vintner's Luck author Elizabeth Knox, have found international acclaim.

Such is the program's local standing, according to **Manhire**, that it now effectively functions as a "talent spotting agency". Publishers concur. "We are lucky to have a course of such international calibre," says Penguin New Zealand publishing director, Geoff Walker, whose fiction list includes six **Manhire** alumni. "Penguin certainly takes note of students writing well on the course."

**Manhire's** stature in NZ letters is indeed hard to exaggerate. The country's first poet laureate, he's widely regarded as one of the leading poets of his generation. But it's his academic role that dominates.

"Future historians of New Zealand literature may refer to our period as the **Manhire** era," wrote Hugh Roberts, an associate professor of comparative literature at the University of California, Irvine (one of the IIML's three centres). "No-one has ever before had such influence."

For the cash-strapped Victoria University program, Schaeffer's intervention was a happy one, providing enough in the way of endowments and pledges to contain class sizes and expand its undergraduate courses.

The program also offers fellowships and exchanges with the three American IIML-associated creative writing programs, a network of literary heavyweights such as Salman Rushdie and Umberto Eco on the institute's advisory board, and Australasia's richest literary award, the \$NZ60,000 biennial Prize in Modern Letters. Such initiatives are a "vote of confidence in New Zealand writers", says **Manhire**, and a potentially lucrative link with the vast American market.

Schaeffer came to the program's rescue at a critical moment. Unhappy with budget cuts, **Manhire** had resigned from Victoria for the second time in 2000 when the gaming executive's "astonishing offer turned up out of the blue. I thought one of my friends was trying to con me", the IIML director recalls. What emerged was a strange marriage of true minds with a shared fascination for literature and gambling.

**Manhire** - who grew up surrounded by the horse-racing punters who frequented his parents' pubs - has seen chance pay off before. A medieval scholar specialising in Old Norse sagas, he was co-opted in 1975 to convene informal meetings for lonely English undergraduates who had elected to submit writing portfolios as part of their degree assessment.

"I fell into it by accident and made things up as I went along," **Manhire** recalls. Soon he was trying to unleash his students' imaginations through strange systems of chance: haikus derived from the contents of the evening paper racing page; poems thrown from words written on cardboard dice; stories pieced together haphazardly from cut-up texts.

By 1997, the course had morphed into a creative writing MA and a range of competitive entry undergraduate workshops spanning poetry, science fiction and children's writing. In 2002, 20 students were selected from hundreds of applicants for two MA streams - a scriptwriting degree was introduced this year - taught at the IIML's harbour-front Glenn Schaeffer house.

**Manhire's** MA class includes poets and novelists, fiction writers and memoirists. Some students have taken time out from busy lives in other cities. Victoria's creative writing MA can be a "very fast track to fame nowadays", **Manhire** admits. Budding poets used to walk into his original composition course - and walk out as playwrights. His MA students are more confident of their capabilities. Catherine Chidgey - now one of NZ's most recognised writers - says she "definitely had being published in mind" when she applied for the 1997 program.

One of her folio assessors was Victoria University Press publisher, Fergus Barrowman. He wanted her book. Chidgey had a London literary agent before she'd even completed her manuscript, the multi-award winning *In a Fishbone Church*, thanks to **Manhire**, who took a copy with him on a mid-year overseas trip. "I really do owe my whole career to **Bill's** course," she says.

In 1989, original composition graduate Elizabeth Knox became the first novelist published by Victoria University Press - and married the publisher. Over the next decade, Knox flirted with fame in her homeland. By 1998 she knew she "had a best seller" with *The Vintner's Luck*.

Knox's seventh novel made her a Kiwi heroine and a sought-after literary export, selling 100,000 copies worldwide and winning the inaugural \$A40,000 Tasmania Pacific Regional Prize. "This is a gorgeous novel," the London Times raved.

Today, **Manhire** graduates make up half of Barrowman's fiction and poetry lists. "Certainly publishers sit up straight when a manuscript arrives from someone who has done the course," says the VUP publisher. "But it's not an automatic process; and it can take years before [graduates] are published. The course is a learning process, not a factory for books," Barrowman says. Penguin's Walker contacts **Manhire** several times a year "to find out who are the stars". None of New Zealand's other creative writing programs "produce anywhere near the same calibre of writing", Walker says.

Across the Tasman, authors have been pitched to Picador publisher Nikki Christer on the strength of their association with **Manhire**. "His course is incredibly well respected," she says. "I'm not aware of any equivalents in Australia." That's not for lack of options - according to a 1999 survey by the Australian Association of Writing Programs, more than 140 courses were on offer at 37 local universities.

But achievement can be a "two-edged sword in a tall poppy society like New Zealand", says **Manhire**. "I've found myself in the odd position of advising some students whose books are coming out not to make a big deal of the fact they've come through the course because some reviewers will hold it against them."

Chief among critics' charges is that the **Manhire** course turns out clones. Across the globe, creative writing programs are commonly accused of churning out writers bearing typically minimalist and social realist voices. **Manhire** insists he doesn't want his students to "write like Raymond Carver. Any influence that I have is to develop their own distinctive voices." That's the stated aim of most creative writing courses.

