



Sweet Charity

PHOTOS Charity Norman & Cora Meredith

Born in Uganda to missionary parents, best-selling author Charity Norman now lives in Napier with her husband Tim, daughter Cora, two cats and a budgie. *Freeing Grace*, Charity's first novel was published in 2010; four more followed with another underway. Louise Cook spent a delightful afternoon with her talking about her life, her loves and her writing.

Where are your books sold, and how many? In the UK, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere in the Commonwealth; also in France, Germany, Hungary and Turkey in translation. They're available as eBooks and audio books. I can't tell you how many have sold in all those formats, but my publisher has described me as a 'best-selling contemporary novelist', which is good enough for me!

What awards or accolades have you achieved?

Second Chances was a Richard and Judy Book Club (WHSmith) choice, alongside massive bestsellers like *Gone Girl* and *The Fault in Our Stars* — it was displayed beside the counter of every WHSmith bookshop in the UK. That book was also, very excitingly, a World Book Night title. *The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone* (aka *The New Woman*) was a BBC Radio 2 Book Club choice. Most, if not all, have been on bestseller lists in New Zealand. *See You in September* was among the New Zealand Listener's 100 best books of 2017 and was a UK Reading Agency's book of the year. I'm delighted that it's also a finalist for Best Book in this year's Ngaio Marsh Awards. [*The awards were to be announced 1st September 2018 at time of publication.*]

What novels or writers inspire you?

Many! Richard Adams (*Watership Down*) kept me company through childhood and beyond, as did the Brontë sisters, Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Roald Dahl, James Herriot, Dick Francis and P.G. Wodehouse. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Gabriel García Márquez) mesmerised me. Jane Austen; Molly Keane, especially *Good Behaviour*; the atmospheric genius of Daphne du Maurier; Graham Greene; John Grisham; and Alexander McCall Smith, especially *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency*. Not all literary heavyweights, but all true storytellers — brilliant users of language, but not so much in love with their own cleverness that the story is lost. Oh ... and Bill Bryson. Can't forget him.

You were born in Uganda to English parents.

Why Uganda?

My parents were CMS (Church Missionary Society) mission partners based at Buwalasi Theological College, in the foothills of Mount Elgon. My father became principal of the college. My mother taught New Testament Greek, worked in the dispensary and had seven children in rapid succession — I was the seventh! We left Uganda when I was very small, before Idi Amin came to power — which is another story. I took my first steps in Jerusalem on our way home. Africa remained in our family consciousness and in my blood. I went back when I was eighteen, working for LEPRA (the Leprosy Relief Association) in Northern Malawi.



Charity working at home



This page: Charity in Africa in the 80s

What brought you to New Zealand, and in particular Hawke's Bay?

Back in 1987, I hopped aboard an ex-army Bedford lorry and set out on a six-month journey from London to Mombasa. We were an eclectic bunch of strangers, along with a lively population of fleas and a rat hitching a ride in the food locker. We slept on the ground and cooked over a fire. Tim, the driver/mechanic, was seriously laid-back, permanently covered in oil and had this cute accent. When I asked him where he was from he replied 'a place called Waipukurau'.

Tim nursed that old jalopy along for thousands of miles. He changed five shredded tyres before we'd reached Spain, dug us out of Sahara sand and Serengeti mud, replaced the gearbox in Tamanrasset, and repaired a snapped axle in Rwanda. After the trip we set off again, taking the Trans-Siberian to Beijing, where we arrived at the start of the Tiananmen Square crisis. To cut a very, very long story short we finally tied the knot in 1992.

You are a qualified criminal lawyer – what made you decide to be a writer?

I began to think of myself as a writer when I was about seven. I liked to imagine I was Emily Brontë reincarnated – after all, she and I were both Yorkshire vicars' daughters! I'm related to Virginia Woolf, but that seemed less significant back then. I wrote my first published work when I was seven – a poem about the Rose Window in York Minster, which appeared in the Minster Magazine and which I'm glad to say is now lost to posterity.

I grew up and abandoned that dream – I needed a sensible career and liked public speaking, so I became a barrister specialising in criminal and family law. We had three children; Tim looked after them full time. My work was fascinating and rewarding and we lived in a gorgeous Yorkshire farmhouse in a beautiful area. However, it all came at a cost in that I was rarely home.

My then four-year-old daughter described me as 'a posh woman dressed in black, who runs in and out of the house, shouting'. This didn't seem ideal, so in 2002 we made the difficult decision to move to New Zealand and reverse our roles. The time had come to try and realise the dream. I was in my late thirties; fifteen years and five books on, we're still here.

