Praise for Maurice Gee and *Salt*

WINNER, NEW ZEALAND POST BOOK AWARDS
YOUNG ADULT FICTION SECTION 2008
SHORTLISTED, ESTHER GLEN AWARD 2008

“From a storyteller who makes the craft look effortless… *Salt* is brutal and uplifting in equal measure.” —Bernard Beckett

“Deft, subtle, artful, Maurice Gee is a magician. He has created another world and he takes us there without showiness or effort.” —Michael Pryor

“I picked up *Salt*, Maurice Gee’s new young adult fantasy, one evening…and I didn’t put it down again…The strength and clarity of the prose, the simple, compelling story woven though with ideas of fundamental importance…this is in my view the best children’s book of his long career.” —*Listener*

“Spare, disturbing but ultimately optimistic—the magic of *Salt* is all in the writing…gritty understated clarity and sharp imagery…an utterly compelling read.”

—*NZ Post Book Awards Judges’ Report*

“A skillfully told story, taut and fast-moving, but with a rich texture of dark reality to it.” —Magpies Australia

“It is a marvelous moment when you read the first page of a new book and realise you are holding a classic of the future. *Salt* is a stunning mix of action and ideas…a master storyteller at his peak.” —*Weekend Press*
Maurice Gee is one of New Zealand’s finest writers with more than forty books for adults and young adults to his credit. He has won several literary awards, including the Wattie Award, the New Zealand Fiction Award and the New Zealand Children’s Book of the Year Award. Salt, the first volume in The Salt Trilogy, was the winner of the New Zealand Post Book Award for Young Adult Fiction.
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Deep Salt in order to rescue Hari’s father Tarl. Their journey becomes far more
than a quest to save Tarl—their world is on the brink of unspeakable terror.

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The Whips, as silent as hunting cats, surrounded Blood Burrow in the hour before sun-up and began their sweep as the morning dogs began to howl. Rain fell heavily that day, washing the streets and overflowing the gutters. The gray tunics of the Whips turned black in the downpour, their helmets shone like beetle wings, and the sparks that jumped from their fingers as they herded their recruits fizzed and spat like sewer gas.

They took ninety men, some from their hovels, some from the ruins, and prodded them, howling, to the raised southern edge of People's Square, where the paving stones had not yet slipped into the bog. Brown water lapped the buildings on the northern side. Cowl the Liberator, crying Liberty or Death, raised his marble head above the rushes. Mosquitoes bred underneath his tongue. The Whips, as custom required, paused in their herding and mouthed “Cowl the Murderer” before going on.
A cart with a covered platform and canvas aprons at the sides and back waited on the stones. A clerk sat at a desk under the awning, with a sheaf of forms under his palm and a quill pen, curved like a blade, in his other hand. His uniform was paler than the Whips’ (and dry) and had the Company symbol, an open hand, blazoned on the tunic. He frowned at the rabble herded in front of him and drew his head back in a vain attempt to avoid the stench of rotting shirts and festering bodies.

“Sergeant.”

“Sir?”

“Is this your best effort? My orders are two hundred fit for work.”

The Whip sergeant swallowed and seemed to shrink, knowing he and his men would earn no bonus, even though they had chased hard, sparing none. “They fled like rats. They have holes and runways everywhere.”

“And your job is to know them and bring me no starvelings, no half-dead.”

“They pretend, sir. This one”—he prodded a near-naked man, making him whimper—“he ran like a marsh deer. Now he stoops. And this—he has swallowed dirt. It makes him vomit.”

“Enough. I know their tricks. Count.”

“Ninety, sir.”

“Silence them. And the women too.”

The Whips raised their electric hands and shot fizzing bolts into the air, and the howling stopped. Outside the ring of guards, the wives and children of the ninety fell silent. Some kept their mouths wide in cries they dared
not utter, while others wept soundlessly, their tears mingling with the rain, which fell more heavily, making puddles around their unclad feet.

The clerk stood up under the awning. “Men,” he cried, widening his mouth in a smile, “this is your great day. You are chosen to serve Company in its glorious enterprise. Daily we grow in comfort and prosperity. In this you share. Who serves Company serves mankind. Raise your voices now and give thanks.”

The men closest to the Whips made a few ragged shouts, “Long live Company. Praise to Company,” but somewhere a woman shrieked, “Murderers!” And from the ruined buildings round the square cries like echoes came from doorways and windows: “Murderers, thieves!”

The clerk was untroubled. His speech was part of procedure, and the shouts and cries, and the howling and tears, were something he expected on recruiting days. He sat down and yawned behind his hand.

