*For immediate release*

**New collection by acclaimed poet, who’s on her way to Iowa**

It’s a big few months for poet Johanna Aitchison: she’s just launched her third poetry collection – *Miss Dust*, published by Seraph Press – and she’s soon heading off to the United States to spend two months as part of the prestigious writers programme at Iowa University.

*Miss Dust* is a follow-up to her acclaimed collection *A Long Girl Ago* (Victoria University Press, 2007), which was shortlisted for best book of poetry in 2008 Montana New Zealand Book Awards.

Eight years between books may seem like a long time, but Aitchison says, “I take a long time to compost ideas, and I see a long lead-in as an advantage in poetry collections. Also, as Grace Paley said, ‘Art is too long and life is too short’, so I’ve packed quite a bit into the last eight years, including making a small human, retraining as a teacher, buying a house, getting into tertiary teaching, and trying to survive.’

And it’s well worth the wait – Helen Rickerby, managing editor of Seraph Press, says “I’ve enjoyed Johanna’s work for years, and am delighted to be publishing her new collection. *Miss Dust* takes all the things I admired in *A Long Girl Ago* and twists them off into a new direction. It’s exciting to watch a poet who not only has her own unique voice, but is also continually developing.”

The first half of the *Miss Dust* contains a sequence of persona poems, starring the eponymous Miss Dust: mother, child, teacher, cheater, lover, liver, dreamer, enthusiastic coffee drinker and a multi-faceted anti-hero.

The poems in the second half of the collection cover a range of topics, from love and death, to natural disasters, relationships, violence and didymo. Both halves feature the same mixture of the bleak and funny, and Aitchison’s trademark inventive and often surreal use of language.

*Miss Dust* was launched on Friday 17 July at the Palmerston North City Library by Vivienne Plumb, a well-known poet, playwright and fiction writer. Plumb, one of Aitchison’s favourite poets, was the judge of the New Zealand Poetry Society’s annual competition in 2010, and selected Aitchison’s poem ‘Jun’, which appears in *Miss Dust*, as the overall winner that year. Plumb said that ‘Jun’, “tells a story about being a New Zealander and living overseas and feeling foreign, and at the same time it plumbs the depths of that most serious and complex of subjects: life and death.”

‘Jun’ is one of a number of poems that draw on Aitchison’s experience of living and working in Japan. “My decision to go to Japan was the best decision of my life so far. It changed my finances and the way I looked at myself. People respect teachers in Japan, so I was given an enormous confidence boost by that.”

Aitchison is about to set off another overseas adventure, which is also likely to be life-changing, as she has been selected to attend the Iowa international writing workshop. “The workshop has over 30 participants from countries ranging from Togo to South Korea. We live in a hotel and present papers, participate in panels and are also free to pursue our own writing projects. They take us travelling to New Orleans, New York, Washington DC, and also in the local area.” Aitchison has received a Creative NZ grant to help pay for her travel expenses.

Currently a lecturer at the International Pacific College in Palmerston North, Aitchison has had many different jobs in her life – “32 jobs by age 32”, she says. In 1996 she was a lawyer in Dunedin, when she read an article in the Sunday paper by a novelist. “He said he’d learned how to write in Bill Manhire’s creative writing course. I remember thinking, ‘That’s what I want to do’. So I rang Bill and said, ‘How do I become a writer?’, and he said, ‘Read and write’, so I bought a desk and started racing down to the Dunedin library in my lunch time and pulling out all the poetry books I could find.” Within weeks she had started writing a collection and had applied for the Masters in Creative writing at Victoria University. She also quit her job as a solicitor, “partly because I wanted to write, but also because it was a poor fit for me.”

As well as writing, Aitchison, also runs marathons, snowboards and has a black belt in Wado Ryu Karate. “I don’t know if running affects my writing, because I never write about running. I have written about snowboarding and karate in my previous collection though.”

The striking cover of *Miss Dust* features the painting, *The Gardening Queen*, by Wairarapa artist Janie Nott. Rickerby says, “We had been going back and forth with cover ideas, but nothing seemed quite right, until Johanna thought of the beautiful painting she had hanging above her mantelpiece.”

*Miss Dust* is published by Seraph Press, a boutique publishing company run by Wellington poet Helen Rickerby, which is gaining a reputation for publishing beautiful high-quality poetry books.

**Notes**

* The author is available for interview – please contact publicist Elizabeth Heritage on 022 652 3981 or books@elizabethheritage.co.nz
* *Miss Dust* is available to purchase from [www.seraphpress.co.nz/miss-dust](http://www.seraphpress.co.nz/miss-dust) and from selected NZ bookstores now.
* Media materials, including high-quality images of the book cover and author, are available for download from [www.seraphpress.co.nz/media](http://www.seraphpress.co.nz/media)
* Poems from the collection are available for reprint by media. Contact Seraph Press for availability and permissions.
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