



NZ Booklovers

## Interview: John Evan Harris talks about The Physician's Gun

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John Evan Harris was born in Christchurch but has lived most of his life in Auckland. He worked as a reporter for newspapers, radio and TV, became programme editor of TVNZ's regional news magazine show *Top Half*, and joined Communicado to produce re-enactment shows like *Heroes*. In 1994 he set up production company Greenstone TV, selling it in 2014 to set up Boy Fell In Pond and become a fulltime writer. John talks to NZ Booklovers.

### **Tell us a little about *The Physician's Gun*.**

It is a rollicking adventure story for young readers 11+, set in Nelson in 1866. The hero is 15-year-old Henry Appleton, a daydreamer who reads dime novels and fantasizes about owning a gun and becoming a gunslinger like Wild Bill Hickok. His naïve dreaming comes to an abrupt halt when he is taken hostage by real life highwaymen, the notorious Burgess gang. After a desperate escape bid, Henry is left for dead at the bottom of a ravine. But he manages to survive, rescue his mother and his girlfriend, and help bring the gang to justice.

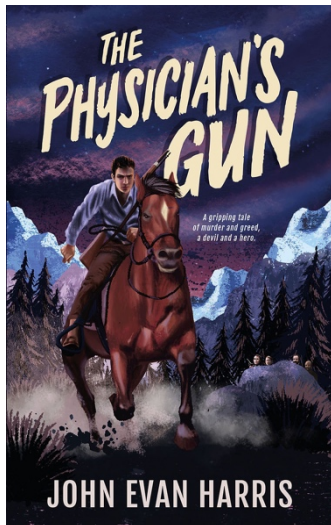
The title of the book refers to the rifle owned by visiting English physician Zephania Smith, who is hunting for the man who murdered his wife. Henry borrows the rifle, foolishly thinking he will be able to apprehend the gang himself, and it does not end well.

Importantly though, when Henry finds himself face-to-face with one of the gang, he is unable to use the rifle. He has seen too much of the misery that guns cause. It is a significant turning point in his life.

### **What inspired you to write this book?**

In the late 1990s I was fortunate to be the producer of the TV series *Epitaph*, originated by the actor Paul Gittins, who became its presenter. In this very popular show, we reenacted stories from New Zealand history – inspired by the inscriptions on gravestones around the country. One of the stories which stuck in my mind was the Maungatapu murders. The bush ranger Richard Burgess and his gang ambushed four businessmen in the hills above Nelson, and killed them for their gold and money. Three

of the gang were hanged. When I was looking for a dramatic scenario from which to develop a fictional story, this grisly event sprang to mind.



### **What research was involved?**

I discovered (rather belatedly) what most writers know – research is so very very important! I wish I had carried out all my research before I put pen to paper or fingertip to keyboard. As it happened I had written the first draft of my story before I even began serious in-depth research. And the research I did proved vital in crafting the story, correcting my historical and geographical errors, and building credible characters.

What research did I do? On Papers Past I read newspaper accounts of Richard Burgess's exploits, trial and hanging; I hunted out old books in the library written by people living in the 1860s; and I researched the history of the New Zealand Company and the early settlers in Nelson. I visited historic sites in Nelson, the Nelson Provincial Museum, the historic village, and the cemeteries.

I stumbled across some marvellous works of original research, notably the incredibly well-documented history of the Maori people in Nelson and Marlborough, *Te Tau Ihu O te Waka* written by John and Hilary Mitchell. And I hunted through old photos on the museum's website.

My research delivered some particular gems which I was able to incorporate in my book. For example one line in an old newspaper report mentioned that on the day of his execution Richard Burgess carried a small posy of flowers with him from his prison cell to the gallows. He had that posy in his hands as the rope was put around his neck, and only dropped it when he finally died. What an incredibly poignant scene. If ever I make a movie based on the book, I know the posy will feature!

The research process was incredibly fulfilling, and I sincerely hope young readers will be inspired to do their own research. To this end, I have included a lot of references, historical photos and links at the back of the book.

### **What was your routine or process when writing this book?**

I'm aware that prolific and successful writers like Stephen King have a very strict writing regime. I think he writes for four hours every morning? However I wrote whenever I had free time – sometimes for hours on end, sometimes for only half an hour. I had no difficulty finding the motivation, because I was gripped by the factual story and by my own characters and fictional storyline! I'm lucky in that writing is my full-time hobby, so I had a lot of time to invest in *The Physician's Gun*.