“Examination,” he said.

A Whip prodded a man into the space before the cart, and then, with his gloves turned off, stripped off his clothing with raking sweeps of his iron hands. The man, young but stooped and thin, stood shivering in the rain.

“No need for the hose today,” said the clerk, but he yawned again while his underlings sprayed the man’s body with disinfected water from a tank behind his wagon.

“Name?”

“Heck,” the man whispered.

The clerk took his quill and wrote on a form.
“Deformities?” he said to a third underling who had stepped down from the cart.
“None.”
“Sores?”
“Multiple. Feet and legs.”
“Condition?”
“E.”
The clerk ran his eyes over the man’s body. “You bring me trash,” he said to the sergeant.
“Sir, he is fast. He goes like a mud-crab. He will fit in narrow places.”
“Perhaps.” The clerk frowned at Heck. “Saltworker,” he said.
“No,” cried the man, falling to his knees. “Not Salt. I’ll go to the farms. I’ll go on the ships. In the name of Company, I pray you, not Salt.”
“Brand him,” said the clerk, tossing a marker to the underling.
The man beckoned his helpers for the acid bucket and the brush. He fitted the metal marker on Heck’s forehead while a Whip held him still, and swiped the brush across the stencil. “Who joins Company joins history. Your time begins,” he intoned, ignoring Heck's screaming as the acid burned.
“Name him,” said the clerk.
The underling read from the marker: “S97406E.”
The clerk wrote.
“Is there a woman? Quickly. Come.”
A woman doubled up with age scuttled through the ring of Whips and stood in front of the cart.
“You are his?” said the clerk.

“His mother, sir. He has no wife. He could not keep a woman.”

The clerk shrugged. “Give it to her.”

The underling handed an iron token to the crone, who seized it and hugged it to her breast.

“Show this at the Ottmar gate on the morning of the last day of each month. Company will pay you one groat. Nothing if it is lost. Do you understand?”

“Long life to Company. Company cares,” said the woman. She scuttled back through the Whips, with the marker hidden in her rags.

“Company cares,” the clerk replied, speaking by rote. “Next.”

The rain continued to fall. The numbering and branding went on until midmorning. Under the cart, Hari knelt on the stones, shifting only to ease his legs and holding his knife ready to stab. The horses knew he was there, but he had made a bond with them as he found his hiding place. Now and then he slipped his hand under the canvas apron and touched each one on the fetlock, as light as a fly, renewing that bond. He had cut a flap like an eyelid in the side-canvas, and he watched as each recruit was held and branded and each wife or daughter given a token, and he was filled with hatred and rage, which he had to hold down and aim away at the Whips and the clerk, so it would not alarm the horses. He must keep them calm and use them when the time was right. He watched his father, who had two names, Tarl and Knife.
He had thought they would never take his father, and Tarl himself had made a vow that he would die before letting Company enslave him. Yet here he was, held within the ring, burned on his chest and arms by electric fingers, and waiting his turn for the brand.

The early howling of the dogs had woken them that morning, in their corner of the ruined hall known as Dorm, and Hari had read the message in their howls and run among the sleeping tribe, waking them with kicks and cries: “The Whips are coming.”

“Wake the burrow. I’ll do the streets,” his father had shouted, so Hari plunged through stairwells and runways and pits, on sloping beams, on slides of rubble, shouting his warning: “The Whips, the Whips!” Men scurried into the dark, deeper into holes inside Blood Burrow. A hundred or more made their escape.

Tarl had chosen the more dangerous way, warning men in the shelters opening off the streets—and somehow the Whips had cornered him and locked him in their fizzing ring. Hari, at the end of his run, watching from a crevice in the base of a shattered wall by People’s Square, had seen the ninety herded round the edge of the swamp, and seen with disbelief his father among them. The clerk’s cart had rumbled by, a body length from his nose, heading for its place by the south wall. Hari had not thought; he had acted, the way the feral dogs, the way the deep-crawling, invisible rats had taught him. He darted across the stones, slid under the canvas apron, rolled between the iron-clad wheels and fastened himself like a cockroach to the underside of the cart. He felt the horses
sense him and replied in a silent whisper: Brother horse, sister horse, I am here, I am you.

Eighty-nine men were stripped and branded and named and stood shivering in the bitter rain, each with his hands tied at his back and a rope halter fastening him to the man in front. His father was the last, and Hari, watching through his eyehole in the canvas, saw why he had worked himself into that position. Inside Tarl’s ragged shirt, in its ratskin sheath, his knife was hidden. He had won space for his throwing arm. The clerk would die. Hari heard his father’s intention like a whisper.

