

Richmond writer pens anti-whaler thriller

by Karen Stade

A Richmond marine biologist and novelist is not surprised at the drama playing out in the Southern Ocean with a Japanese whaling ship – he predicted it all in a novel he has just published.

George Muller's *Echoes in the Blue* is a fact-based eco-thriller telling a story about whaling in the Southern Ocean and one man's battle to stand up for what he knows is right, despite the consequences. In it a Japanese whaling ship is rammed during a conflict with anti-whaling protest vessels and suffers a fire on board.

It was written over a two-year period in between stints working with research students at the University of Canterbury's field station at Kaikoura and being a volunteer fire fighter both in Kaikoura and Richmond. The book follows on from his award winning but yet to be published first novel, *Into the Shadows*, which won the 2005 Richard Webster Popular Fiction Award.

Mr. Muller says his interest in marine biology began as a teenager in the 1980's when the newly introduced moratorium on commercial whaling failed to stop the practice.

He studied marine biology and says as a scientist it is easy to see that the so-called scientific research the Japanese say they are carrying out in the Southern Ocean Whale Sanctuary is not science at all but commercial whaling.

"You don't have to kill animals to research them. You can tell a lot by DNA and skin samples, by sighting and observation surveys," he says.

His own research and marine biology work has taken him to Alaska and Antarctica where he has observed species such as minke and humpbacks, as well as Cook Strait and Kaikoura, where he has seen humpbacks and sperm whales on their migratory paths between the tropics and the Southern Ocean.

So determined was Mr. Muller to do something to raise awareness about the whale slaughter that he decided to write a book about it and to set up his own publishing company in order to get it into bookshops this month because, "I knew everything was going to happen (in the Southern Ocean) this summer.

"Just because it's happening out of sight over the horizon is no reason to ignore it."

He says Japan's decision to increase its whaling programme this year to up to 1500 whales, including 50 endangered fin whales and 50 humpback whales in the Antarctic, could be the last straw for conservationists.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures. A kill that large could decimate local sub-populations of whales, there are only around 2000 humpbacks that pass through New Zealand waters. At that rate of slaughter they would last for only five or six years before becoming locally extinct."

Mr. Muller's campaign to raise awareness includes a \$1 donation from every book sold to save-the-whale causes. This represents half of what he personally will make from the sale of each book.

A Website, www.cgeorgemuller.com, has been set up to provide further information on whaling.