

# Books



MARK BARBER

## SARAH BROOM

Glendowie-based poet Sarah Broom's first collection, *Tigers at Awhitu*, is published this month by both Auckland University Press and the prestigious British imprint Carcanet Press. Broom is already known as a distinguished scholar. Born in 1972 and raised in Christchurch, she spent most of the 1990s studying in England. She has taught at Somerville College, Oxford, and Otago University. She talks to Iain Sharp about her career and battling cancer over the past two years.

**What prompted you to return to New Zealand rather than remain in England?**

I think I just wanted to come home, it's as simple as that. I feel a strong connection with the New Zealand landscape and always felt that I would write better here.

**Do you have a long connection with the Awhitu Peninsula?**

No, my husband and I started going there with our three children in August 2008, around the time I finished chemo. When I wrote the poem called "Tigers at Awhitu", I knew straight away it should also be the title for the collection as a whole. British readers will have trouble pronouncing it, of course. But Awhitu's not very well known, even to New Zealanders, which is part of its attraction.

**What's the current situation with your illness?**

Stable at the moment but in the long term still uncertain. I'm on an experimental drug treatment that requires me to fly to Melbourne once a month to be monitored. Along with all the other therapies I am doing, it seems to be working, and the side-effects seem to be minimal — I have been very lucky.

**Have you written poetry all your life?**

I tried hard as a teenager, but it was the usual dreadful stuff. I didn't write much poetry when I was in Britain. I got into it seriously after I came back to New Zealand. I think I've been quite influenced, though, by contemporary Irish poets like Michael Longley, Paul Muldoon and Medbh McGuckian.

**Does being diagnosed with cancer create a pressure to write?**

I'm not ashamed to say my poetry is partly therapeutic. It's a way of creating something out of an almost impossible situation, giving me a sense of control and agency. But I want to stress that I haven't just written a book about cancer. All the poems in the first half were written before I knew about the illness. I talk about other cultures and times, about landscape and parenting. And many of the poems in the second half, which is a narrative of the cancer experience, are more about life, I think, than illness or death. I never felt more alive than when I was supposed to be dying. Yes, there were terrible lows, but there were also incredible highs. The difficulty is to keep that heightened awareness of the world now that my condition is just slightly less precarious. Really, death is very near for all of us, but we have a lot of defences to help us ignore this fact.