No, he tried to whisper back, I have a better way.

He was too late.

Tarl writhed and cowered, with his limbs locked in crooked shapes as though by disease. The Whip stepped close, turning off his gloves. He raised his iron fingers to strip Tarl’s clothes, and in that moment Tarl became himself—stepped in and out, with his black-bladed knife in his hand, and slashed like the blow of a fangcat. The Whip fell back, shrieking, as his cheek between his helmet’s eye- and jaw-piece opened up.

A single leap sideways gave Tarl room. He turned in the air and landed facing the clerk. The knife spun in his hand as he reversed it. But even as it sped away with a whipping sound, Hari saw his father’s error. The blade was slippery with blood, and Tarl’s fingers had slid at the last moment, lowering the trajectory. The knife struck the edge of the desk. It bounded back and fell on the stones. And already Whips, with gloves sparking at lethal power, surrounded his father and moved in.
“Hold him. Don’t kill him,” cried the clerk.
They paused an arm’s length away and held Tarl immobile in their hissing ring. His clothes began to steam and smolder, and the clerk cried, “Back. Farther back. I want to see him.”

The Whips retreated a single step.
“Strip him,” said the clerk.

The Whip sergeant raked Tarl’s body, making him scream. Tarl stood naked in the rain.

“Yes, I see. No crooked man after all. You will serve Company well. What a pity it is we cannot use your knife skills. I might have posted you to Company Guard. But after attacking a Whip and trying to assassinate me, you have lost your chance.”

“I will join no Company. I belong to myself. I’m a free man,” Tarl cried.

The clerk gave a smile and said patiently, “Yes, that is true. Everyone is free. But freedom means serving Company. Is that not understood in the burrows?”

“You use us to enrich yourselves. You starve us and turn us into slaves.”

“There is a time of hardship,” said the clerk. “For everyone. But Company works for all and the benefit will reach here soon. It comes down like the soft rain, even into Blood Burrow, you will see. Perhaps it is time we sent educators here. But enough talk. What is your name?”

“I have none for Company. It is mine,” said Tarl.

“Then keep it,” said the clerk. “I’ll make you a new one.” He spoke to his assistant, who punched out a stencil. The clerk threw it down to the underling.
“Brand him,” he said.

Two Whips with gloves at quarter power forced Tarl to his knees. Even so, his limbs jerked with pain. The underlings, one with the stencil, one with the acid, branded him. Tarl cried out, but not with the burning. “I do not accept this. I am Tarl.”

The clerk picked up his quill. “Not anymore, I’m afraid. Yes, man, read it.”

The underling obeyed, and a moan of fear went up from the haltered prisoners and the women gathered by the swamp.

“DS936A,” the man read.

Under the cart Hari closed his eyes in terror. DS was Deep Salt, the furthest reaches of the deepest tunnels of the mine. Men sent there never returned to the surface. What they dug for nobody knew, and after a time, one by one, they vanished. No bodies, no traces of a body, were ever found. It was said the salt worms took them, or salt tigers, or salt rats, but these were make-believe creatures no one had seen. It was said their souls were sucked down into the dark lake at the center of the world and locked in cages forever. Hari believed it. He knelt with his forehead on the stones, shaking with fear. The cart horses whinnied and rippled their hides as though stung by flies.

Outside, the Whips stepped back from Tarl, and after a moment he rose from his knees.

“I am still, I am always, a free man,” he said, but his voice was thin and afraid.

“Who you are is DS936A,” said the clerk. “And I offer my congratulations. It is the first time I have given an A.
Your woman will get two groats instead of one. Where is she?”

“I have no woman. And I will take nothing from Company.”

“Then Company is spared the expense, which is to the good. Bind him, and make it tight.”

The Whips obeyed, while Hari, under the cart, raised himself from the stones and crept to his eyehole again. Stay, he commanded the horses, do not move. He saw how the Whips pulled his father’s halter tight and tied double knots to bind his hands. But Tarl had no man fastened behind him. A single knife-slash would cut him free.

“Let no man think he can change his destiny, which is service to Company,” said the clerk. “You will march now, ninety servants in the glorious enterprise, to the dispersal center, where you will find clean tunics, each emblazoned with the open hand, and food, good food, enough to satisfy strong men like you. Company cares.”

“Company cares,” murmured several of the recruits, for food and enough were words seldom heard in the burrows.