What are you working on now?

A young man walks into a café in South London, shoots the owner, and a siege begins. Why? Can there ever be a reason good enough? Gradually his story and that of the people trapped with him begin to entwine. Right, that's all I'm telling you



Charity with the members of Octavius at Mangapapa Hotel

You have a very busy family life. How and when do you manage to write?

By living in unrepentant chaos. Housework and gardening are at the bottom of my priority list. Our iron still has its UK plug and only gets an outing when my son wants to wax his snowboard. Henry, our vacuum cleaner, sits in the dust and eyes me reproachfully. I write whenever I can, every day, often late at night, sometimes literally all night.

When I'm making slow progress at home I take refuge in the Napier library or a café — thank you, *Fuse*! If I'm panicking, I bolt to a friend's isolated bach on the coast. It's off the grid for power and water, there's no internet or phone connection. I might not see another human being all week. I achieve more there in a week there than I do in a month at home.

Any advice for budding writers?

Read widely. Edit savagely. Do your research. Leave most of your work on the cutting-room floor. Every line of my first book was rewritten about fifty times — a painful process but worth it in the end. Use a manuscript assessment service and take their advice. Finally, the golden rule: never forget to show, not tell. It's a cliché but it's vital. Took me years to truly embrace it. Good luck.



Charity and husband Tim

The Secret Life of Luke Livingstone is my favourite book. Do you have a favourite?

When Stephen Hawking was asked to choose between the space program and the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, he replied: 'That is like asking which of my children I would sacrifice.' Each of my books took a year — or more — of my life; I lived and breathed and dreamed them all. I researched each for months. I have sweated over every line of every one. Don't make me choose between them!

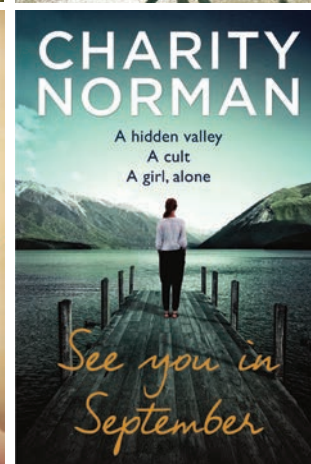
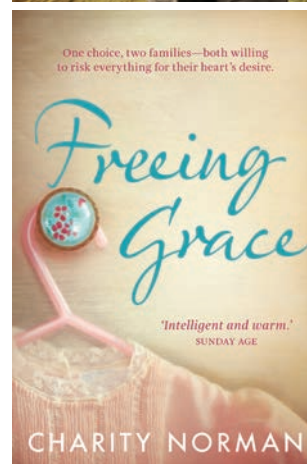
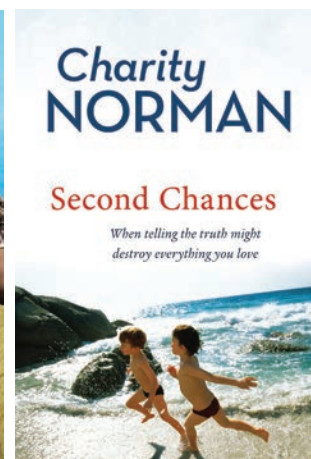
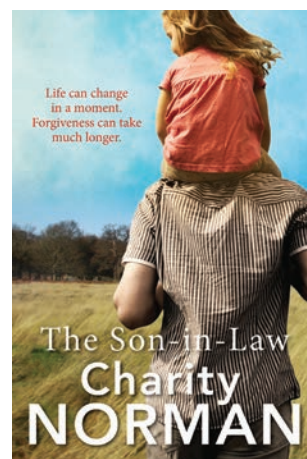
What do you do for fun?

I find an awful lot of things in life are fun, so I'll pick three of them. It's fun to hang out with my children. George, Sam and Cora have their own lives, but when they're around they are funny, cynical, erudite, irreverent, often wiser than I am — and more than happy to tell me when I'm being ridiculous.

I sing in two fantastic choirs: Waiapu Cathedral Choir and an eight-voice group called Octavius. That's hours of music every week and it keeps me more-or-less sane. Today, for example, I sang with the Cathedral choir in the morning and then went on to Managapapa Hotel, where Octavius was the entertainment for a winter Art Deco event.

Finally, my cats: a neurotic feral moggy, rescued by Cora from starvation when he was a tiny kitten, and a magnificently fluffy ragdoll, so insanely relaxed that one wonders whether he has been smoking a kind of feline whacky baccy. There have always been cats. I daresay there always will be. Not sure what that makes me.

Right: Charity's best-selling books



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