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McGee, Greg

IN BRIEF

Greg McGee has written for theatre, television and film. His first play, *Foreskin's Lament* (1980), drew on Rugby culture of the period to comment more broadly on national codes and values. It first toured New Zealand in 1980 and 1981 and happened to coincide with the political and civil upheaval leading up to the 1981 Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand. McGee's television writing has won several awards, including Best Drama Writer awards for two of his political documentary dramas.

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FROM THE OXFORD COMPANION TO NEW ZEALAND LITERATURE

McGee, Greg (1950–), theatre, television and film writer, was born in Oamaru and educated at Waitaki BHS and the University of Otago (LLB 1972). During his university years he also played rugby to the highest level, playing for his university, the province of Otago, the South Island, New Zealand Universities and the Junior All Blacks. He was twice an All Black trialist.

Rugby provided both the setting for his spectacularly successful first play, **Foreskin's Lament*, and the metaphor for a society in which old codes and hypocrisies were anatomised. Professional performances of *Foreskin's Lament* around the country in 1980 and 1981 happened to coincide with the political and civil upheaval leading up to the 1981 Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand, and McGee's humour, savagery and lament for lost innocence made the play provocative and influential far beyond the usual realms of theatre audiences.

His second play, *Tooth and Claw* (first performed 1983; published 1984) drew on his legal qualifications and background to use a law office as a metaphor for society. He implies that lawyers and others, like rugby players, can ignore the unfortunate and bend the rules when it suits them.

Out in the Cold (first performed 1983; published 1984) was based on his short story published in *Islands* 27 (1979). A solo mother disguises herself as a man in order to get a job in the freezing works, where she becomes an effective mouthpiece for social and feminist critiques of the male working world. Unlike the earlier plays, 'Whitemen' (performed 1988) was a box office failure. In satirical farce, using revue-style caricature and energetic bad taste, Rugby Union administrators were lambasted for their decision to proceed with the 1985 All Black rugby tour of apartheid South Africa. (McGee wrote no further stage plays for a decade after 'Whitemen', although a new play called 'This Train I'm On' was workshopped in 1997, and is scheduled for production in 1999.)

All McGee's stage plays are centrally concerned with the loss of collective values and individual altruism in an increasingly materialist and selfish society. Their dramaturgical power relies on vigorous comedy to relax an audience into familiar territory; then bitter paradoxes and social pain emerge to leave the audience uneasy about the society it shares with the characters of the plays. McGee's liberal protagonists face the same anguished dilemma, since affection for such established structures as the world of rugby, or the law, confounds the social critique. These overtly socio-political concerns have led McGee to television and film writing, intending thereby to reach a wider popular audience. His television writing has won several awards, including Best Drama Writer for his two most significant political documentary dramas: 'Erebus: The Aftermath' (1987), which examined the judicial inquiry into the Mt Erebus air crash, and 'Fallout' (1994), a dramatisation (with Tom Scott) of the ANZUS anti-nuclear row with the US and its political implications for the Labour government of David Lange. 'Free Enterprise' (1982) was a drama; and McGee has written for a number of series, including *Roche*, *Marlin Bay*, and

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CoverStory. He also writes for film, notably the award-winning *Old Scores* (1991), co-scripted with Dean Parker.

DC

Author entry from *The Oxford Companion to New Zealand Literature*, edited by Roger Robinson and Nelson Wattie (1998).



[Back to top](#)

MEDIA LINKS AND CLIPS

- Greg McGee's bibliography in the Auckland University Library's [New Zealand Literature File](#)

[Back to top](#)

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