The clerk smiled. “From there you will go to your new work—to Ships, to Coal, to Farm, to Factory, to Granary, to Salt”—he smiled again—“and to Deep Salt. Each will serve out his time, and payment will be made to your women here at home. Company cares. And when you have made your contribution and wish to labor no more, you will retire to a Golden Village as honored workers of Company, and your women will join you to live out your lives in quiet enjoyment. That is the happy
future Company prescribes for you! Now march like men. March like servants in our enterprise.”

“And march to your deaths,” Tarl cried, “for there is no retirement. You will work until you die. That is the only use Company has for you.”

The Whip sergeant stepped at him with his hands raised, but the clerk cried, “Leave him. Let him rant. He goes to Deep Salt, and it is true, no man returns from there. But let me ask you, fellow”—he squinted at Tarl’s forehead—“DS936A. Are there any more hidden in the burrows like you? Do you have followers? Do you spread your poison among our happy citizens there? We must investigate. A brother perhaps? A son to follow in your ways?”

“No,” Tarl said, “no son.” But he spoke too quickly, for the clerk said, “Ah. I must make a note,” and turned to pick up his quill.

Under the cart, Hari waited another moment. Whips stood too close to his father. But he must act; there might not be another chance. He sent a questing thread out from his mind to the horses, found them and whispered silently: Brother horse, sister horse, the black fly stings your rump.

The two beasts lurched forward, rearing and whinnying. The cart bucked and leaned, and the clerk’s desk skidded sideways, carrying him with it. It balanced on the edge of the tray, then tipped off. He thrust out his arm to save himself and one of the iron cart-wheels crushed his elbow on the stones. His shriek rose like a sharp spear into the sky.
Hari slid back as the cart advanced. The canvas flap at the rear brushed over him, and he sprang to his feet in the open. The acid bucket stood close, and he seized it and flung it one-handed at the two underlings. They danced, screaming, as the acid burned. Hari sprang sideways, quick as a cat. He stabbed with his knife into a helmet joint of the nearest Whip as the man fumbled with his glove, but the joint shut as the Whip fell, holding the blade as though in a vise and ripping the knife from Hari’s hand.

“My knife, Hari,” Tarl screamed.

Hari saw it lying by the wheel of the cart and scooped it up, but his advantage of surprise was gone. The Whips who had run to help the clerk abandoned him and rushed back to surround Tarl, while others who had been posted at the gates of People’s Square came running around the side of the swamp. Hari sprang sideways. He felt the heat of a Whip hand strike in the space he had left; heard the deputy clerk, standing on the cart, cry, “Take him alive.” He dived low, skidding on his belly across the stones, passed between Whips’ feet and came upright beside his father. He slashed with the black-bladed knife, and the rope linking Tarl to the man in front parted like a cotton thread. There was no time to cut Tarl’s hands free, for the Whips were closing in, with yellow bolts jumping from their fingertips.

Again Hari flung his thought-spear at the horses: The black fly stings. The black fly bites. The animals whinnied with pain and plunged against their traces, jumping the cart forward. The linked water cart tumbled on its side,
pinning three Whips on the stones. Hari and his father sprang through the gap, but the Whip sergeant, sprawling on the ground, lunged as they went by and clamped Tarl’s heel in his burning hand. Tarl fell, screaming, and Hari, two steps ahead, felt the pain too, so close was their bond. He fell on his knees, crying out, and would have turned to help his father, but Tarl, in the grip of the iron hand, mouthed: “Go.”

Whips were only a body length away. Hari felt their heat. He turned and plunged into the crowd of women.

“A purse for whoever takes the boy,” cried the deputy clerk.

Some of the women clawed at him; others parted, making way, then closed again. But the Whips, close behind, with burning hands, knocked them aside like stalks of corn. Hari had no time to pause at the edge of the swamp. He plunged through the rushes, mud sucking at his feet, then flung himself into the brown water where it deepened and clawed his way down with his father’s knife clutched in his fist. Deep, deeper, he went, blind in the murk, out of reach of the iron men. Swimming was unknown in the burrows, where no water flowed except in drains, and the scummy ponds and yellow swamps that lay in deep basements and abandoned squares and parks were believed to be poisonous; but Hari, taught by the old Survivor, Lo, had learned how to worm his way into the minds of the giant rats that lived deeper in the ruins than men could go, and had found the place where their swimming instinct had its home, and had learned the skill. The ponds, the swamps, were part of his highway through
the burrows. He swam with his belly sliding on mud, probing with his father’s knife, until he felt it strike the sunken pedestal of Cowl the Liberator’s statue. With his breath almost gone, he circled to the back, then climbed the Liberator as if he were a tree and broke the surface of the pond beside Cowl’s giant head. He put one foot in his wide mouth, hauled himself up on a shaggy eyebrow and lay on the slope of Cowl’s forehead, catching his breath.

