

4000km and was unsure if he had the mental and physical fortitude to continue.

The attraction was immediate. Gray was quite the package; also 27, a towering lawyer from a well-regarded Maori family who can get by in seven languages. A passionate hyper self-aware kind of guy who, in his own words, “wants to buy everyone a beer but doesn’t want to pay for it”. Greeks and Gray quickly became lovers, igniting a highly combustible relationship.

Even in the early days there were ominous signs. Gray later wrote of his feelings for Greeks. “Sometimes she is the most beautiful girl I have ever seen, sometimes she isn’t.” She was at once inspired and, she admits, occasionally bored by his obsession with the wall and the way it was somehow tied into his mana. One day she thought she had the answer. She would join him, ostensibly to document his journey. “But I was also thinking that in order to have a good relationship with him I had to invest in it,” she says. “And that seemed really romantic to me at the time.”

Yet even before they got on the plane, the trouble began. In *Embracing the Dragon* she recalls:

The day I bought my plane ticket to Beijing, he accompanied me to the travel shop. Afterwards we lay on our backs in a park, staring silently up at the sky. Later that evening, he rang to say he’d changed his mind. He wasn’t going to China. Not yet. He wasn’t ready. “But I’ve paid for my ticket!” I cried — and the inner voice I’d been trying so hard to ignore bellowed at me like an emergency siren: “Stop! This is all wrong and you know it. Walk away while you can.”

Thereafter, almost every idealistic notion she had about forging bonds through adversity were stripped away. The two walk into a blizzard on their first day and almost die from the cold and lack of oxygen in her woefully inadequate survival bag. Gray informs her the wall is tapu and that means no sex while they follow its long, winding path.

In *Embracing the Dragon* Greeks chronicles how her romantic adventure became three months of walking arduous terrain in utter cultural isolation, unable for most of the journey to understand a word of Chinese and, most gallingly, dependent on an intensely driven man she often didn’t like.

After walking the wall and travelling for a time in Asia the couple arrived back in New Zealand and tried to settle down. But Gray then asked Greeks if he could bring other women home. At that, Greeks finally pulled the plug. Soon afterwards, a chance meeting with the head of the fledging Awa Press led to a book contract. “They said to draw up a plan and I did and it was just chronological and then I just sat down with my diaries and started to write it.” (Her editor promptly handed it back suggesting she protect herself by removing some of the even more intense personal revelations, advice for which Greeks is now thankful).

She says she wrote the book because she wanted to exorcise her demons and try to retrace how everything had gone so wrong. “Because at one point along there I really wanted to be with him and I changed my plans to go to China and be with him to share in his dream and at times I felt completely and utterly shat upon and that was quite devastating to discover at the bottom of a cliff in a mountain in China.”

Mortified by the exposure when *Embracing the Dragon* was published, Greeks moved to Dunedin where no one knew her and waited for Gray’s reaction. When it came it seemed to encapsulate his complex personality. He told her his ego was a little battered but magnanimously he helped her promote the book. He then emailed his friends urging them to buy it and boasting that “not even Bill Clinton had a book written about him at this age.”

Asked if he recognised himself in Greeks’ portrayal, Gray is equivocal. “In some ways I think she recounted a lot of that journey correctly and like a journalist. But in some ways, like, I don’t think she quite got what I was doing the whole time. That was something I picked up in her book — that she never quite got it,” he says.

“My journey was more focused on the wall and a deeper spiritual endeavour and based on what Polly had written she wasn’t on the same journey I was on and that was pretty clear.”

True. He writes of the wall as a trail of self-initiation. *A one-man path that tests the very threshold of your mental and physical exhaustion; makes you believe in the guidance of the divine and, when you are ready, graduates you towards the journey unto the other.*

She recounts one of her best moments; “I remember once there was a little Chinese boy playing on the wall and

“She said I’d fallen asleep. We would have died, you know, and it was those factual inconsistencies, it was, like, well, that wasn’t actually what happened and that did paint me in a light that wasn’t quite right,” he says.

