



# The hear and now

Nick Earls fuses books with audio in his new project, writes **Amanda Ellis**

**E**very so often storytellers have to mix things up to stay fresh, follow their ideas and feed the muse. Brisbane writer Nick Earls is no different, with the 52-year-old author firmly embracing the digital era with his latest project, a fine series of interwoven novellas co-produced as audio books and read by Australian actors.

Earls' last novel was *Analogue Men* in mid-2014, the story of a fuddy-duddy technophobe called Andrew van Fleet whose return from abroad to revive a radio station was welcomed by his family with as much enthusiasm as a shark bite.

The Northern Irish-born writer is known for funny novels that examine the experience of being a man. But Earls' *Wisdom Tree* novellas and audio books take his evolution as story-man a step further, standing apart as thoughtful, satisfying journeys of Australian males in unfamiliar but iconic landscapes.

The novellas' audio-book productions, produced by Audible.com.au, hold their ground as fine adaptations, creating their own mini creative industry, as five local actors were employed to voice the stories which the Amazon subsidiary will fast-track release locally on the same day as the official release of each on the first day of a month.

Earls produced his last three novels under contract with Random House, and used emergent and experimental Melbourne publishing outlet Inkerman & Blunt for this project, which he is also evaluating as part of a wider postgraduate research project at the University of Queensland.

"I realised I wanted to write these ideas and that they really could only be novella length — I thought 'They've each got to be about 20,000 words . . . I'd be chopping something crucial out to make them short-story size and I'd be faking something to make each of them novel size'," he says over the line from Brisbane.

"My first thought was 'That's not what the publishing industry wants'. The concerns about size . . . doesn't apply with



ebooks and it also doesn't apply with audio books.

"I started thinking now is the time to make the most of those platforms and then I thought 'What about people who want to read about those on paper'. When I talked to Donna Ward at Inkerman & Blunt, I thought 'She's not afraid to put out a small book'."

Short-form fiction is a trend audio-book publisher Audible.com.au is noting as popular with readers who are rich on so-called dead time — where book lovers are engaged in other activities such as commuting that use up their time but not their brainpower.

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# Novellas find a fresh ear

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Audible.com.au Australia head and spokesman Matthew Gain says the audio-book publisher's membership base has a fairly good gender mix, with slightly more female members, making the Australian site's membership fairly representative of the general population.

"There's a lot of professionals and people who do a lot of commuting," he explains. "These are people who are busy."

The commercial audio-book trend goes against the book trade generally, where more women read more books than men; and the cinema business, where women are the more familiar faces at daytime movie sessions than men.

Novellas such as Earls' Wisdom Tree productions are short enough to be heard on long commutes up and down Australia's coasts, with the books running to movie length (or Tom Cruise film length) times of one hour and 47 minutes — or up to two-and-a-half hours.

Gotham is the first title in

Earls' series and it made a digital outing online on Sunday at ebook outlets and Audible, although it made its first appearance as short

fiction last October in Griffith Review 50: Tall Tales Short — The Novella Project III.

The notable series lead-in is the story of faded music journalist Jeff Foster's trip to New York and interview with lost-boy hip-hopper Nas\$ti Boi, whose faulty ego and narcissistic wounding blinds him to the more important journeys of the people around him, such as his manager's imminent second-time fatherhood and Foster's desperate quest to save the life of his terminally ill daughter.

Gotham is an emotionally satisfying tale. Its Batmanesque final moments, where the journalist's daughter catches the wind with her cape in a stolen slippery-slide moment, is eminently triumphant and inspired by Earls' own life experience with his child.

Rhys Muldoon, of House

Husbands and Play School fame, was the narrator of Audible's Analogue Men production and came on board early as the Gotham narrator, an encouraging development for Earls who admits the selection of actors to voice the male narrators influenced his voice for the male characters, particularly for the later novellas.

Award-winning Underbelly actor Gyton Grantley narrates the June title, Venice for Audible; while Wonderland actor Michael Dorman reads the July release, Vancouver; high-profile WA Institute of Performing Arts graduate and The Time of Our Lives star William McInnes reads the August title, Juneau; and child actor Flynn Curry reads the stand-out finale, NoHo, the September-release story of an Australian boy abandoned in Hollywood.

**Gotham** is published by Inkerman & Blunt (\$20) and Audible.com.au (audio book free for a limited time).



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**Author Nick Earls.**