

Randell Cottage Residency Report January - May 2024

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From the 23rd of January to the 7th of May 2024, I was delighted to have the good luck and privilege of being the writer in residence in the Randell Cottage, in Thorndon, Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, Oceania, Earth, third planet of a solar system in the Milky Way, in the heart of infinite interstellar space, which is one of the themes featured in the novel that I worked on in the Randell Cottage, the wheel turns full circle and life is good.

On a practical level, the Cottage provides all the conditions needed to support the work of a writer. A word about the house: its Victorian charm reminds us that we are part of a tradition, a notion that is underlined by the bookshelves holding works about history and the local literary scene, and by the lean-to/laundry/office where the portraits of my illustrious predecessors can be found.

In terms of location, the Cottage is ideally situated in the interstellar universe, a short stroll from the wonderful Botanic Gardens (where you can go for lovely walks as you seek inspiration) and just a stone's throw from the town centre (where you can try out local beers as you seek inspiration). Space, tranquility, nature at the end of the street: this *room to write* is a writer's dream.

Living in Wellington was an enchantment every day. In addition to the quality of life, the city offers numerous cultural opportunities. I met singers, writers, illustrators, academics, diplomats, journalists, all kinds of creatives who, through a conversation or over dinner, enriched my perceptions of New Zealand. I believe I noticed that Wellingtonians have a tendency to bemoan the limited local artistic life, and I'm not entirely in agreement with that assessment, because there is actually an abundance of festivals, museums and book shops – fertile sources of intellectual inspiration for a foreign writer. Yes, Wellington is a long way from the rest of the world and its size means it can't be compared to Paris, London or Tokyo. But the equation 'number of inhabitants x number of cultural events / quality' gives an excellent result in terms of creative dynamics. Wellington is fully deserving of its title as coolest little capital in the world.

I must point out, too, that the label 'Randell Cottage writer', along with Kiwis' natural hospitality, opens many doors. Many people offered me assistance and guided me in my explorations. Everything was easy.

The Randell Cottage has a unique feature among residencies for French writers: the possibility of being accompanied by one's family. I would not have come for such a long stay if I had had to be away from my partner and our son. For a number of weeks the Cottage was home to family living, with a child's laughter in the background, just as it was in the days of the Randell family at the end of the 19th century. This has an impact on the residency experience. I am not just a writer who came to do research and to write. With our son enrolled at Tawatawa Ridgway School, we joined a community that

welcomed us warmly. We socialised, developed contacts, some of which will endure over time and distance.

From a literary angle, this unique feature is not neutral. The project I developed over the course of this residency is a novel with a child narrator, its action moving between Paris and Wellington. Being steeped in the everyday and the routines of family life in New Zealand has contributed positively to my work.

I wrote in the Cottage, of course, but also in Cuba Street's cafés, at Te Papa or on the waterfront. I made notes all over New Zealand. In addition to Wellington, I was able to discover the country thanks to my presentations to the Alliances françaises in Auckland, Hamilton, Christchurch and Palmerston North. I travelled by train, bus, car, in a plane and a camper van, on a bike or by foot, my eyes wide to drink it all in. Among the wonderful sights I saw, Lake Tekapo's dark sky reserve was particularly impressive. What I learned there and at Wellington's Space Place about the Southern hemisphere's skies and Māori cosmogonies was most helpful to my narrative process – my story's young narrator being fascinated by infinite interstellar space.

Writing this work is well advanced and I hope to be able to have it published in 2025 – provided there are no major unexpected disasters such as a deadly meteorite colliding with the Earth or, worse, a drying-up of inspiration.

I am going home completely fulfilled by this experience. I should like to be able to express some reservation, some criticism, out of respect for the stereotype of the whingeing Frenchman, but I rack my brain in vain, no, there's nothing. Or maybe this: I'll have to find a way to come back.

All that remains is for me to express my interstellar gratitude to all those who, whether near or far, made this residency possible, especially those humans who run the Randell Cottage Writers Trust, and the French Embassy in New Zealand. Thank you. I shall try to write a good book.