As far as the structure of the story is concerned, I began by writing a list of all the dates and times of the events in the Maungatapu Murders story. Then I inserted the events from Henry Appleton's fictional storyline, to make them dovetail.

My story has undergone huge changes along the way. Originally, the physician was going to be the protagonist. It would be a story of revenge and forgiveness. But as I wrote, it became clear to me that my heart was with the 15 year old boy Henry. I channelled my own teenage self to get inside his head.

Another significant change was brought about because of advice I received from a respected assessor, who urged me to make sure that my protagonist Henry was in every scene. To avoid what she called “head-jumping”. At first I thought this would be impossible – but I worked hard, changed a lot of scenes, and made it happen. Henry is now in all but one scene and this really beds him in as the main character, and allows the reader to stay inside Henry’s head.

**If a soundtrack was made to accompany this book, name a song or two you would include.**

When I first wrote the story as the screenplay for a movie, it was my hope that there would be a lot of music in it. And that is still my dream. I would commission well-known Kiwi musicians to write songs specifically for the movie, as well as (hopefully) acquiring the rights to some existing Kiwi classics.

I love songs by Crowded House, Split Enz, Dave Dobbyn, Dragon, the Mutton Birds, Bic Runga, the Exponents, Chills, Aaradhna and Marlon Williams. Theirs are some of the songs I would like to include.

I also hope Burgess in the movie will sing I song that I wrote (many years ago). It’s called ‘*Social End Product*’, and the key words, “Don’t blame me, blame society,” sum up Burgess’s attitude. I have included some of the words of the song in the book.

**The Physician’s Gun started life as a screenplay, so if your book was made into a movie in the future, who would you like to see playing the lead characters?**

Great question, but I really have no idea yet!! Because I have been engrossed in writing the book, I have given no thought to names. Choosing actors is going to be a really intriguing and exciting process.

The four gang members and the physician came from Ireland and England, so that is probably where we would recruit the actors for those parts. The all important role of Henry Appleton – although he came from England originally – would be played by a young Kiwi actor. And of course Miriama will be a great role for a young Maori actor. As for the American dime novelist Johnny Slick – well, I’m hoping we will be able to get a well-known character actor from the United States to play that role.

**What did you enjoy the most about writing this novel?**

I enjoyed building the world of Henry Appleton, and fleshing out each of the characters. But although the plot was important to me, the aspect I enjoyed most was writing the dialogue. I loved putting words in the character’s mouths, and reading their dialogue aloud to make sure it sounded authentic. I’m getting better at this, but there’s a long way to go.

Being a former radio and television journalist helped, because we were always encouraged to write our scripts out loud. It's no good falling in love with the words on the page. What is important is how they sound when they are voiced.

### **What did you do to celebrate finishing this book?**

I am a great believer in celebrating everything you can! There've been several milestones along the way when I have gathered my wife and family together and cracked open a bottle of champagne. On the day when several cartons of books arrived on my doorstep I was so excited I texted all my family. And within an hour or two, they were around to my place and we celebrated together. It's wonderful to have people you love who want to share the good times.

### **What is the favourite book you have read so far this year and why?**

I tracked down a copy of the old classic *Catcher in the Rye*, because I never got around to reading it when I was at university. I found it very readable of course but the main thing I took note of was the protagonist's interior monologue. I have used this technique in *The Physician's Gun* to some extent, inserting my young hero's thoughts in italics. The other book I am reading is William Boyd's *Any Human Heart*. I first read it years ago, and it's stuck with me. It talks of love, laughter, pain, torment, tears, successes and failures. And it's written in the first person. I tracked down this book too, to reread. The language is beautiful, but I'm still trying to analyse its magical appeal.

### **What's next on the agenda for you?**

I haven't done any actual writing for several months, because I have been focusing on the editing and production of the book, and more recently on marketing and promotion. So I have a lot of pent-up energy ready to tackle my next project or projects. I like to have more than one on the go – jumping from one project to another when I get stale seems to help fire me up. I will be finishing a manuscript titled *Henry Appleton, Boy hero, and the Burgess gang*. This is the story of Henry's early years, supposedly written by the dime novelist Johnny Slick, and referred to at the end of *The Physician's Gun*.

But my major project for the next year will be to revisit a story which my brother Peter Harris completed some years ago – *The Nautilus Project*, a science-fiction adventure which will appeal to the same readership as *The Physician's Gun*. Can I do all this? Yes I can! But once again, I will be making good use of editors and assessors along the way.

I will of course put aside time to attend the premiere of *The Physician's Gun*, the movie!

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