

# Phoenix arts profile: Dan Keane

Marisa King

The story of how Dan Keane – writer, teacher and now librarian – came to live in the Wairarapa is almost as interesting as his new job at Wairarapa Library Service (WLS). Back in January 2020, when Covid was a small dot on the horizon, Dan was living in Shanghai with his wife Jennifer Tomscha and children Solveig (now 3) and Wilder (5). Dan and Jennifer both taught creative writing at New York University Shanghai, which had just announced a two-week delay to the new semester due to Covid.

With a possibility of a lockdown looming, they decided to pay a visit to Jennifer's sister and husband in Wellington. But after they arrived, New Zealand closed its border.

"We came down here with backpacks and we just stayed," Dan recalls. "We could still work from New Zealand. I taught for three semesters online from here."

After it proved difficult to find a place to rent or day-care spots for the kids in Wellington, the family made the move over the hill and rented a house in Greytown.

Fast forward to early 2021. Dan and Jennifer were working out of Carterton's 3Mile coworking space. Someone there mentioned a job that had been advertised at WLS.

"I was like, 'Hey, let's try something new'," said Dan. "I've been a reader and a writer and a book person all my life. I've been on the journalism side, the university side ... it seemed interesting to try another flavour of that."

That, in a nutshell, is how Dan came to be WLS's Bringing Reading to Life Champion, a role he started in June. His main focus is to promote reading and literacy in whatever way possible, such as by running events, providing classes and visiting schools.

"The goal is continual community engagement, rather than a 'big spike'," he said. "[Community Engagement Coordinator] Sylvia Arnold and I are working together to just continually put ourselves out into the community."

Dan's latest initiatives have included a series of memoir writing classes in October and an evening book club, which meets online on the first Wednesday of every month. Both have generated positive responses from the community, and more writing workshops are planned.

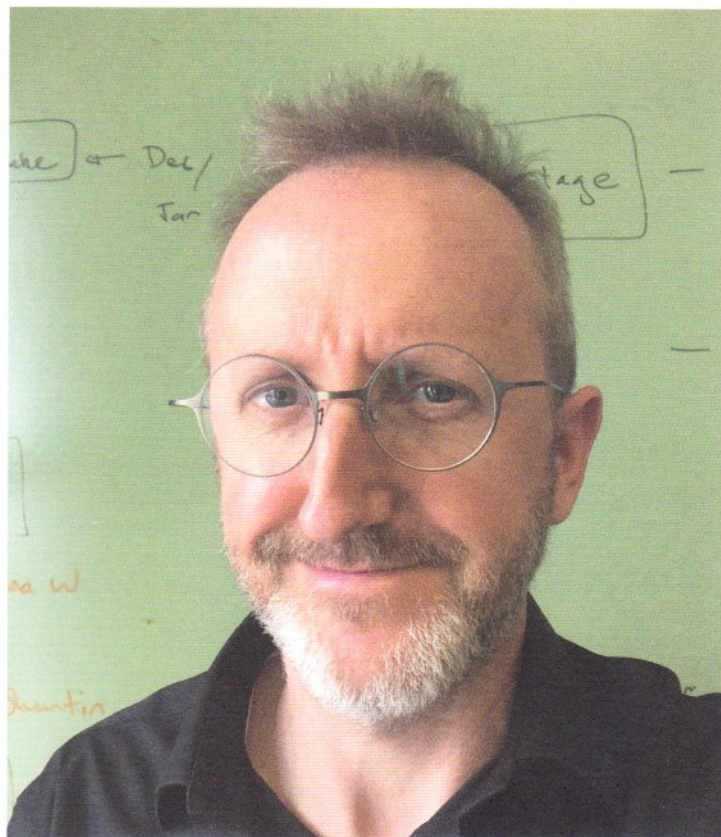
"Reading and writing are not separate; they are the same at a basic mental level," said Dan. "It's about living in that shared community space of text. And you have to read a lot to be a good writer."

Dan grew up in Phoenix, Arizona, before moving to New York to complete a bachelor's degree in earth and environmental science. Realising he was not a natural scientist, he subsequently moved to Texas and worked for a community newspaper there.

Further travel to Mexico and Bolivia (where he was the Associated Press correspondent for three years) followed, before Dan returned to the US and completed a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Creative Writing at the University of Michigan. There he met Jennifer, who was also doing an MFA, and they subsequently moved to Shanghai together. Marriage and children followed.

Dan and Jenny are now working on separate novels, Jenny as a PhD candidate at the International Institute of Modern Letters. Dan admits he had "a big blank" in his head about New Zealand prior to moving here. "The depth of the differences has been really fascinating. Americans are naked in our enthusiasms; we overshare. There is more and slower small talk here and it has a different rhythm."

Dan can regularly be spotted working the desk at Featherston Library and also contributes a Library column to the *Phoenix*.



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