

# Streets of your town

## Nick Earls as an INTP author

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Nick Earls: *Zigzag Street*

Nick Earls: *Bachelor Kisses*

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Round and round, up and down  
Through the streets of your town

—The Go-Betweens, 'Streets of Your Town'

What's going on in my head is floridly bizarre  
most of the time.

—Nick Earls, *Bachelor Kisses*

In 1980, prior to moving out of our first house, my wife and I took a last walk through the area in which we had started our life together. Halfway up Red Hill we came upon a side street with an intriguing name: Zigzag Street. It's an appropriate name: the street pitches and yaws as it cascades down the hill towards the Fourx brewery. And the name has quaintly old-world overtones that fit well with the Federation cottages lining the street.

It seems that I'm not alone in my fascination with the name Zigzag Street: Nick Earls used it as the title of his 1996 novel. On opening the book I was delighted to find that it's set in that very same inner-Brisbane street.

My delight was heightened by the fact that it's a very funny book: a "laugh out loud" book, as the *Australian Review of Books* puts it. I found much to identify with in the trials and tribulations of the (anti)hero, 28 year old corporate lawyer Rick Derrington. I suspect that's at least partly because he and I are similar types.

Rick tells his story in the first person. His opening line sets the theme: "I basically blew my university days in pursuit of one girl." Perennially unlucky in love, he is languishing on his own after being 'trashed' by his last partner. He spends his days in a city office, working (or more often *not* working) as an investment analyst, and his nights at home with just his cat for company.

Rick plans home renovations, but never translates them into action. His modest social life consists of tennis and dinner parties with his small circle of friends. The group amuse themselves with quasi-intellectual banter, along with ribald commentary on Rick's love life.

Despite his friends' 'helpful' advice, Rick has no luck on the relationships front. A spontaneous fling with his manager, a married woman, merely compounds his anxiety. His situation seems hopeless—until his most inauspicious encounter with one Rachel Vilikovsky.

What is Rick's type? He prefers his own company and is not comfortable in the outer world. On first seeing him at home, Rachel is moved to remark:

Do you have any human contact at all? ... This is your own little world here, isn't it?

Rick engages with the world through an intuitive fog:

... some days practicalities are quite foreign to me, and I'm much more at home in a world described only in terms of the crappiest metaphors possible.

By his own account, Rick is "a theorist rather than a practitioner." He is absorbed in his thoughts:

...thinking's the best kind of doing, isn't it? Once you carry anything through you really start to limit the possibilities.

This aversion to limiting the possibilities is expressed as an exasperating indecisiveness:

SAL: Have you got any particular food preference? ...

RICK: I'm not sure.

SAL: So does that mean no, you have no particular preference? Or are you actually unsure as to whether or not you have a particular preference?

RICK: I suspect that at present I can neither confirm nor deny whether or not I have a particular preference, and I may not be able to do so for some time.

At work Rick favours a back-office role over the cut-and-thrust of front-line international financial dealings. He communicates facelessly by telephone:

... I talk to them like a man in a dark suit, and they have no idea that things are less than perfect.

Relationships are Rick's Achilles heel. He struggles to take account of others' feelings, but it's an uphill battle:

I don't do bad things. I do crap things, sometimes insensitive things, but that's usually as far as it goes.

Rick sounds to me like an INTP: caught up in dominant introverted thinking; relating to the world via auxiliary intuition; and grappling with inferior extraverted feeling.

Earls' *Bachelor Kisses* (1998) again centres on a young urban professional—this time, resident medical officer Jon Marshall. The parallels don't end there: Jon Marshall and Rick Derrington manifest similar type preferences.

There is little doubt that Jon prefers intuition:

It worries me that my genius mind might work this way. It worries me that I might have a fondness for connecting things for the most inappropriate of reasons.

## Type/writing

"Possibilities have always appealed", says Jon. "I could spend months, years even, contemplating the possibilities." The other side of the coin is a chronic aversion to closure:

"Why can't people just relax and take it day to day?"

