

Tauranga GP digs deep into history, faith and ancient tales of rebellion

Editor **Barbara Fountain** catches up with a Tauranga specialist GP who has recently published a historic novel set in the early years of the first millennium in the Middle East

Doctor, historian, writer, researcher, teacher, orchardist; in another time, Tauranga specialist GP Andrew Corin would have been dubbed a Renaissance man. In this century, he is one of those people who just seems to get stuff done.

I spoke to Andrew when we were both at GP25: Conference for General Practice. We had arranged to meet and talk about his latest book, *Today in Paradise*, which had won a historical fiction prize. He was at the conference to receive a President's Service Medal recognising his dedication as a teacher on the GP registrar training programme and mentoring of junior doctors.

Today in Paradise is set in the Eastern Mediterranean in about 1BC when Roman-backed rule is subject to constant challenge by local resistance. When local bully boy Herod believes his rule is threatened by prophecies around the birth of a baby boy, he has all boys under the age of two slaughtered.

Today in Paradise follows the fortunes of the elder brother of one of those slaughtered babes – Judah ben Perez.

Readers familiar with the Bible will recognise the setting from the time of Christ's birth, and the Galilean carpenter, later prophet, is present mostly in the background of the narrative. The focus is on Judah and his parents, who are essentially subsistence farmers living in a time of political unrest, and it explores a range of social issues – rebellious youth, the role of women, Jewish traditions, and the political and religious tensions of the time. Judah's father is himself part of the resistance, an accomplice of Judas the Maccabean, a historical figure who was a significant agitator at the time.

Judah, an only child, grows up struggling to fulfil his parents' expectations.

Andrew tells me he aims to provide insight not just into the religious thinking of the time, but also into the geopolitical, cultural and social issues.

"This is an ancient historical piece, but I would argue that most of the issues remain relevant and contemporary. Placing the story of the slaughter of the innocents in a contemporary context of what it actually meant at the time, in the same way a bombing in Gaza might happen today."

Andrew says he was fascinated by



Author Andrew Corin buries an early copy of his book *Today in Paradise* at Qumran, in the Jordan Valley, home of the Dead Sea Scrolls

the whole sense of place and understanding the landscapes and how people travel through them. I'm surprised to learn he had not visited the Middle East when he wrote the book. He had planned to visit Syria, Palestine and Israel in 2019/20 and walk a new hiking trail, the Jordan Trail, which follows an ancient trade route from Umm Qais in the north to the coastal city of Aqaba in the south. But then came the pandemic.

Instead, he researched his locations using the internet and Google Earth to analyse lots and lots of images.

When he did finally visit the region in 2023 for three weeks, he already had advanced reader copies of his book. Each day, he visited places featured in the book and checked what he had written about the location. "What was encouraging was that most of the time I got it right."

No spoilers here, but the title of the book might trigger a clue for some readers. Andrew says he loves mystery in both a religious and spiritual sense.

"I love the fact that there is so much that we don't know. Life is not black and white. And that's the beauty of

our spiritual natures, there's so much that is uncertain."

That's what Andrew hopes for his own book.

Today in Paradise won top historical fiction/memoir at the 2024 Eyelands International Book Awards and was a finalist in the religious fiction category in the 2025 Next Generation Indie Book Awards.

Andrew credits his family with allowing him the time to write, but also his passion for seeking knowledge. "I think like most things, when you have a passion, you find the energy and the time to make it happen." But writing the book was helped, in part, by Andrew having a serious hand injury, which required eight operations. Each of those put him out of action for about six weeks, giving him concentrated time to write.

"And when I've got time to write, I really dive into that. And I think it's also about setting up systems so you're not sitting down wondering when the next lot of inspiration is going to come. I know how to get inspired. I put myself into those places and allow things to happen."

While his Christian faith brings a certain perspective, Andrew says he thinks all faith traditions have got a lot to offer. A talk at the conference, "A holistic model of patient-empowered care", included reflections on some Buddhist teachings that he finds useful when discussing a new model of healthcare that is about empowering patients to be the project managers of their health journey.

It looks to the four pillars of wellbeing – physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual – the model created by Māori health advocate Mason Durie.

"I believe that the spiritual pillar is the most important one because having a sense of our deep motivations and purpose – what drives our daily decision-making and behaviour – is really important. And a lot of people are not particularly aware of that deep sense of their spiritual purpose or motivation."

Andrew works seven-tenths in general practice at Tauranga practice Family Doctor; he also has an avocado orchard. Taking on the orchard was an intentional step to help maintain his wellbeing: "Connecting with the land, seeing things grow, because in my role as a GP, there's a lot of cerebral and verbal."

But it has been far from the pastoral idyll it might conjure up. Following damage to the orchard by a developer on neighbouring land, Andrew found himself the owner of a dead orchard for five years. "That didn't nourish me in my spirit at all, but we came through that, and it's been replanted."

Then there is the two-tenths in clinical research work he does as owner of clinical trials company Clinical Horizons. "That's the other fire in my soul...I like to be at the front end of new things and testing and pushing boundaries, challenging existing paradigms and looking for what's new."

His service medal acknowledged his work in the development of clinical guidelines and condition management across several medical specialties, including asthma and COPD.

Andrew is working on a companion book to *Today in Paradise*, picking up the story of Syrian arms dealer Moushe. He's going to play with the genre of magical realism to connect Moushe with events in Mesopotamia, 2000BC.

Unlike fantasy, which actually separates ordinary from extraordinary, magical realism just embeds the extraordinary within the normal. Which seems an appropriate nod to Andrew's ever-questioning mind and passion for what lies between the black and white. ■

editor@nzdoctor.co.nz