

Archaeology of the soul

David Howard's new collection records a writing life. Philip Matthews reports.

Writing about David Howard's *The Incomplete Poems* at the *Landfall Review Online* back in August, critic and historian Nicholas Reid concluded that "The *Incomplete Poems* is the substantial summation of a poet who has matured in his craft".

The Incomplete Poems lets you take the long view. Substantial is right: there are 141 poems in this large book, spanning 35 years. And Howard isn't exactly old. The earliest poem, *Judy is a Punk*, dates from 1976, when Howard was just 17.

The poetic impulse started even earlier than that. He was 12. During a phone conversation from his "glorified barn" at Purakanui, just north of Dunedin, Howard explains that he read Arthur Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell* and saw that there was a way to be both adolescent and articulate.

In suburban Christchurch in the 1970s, the outsider glamour of being a poet attracted him. The talent came later. He taught himself by reading and listening to music – not just punk rock but great lyricists like Leonard Cohen. He sent poems to Michael Harlow, then editor of *Landfall*, who rejected them encouragingly – "He didn't just send back one liners; he sent four-to-five liners."

Duly encouraged, Howard kept at it. Publication followed and then collections: *In the First Place*, *Holding Company*, *Shebang*, *The Word Went Round*. He collaborated with artist Fiona Pardington on *How to Occupy Ourselves*. He has worked with other artists and

musicians and has been anthologised and translated. He will be Burns Fellow at the University of Otago in 2013. When the Burns news broke in September, he said he was astonished and honoured.

But as a record of a writing life, *The Incomplete Poems* trumps all: "It was a really important book for me. Everything had to be real, solid and genuine."

He could not include any of the "forgeries" that all poets write – all writers, in fact.

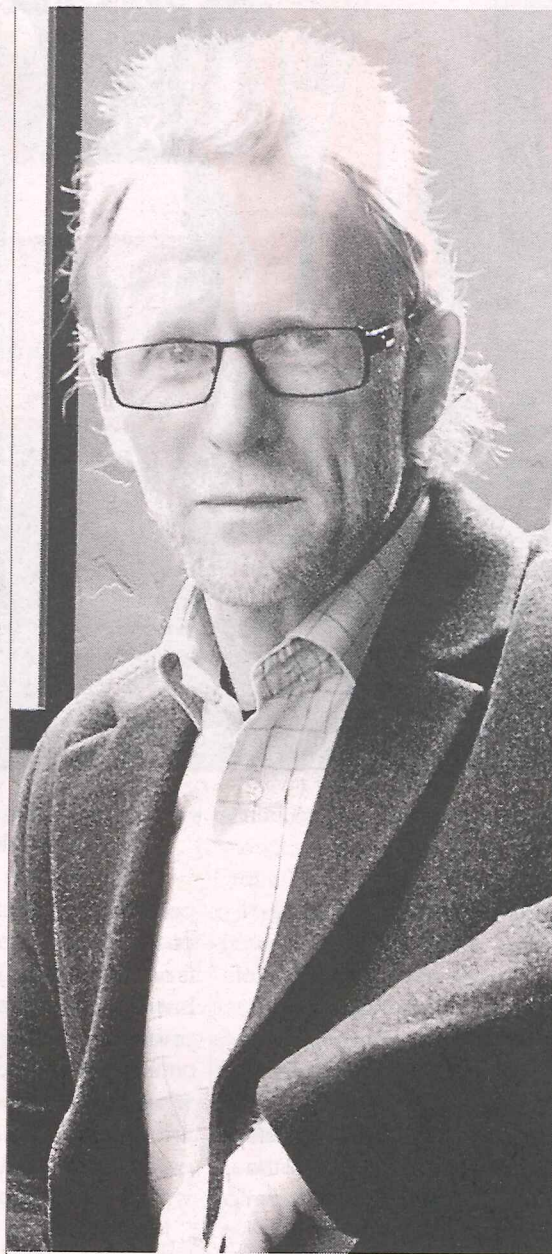
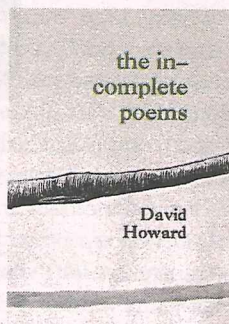
"Understanding is necessarily personal," he explains. Poems are written to advance his understanding of

the world. He is aware of readers but they are off to one side.