Having started duty in a psychiatric ward, Jon contrives a transfer to a solo research project—far more congenial for an INTP. While ambivalent about other aspects of his work, he takes this avenue of study very seriously:

... I'm going to be very frustrated if someone doesn't look into this, if it slips away ... and the evidence is left to say only that a relationship couldn't be clearly established.

"I'm not afraid of being wrong", Jon declares. But when the time comes to assert himself, he is handicapped by an introvert's diffidence:

I say yes, since it's the only appropriate way of saying no that I can think of at the moment.

Unlike the reluctantly celibate Rick Derrington, Jon has little difficulty in finding partners. But they are unstable affairs; the book abounds with passages reflecting type differences between Jon and his companions. When the book opens, he is extricating himself from a relationship foundering on differences on the EI dichotomy:

I'm probably better left alone. But that's not the way she operates. Alone, from Penny's perspective, is surely a worse option than anything.

When Kelly McLean enters Jon's life he soon finds that they "look at things in different ways." That's an astute observation, as Kelly seems to be an ESFJ, his opposite on all four MBTI dichotomies.

Kelly, too, recognises their differences. She contrasts Jon's intuition with her step-by-step sensate preference:

We don't think quite the same. You're lateral, and I'm more straight ahead.

Kelly quickly becomes frustrated by Jon's inability to communicate in specifics:

JON: I've just got a few things to work out.

KELLY: What things?

JON: What term I'm doing, the project, stuff like that.

KELLY: What stuff like that? Why is there never a complete list?

The TF dichotomy is another source of tension. As the feeling-judger Kelly sees it, "even when you're being nice you're not actually nice." When Jon offers a friend advice on relationships, Kelly objects to his impersonal tone:

... the way you tell it ... it sounds like a board game. ... It doesn't sound like there's another person involved at all.

For his part, Jon is acutely aware of his inadequacies in the feelings department—and he seeks a strategic solution:

I hate hurting people's feelings. ... I got a seven in psych at uni. I should have dozens of different strategies for raising contentious issues in uncontentious ways.

Differences on the JP dichotomy complete the quartet. When Jon offhandedly suggests a holiday, Kelly presses him to finalise the itinerary. "I don't want to plan this", he protests. "It's too far ahead for me." His suggestion had been meant to be "a bit more abstract than that."

The couple's differences prove to be irreconcilable. Jon ponders his psychological distance from Kelly:

Sometimes Kelly really matters to me. ... But sometimes Kelly's just someone on the passenger seat, way outside my head, someone who probably wants clear signals and doesn't always get them.

In *Bachelor Kisses*, Nick Earls neatly encapsulates how it feels to live life in an INTP's skin:

Sometimes I think I conduct most of my life in an abstract domain, as though it's only a concept.

Rick Derrington and Jon Marshall both present as INTPs. Earls' depictions of his protagonists are so true to type that I would be surprised if he is not that type, too. (His preference for perceiving is clear enough: Earls has said that he chose to study medicine because it offered "the longest period of time to work out exactly how and what [he] was going to write.")

In just five years *Zigzag Street* has acquired the status of a work worthy of academic review. For Rick, says Karen Brooks, power is "accessible only through others or as an alternative reality." (Brooks also suggests that Rick is "searching for a phallic substitute." Perhaps. Certainly the cover of *Bachelor Kisses* is as Freudian as it gets.)

INTPs are 'different'. Peter Geyer has noted how their normal behaviour can be pathologised by commentators who lack an understanding of type. Where Brooks sees "emotional weakness" in Rick, I see an INTP, with that type's distinctive package of gifts, faults, and anxieties. As Jon Marshall puts it in *Bachelor Kisses*:

[I'm] frequently misunderstood, but that's an error at the other end. That's not my fault. I mean well.

As you enter *Zigzag Street*, the first building you'll see is an architectural practice. What could be more fitting in a street made famous by an INTP 'Architect'? ❖

## References

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