

October 2025

Kia ora koutou,

In the next few newsletters, we'll take the opportunity for each of our committee to say 'hello' to you, our members, and introduce ourselves.

Kia ora koutou katoa, ko Nicola Cummins tōku ingoa. I teach writing in the English and Linguistics programme at Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka | University of Otago. I enjoy the process of guiding students to develop their skills to write with clarity, purpose, and imagination. I'm a shamelessly voracious reader, with a lifelong soft spot for Jane Austen whose wit, style, and insight beguile me on every re-read.

Beyond campus, I'm keen on building literary connections. I spent six years on the board of the Dunedin Writers & Readers Festival Trust, and I'm involved with the Robert Lord Writers' Cottage. As internship coordinator for English and Linguistics, I've placed bookish students with community organisations from the Regent Theatre and Otago University Press to Orokonui Ecosanctuary.

I joined the Athenaeum two years ago, and I'm thrilled to be part of this community as we consolidate our heritage and explore new possibilities in Ōtepoti Dunedin, UNESCO City of Literature.

What's Happening

Join us for the Master in Creative Writing students' end of year reading. Presented by Liam McIlvanney and Lynley Edmeades.

The evening will be a mixture of prose and poetry readings.

5.30pm Wednesday 19th November



Photo from the Southern Heritage Festival event. Which took place on the 28th October.

Featuring a presentation from Hocken Archivist Tom Riley.



Book Review

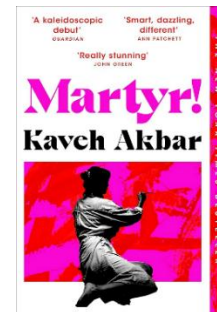
Martyr!

By Kaveh Akbar

Martyr! is the debut novel by Iranian- American poet, novelist and editor Kaveh Akbar. The story follows Cyrus Shams, a young man grappling with life as a recovering alcoholic. Haunted by questions of purpose and mortality, Cyrus becomes consumed by the idea of finding a meaningful death. Themes which fuel his attempt to write a book.

The son of an Iranian immigrant factory worker, Cyrus carries the heavy weight of both personal and historical trauma. His mother was killed in the infamous 1988 air disaster, when a U.S missile cruiser mistakenly shot down an Iranian civilian airliner in the final months of the Iran-Iraq war. This loss profoundly shapes the way in which Cyrus navigates his life

Although *Martyr!* explores some heavy material, Akbar approaches this with poetic sensitivity, dark humour, and elements of surrealism. The novel's form is inventive and propels the reader forward. There are conversations between cultural characters such as Lisa Simpson and Donald Trump, which might sound farfetched, but curiously work as an addition layer within the story's flow.



Being inside Cyrus's mind, although troubled, is an interesting place to be. The book is full of poetic insight: "An Alphabet, like life, is a finite set of shapes. With it, one can produce almost anything."