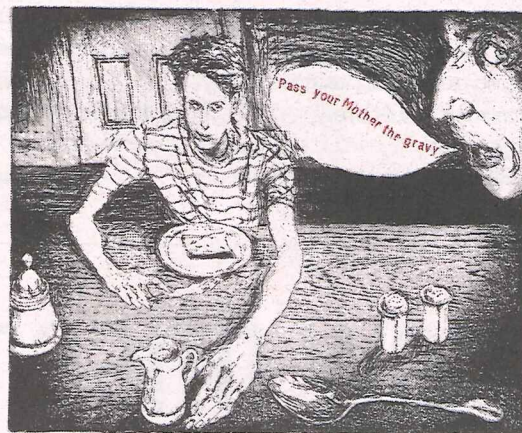
Poetry sells in tiny amounts compared to, say, sports biographies. If you have something to communicate to the masses, poetry may not be the way to do it.

As for "incomplete", that relates to negative reactions to the notion of authority. "I don't think people need authorities," he says. "Literature is about helping people to learn how to live their own lives. The authorities use words to circumscribe, to diminish, whereas poets use words to open, to expand."

Besides *The Incomplete Poems* and the Burns Fellowship, the other big piece of recent David Howard news involves a limited edition book launched at the Going West festival in Auckland in September. A long poem about the punk era, *The Whole of Boredom*, inspired academic and publisher Peter Simpson to commission *You're So Pretty*



David Howard: "Understanding is necessarily personal," he says.



The poems are set alongside images by artist Peter Ransom.

When You're Unfaithful To Me for his Holloway Press imprint. The book's title is from a song by the Pixies. For Howard, it means that "the most charged moment is when everything's going".

Howard describes the book as "a specific, targeted act of respectful archaeology". It evokes the Christchurch of his youth.

Howard's poems are set alongside 11 images by artist

Peter Ransom. Punk rock and the exciting music that followed is the context. Bands like the Gordons and the JPS Experience played in venues that are now piles of rubble. Since the earthquakes, the city he knew has been "irrevocably removed".

A recent poem dedicated to Rhys Brookbanks, a young poet who died in the collapse of the CTV building, also addresses the fallen city and the tragedy of a promising career cut short.

And Peter Ransom? *The Whole of Boredom* was dedicated to Ransom, a Christchurch artist who burned brightly in the late 70s and 1980s, and disappeared.

You sense that Howard doesn't just like Ransom's work – he also likes his story. Ransom was a student of Barry Cleavin, and was seen as a big thing in print making. He produced "angry, expressionist work that had a light, mobile line and a punk charge".

But then, like the young Rimbaud abandoning writing, Ransom turned his back on art. He destroyed his plates and kept just one of each surviving print. "A talented artist not making work," Howard says. "I find it really poignant."

Christchurch is the past. Howard moved to Purakanui in 2003. He works half the year as a pyrotechnician – clients have included Metallica, Janet Jackson and the All Blacks – and writes the rest of the time.

How do poetry and pyrotechnics fit together? For Howard, narrative poems can be akin to a fireworks display: You set up clusters of images to follow each other.

He believes that the narrative-inclined Ian Wedde is "the best New Zealand poet of his generation" but too many local poets simply set up one situation and leave it – the poems don't keep delivering on the page.

Is that another way of saying that readers might find Howard's work more inaccessible than most? "That's a fair statement," he says. "There are multiple points of access. If a building had 10 doors, they may not be sure which one to go in. I deliberately write poems that take a while to unpack."

The Incomplete Poems by David Howard
Cold Hub Press, \$49.95