Michael Gresham is a friend of Gray’s, who the couple sometimes stayed with in Beijing during their breaks from walking. He said he found Polly’s “intimate” book quite disturbing.

“Polly didn’t paint a great picture of Nathan although I understand that would probably sell more books,” he says. “But Nathan has a personality where he brings a bit of it on himself.”

Mainly, he says, he feels disappointed Polly had published a book ahead of Nathan when it was meant to be his big expedition. “There’s not much justice in that but at the same time Polly’s a great writer and good on her for putting out the book.”

Unlike Greeks, Gray had to shop his manuscript around before he found a publisher. He had approached Awa Press but they thought it would be “inappropriate” to represent both authors. It was only after he enlisted the support of Witi Ihimaera (whose endorsement on the back cover reads “A remarkable celebration of the indomitable spirit of humankind”) that Penguin picked it up. It’s only been out since August but Gray’s enthusiastic promotion of the book — his publicist at Penguin, Rachel Wallis, calls him a “one-man marketing machine” and says he sat outside Dymocks for days on end as well as visiting all manner of cultural groups to get the book out there — has seen it fly up to number nine on the national non-fiction bestseller list. The initial 3000-print run sold quickly, it is now being reprinted, and Penguin Australia, UK, US, Canada and China have all secured the rights to publish it in their markets.

Gray finally finished the wall although he was beaten in his quest to be the first westerner. But over 4000km, his goal slowly changed. Somewhere along the way he realised he no longer wanted the fame but a personal transformation. Skirmishes with the Chinese police, being the witness to the murder and finding himself thoroughly reliant on the kindness of strangers deeply affected him.

When at last he reaches the wall’s end at the Bohai Sea, he writes; *I place my hands on (the) last brick and scream six screams so completely inhuman — I evict from my soul the fuel of a billion angry men.*

He says he’s grateful to the wall for changing him from a boy into a man. “When I look someone in the eye now I know that in their eyes there are 10,000 or even more lives that have gone into the creation of that human being, and once you have that awareness, then that’s basically the respect for the human being. There is so much genealogy, so much whakapapa, that has gone into [the wall] and so it was having a sense that it’s not just a wall, it’s a history that we’re playing with and you have to be respectful and honouring it as I learned on the trip.”

So what did the whole episode teach Greeks? “I’m definitely a lot more certain about my inner compass. If it says you’re going off course then I’ve learned my lessons about stopping and putting myself back on course. I guess I feel more empowered and more confident. It’s changed me for the better.”

After everything, she feels indebted to Nathan Gray. “I feel so lucky. It’s been such a good teacher in so many ways. Just today I picked up a business magazine and there was a picture of the Great Wall of China and just looking at it I was there for a second and remembering smells and feeling what it was like to stand on a mountain top and look out across those ranges it’s like ‘wow that’s a part of me’. It was absolutely the journey of a lifetime and I feel lucky to have had that. And that’s thanks to Nathan.” ■



BACKDROP: Nathan Gray’s objectives changed during the journey.

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peeing on it and he was laughing as he was peeing and having fun and it was just really, really lovely because he was enjoying himself and he wasn’t desecrating the wall; he was just playing, but it put everything back into context.”

When Greeks is asked how she felt about the way she is portrayed in Gray’s book, she says it was fascinating to read, although she had her own “little ego struggles at time. I didn’t like his use of the word ‘meek’. What planet was he on? But that’s what makes it so interesting. Crikey, we really were in different realities at times.”

SOME BELIEVE Gray’s self-image as a humble, spiritual guy belies a machismo he can’t quite hide. The editor-in-chief of Awa Press, Mary Varnham, said she thought Greeks’ depiction of her then boyfriend erred on the kind side. “In his public utterances towards her he has been rather condescending, I think”. Still, when *First Pass Under Heaven* was published Awa Press took the opportunity to reprint *Embracing the Dragon* — hoping the publicity from Gray’s book could flow over into sales of Greeks’ book.

Gray says he is unfazed about the differences in their recollection of the cliff episode. Fear and emotional reaction make people recall things differently, he says. But he is piqued at a “factual inconsistency” in Greeks’ telling of the blizzard episode.