But **Manhire** accomplishes it, his alumni maintain, by diversifying his student mix, separating himself from their assessment and withholding unnecessary advice. Says novelist Knox: "He has a light touch. He lets people become themselves." To debut novelist Paula Morris, "the image of Svengali **Bill** is ridiculous". Chidgey found his sessions "like attending therapy".

**Manhire's** gentle encouragement of his writers contrasts starkly with the rough treatment traditionally meted out internationally to Kiwi authors. Says VUP's Barrowman: "There's been a real prejudice in London, a sense that nothing good or interesting could come out of New Zealand almost by definition, because it's neither big, nor familiar, nor exotic enough."

Breakthrough books by Janet Frame and Keri Hulme have eroded such stereotypes, but the going is still tough for anyone working outside the main publishing centres. "No-one is desperately seeking out the next New Zealand novel in London or New York," says Penguin's Walker. Emily Perkins, who has lived in London since her short

story compilation *Not Her Real Name* (penned in **Manhire's** workshop) was published by Picador UK in 1996, says New Zealanders are on the scene, but they

aren't recognised as New Zealanders. She's a case in point: The Sunday Times called Perkins "one of Britain's most exciting young writers".

The New York Times may have described Chidgey's *Golden Deeds* as "a fascinating novel", but it was only after glowing reviews in the British press that any US publisher would talk to her agent, she says. Winning the inaugural Schaeffer-endowed Prize in Modern Letters in March - a prize judged by American writers - "could not have been better timed" for the book's US summertime launch, Chidgey notes.

Schaeffer says he wants to help "deserving voices" from New Zealand achieve huge American audiences. He finds it hard to recall those voices - apart from established authors Janet Frame and C.K. Stead - but the executive still believes the upcoming generation is "a match for anything in the US and our cultures are similar in many ways. We are both frontiers - like Australia."

Whatever the similarities, the literary traffic across the Tasman remains remarkably slight. Apart from Knox, young Kiwi writers haven't received mainstream attention in Australia. Australian publishers say they have no idea why New Zealanders don't sell.

"I'm a real fan of New Zealand writing," says Random House's Jane Palfreyman. "I'm mystified as to why it doesn't work over here." **Manhire** blames colonialism: "Our information still comes courtesy of the old centres of power."

However many stars emerge from **Manhire's** stable, not all of its graduates go on to establish writing careers.

But even critics such as Australian author Robert Dessaix, who has visited Victoria, admit that creative writing courses still have something of great value to teach - the ability to read critically and take pleasure in fine writing.

Schaeffer penned 62 pages of *Holy Shaker*, the novel about a barnstorming 1920s gospel singer that he began while studying at Iowa, before he realised that "sitting alone in a room and receiving rejection notices from publishers was not for me. I can be more influential as a literary activist for the cause of literature than by anything I can accomplish with my own pen," he says.

The IIML is a work-in-progress, but whatever direction it takes in Wellington is a decision for **Manhire**, Schaeffer stresses. In hindsight, Australia's budding writers may wish that Schaeffer had holidayed on their shores.

#### PAULA MORRIS - A STUNNING DEBUT

It may be the course of choice for budding New Zealand writers, but Paula Morris had never heard of Victoria University's Masters degree in creative writing until she interviewed its director, **Bill Manhire**, for the newsletter of the Kiwi Club of New York in 1999. The RCA Records marketing vice-president was trying to write a novel around her professional commitments. Her juggling act wasn't working out. Neither were the writing classes she was attending.

"They were hell," she recalls, "full of crazy people who were convinced they were about to make the big time." It had been 15 years since Morris had lived in New Zealand but, talking to **Manhire**, "I got the idea in my head that Wellington was the place where

I would have the time and space to write."

In 2001, Morris took flight. She left her career and her Manhattan home for the "opportunity to take myself seriously as a writer in a supportive, book-oriented environment". The resulting novel, *Queen of Beauty*, was far more ambitious than the book she had planned, Morris says, "but ... I wanted to strike out [into] uncharted territory".

**Manhire** describes the book's range as "quite extraordinary - from New Orleans to New Zealand, from the present day to the 1920s - and it has what people used to call a cast of thousands".

The story of a young expatriate researcher's journey home, *Queen of Beauty* won Morris the prize for best student folio. Penguin's Geoff Walker was also impressed. Within weeks of graduation, Morris had a publishing deal and her book was on New Zealand bookshelves by October. "A stunning debut novel, *Queen of Beauty* had me mesmerised," gasped the *New Zealand Herald*.

An added reward was the Glenn Schaeffer-endowed \$US20,000 Modern Letters scholarship to his alma mater. Now back in the US, Morris says the Iowa Writers' Workshop is "another chance to hopefully get the best part of another book written". And perhaps pick up an American publishing contract. Walker says: "The advantages of that exposure are the wonderful contacts that can develop and the confidence it gives the writer."

**Bill Manhire** advises his students to "write what you don't know". For many, that means setting stories offshore. But Morris still wants to write about her birthplace, Auckland. For Morris, who is of English and Maori descent, the "great challenge facing New Zealand writers is to stop writing about other places and write about New Zealand as a multicultural society, without stereotypes and compartmentalisations".

Where earlier literary heroines such as Katherine Mansfield and Janet Frame journeyed overseas to find themselves, this emerging author has found her voice by returning home.

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