Most of the Whips had given him up for dead, but the sergeant still watched. “There, the boy,” he cried. “He swims like a rat.”

The clerk was on his feet, with his crushed arm dripping blood. “Kill him,” he shrieked. “Use your bolt guns. I authorize it.”

The Whips drew their weapons from their belts and flicked them on. Hari, watching from his perch, knew he had a moment while the charge built up. He saw his father climb painfully to his feet, his leg half-dead still from the sergeant’s glove.

“Tarl,” Hari cried, “I’ll come for you.”


“Kill the boy,” whimpered the clerk. Then he fainted on the stones.

The bolt guns were charged. They were clumsy weapons that could not be aimed accurately, but the bolt of energy they threw would blast a hole in a stone wall. Hari waited until the sergeant leveled his weapon. Then he scrambled across the top of Cowl’s head and slid onto his submerged shoulder.
“Company dies,” he shouted and flung himself into the water as the sergeant’s bolt fell in its arc toward him.

This time he stayed shallow, for it was a longer swim. He held his father’s knife in his teeth and went like a mud frog, arms and legs stroking in unison. The pool was deepest where it met the wall of a ruined building on the north side of the square between two gates. He meant to come up there, and would have time for only a single breath before the bolt guns were fired again.

Then I must make them think I’m drowned, he thought, but Tarl will know.

His hands touched the wall. He fixed his feet on jutting stones and propelled himself up. Beyond Cowl’s broken head the sergeant was watching, and other Whips, their bolt guns raised, were waiting by the gates at the edge of the pond. Tarl struggled to his feet again. He made an agonized shout: “Never let them take you.”

Hari had no breath to reply. He took the knife, his father’s knife, from his teeth and raised it above his head, knowing Tarl would understand. Bolts hissed toward him. He sank again and was punched by detonations, burned by water that boiled as they struck, but he had marked his place and knew his way. Down again, and sideways, counting the handholds in the wall, until, four body lengths under the surface, he found the hole he was seeking, blown in the base of the wall by cannon bolts in Company’s Freedom War. The masonry was thick and the hole narrowed to his shoulders’ width on the inner side. He wriggled through, fighting slimy weed that hung like curtains, bent his body upward, inside the wall,
and slithered along tunnels in the drowned masonry, praying that no new fall of stone had closed the passage and that he would not meet a king rat here.

At last he broke into the air and freed his knife from his teeth and lay across a shattered door, gasping for breath. Then he hauled himself up through tangles of broken beam and plank until he reached the light. It pierced in rays through the building’s roof. He was in a vast room, for banquets and dancing in the old days, he supposed—although he had no idea what banquets and dancing were. Everything had been scavenged generations ago. Rubble and rotting timbers lay on the inlaid floor. Hari did not pause, although in the past he had spent hours in the room, shifting rubble and scraping the floor clean so that he might wonder at the colored scenes of trees and animals and people inlaid in green and red and yellow tiles.

There were no windows, no openings to People’s Square. Hari ran through halls and passages, crawled in tunnels of broken stone, climbed through floors and ceilings, and slid through walls where charred timber stood like blackened teeth. He crept on his knees around a hole opening in the floor of the watchtower over East Gate. Below him, a Whip kept guard, with his bolt gun holstered and his gloves humming at low power. Hari went by, as soundless as a cat. Then he ran again and came at last to a building on the south side of the square. A window opened in the wall above the clerk’s cart. It was blocked with timber except for a small hole at the bottom where the frame had been forced out like a fractured bone. Hari inched forward, and the square came into view.
The rain had stopped and the sun was shining. Half a dozen haltered men with their hands set free were tipping the water cart back on its wheels. Tarl was not among them. He was chained to an iron ring on the clerk’s cart, and the Whip sergeant was guarding him.

Hari sent his thought thread to the horses: Brother horse, sister horse, I’m sorry I caused you pain. I ask you, travel slowly so my father doesn’t fall.

He did not know in what form the silent messages Lo had taught him to send reached animals, but the horses pricked their ears up as though they heard.

I thank you, Hari said, and turned his eyes back to his father. They would take him across the desert to the mines, and down the shafts into Deep Salt, where no worker ever came out. Hari held the black-bladed knife in front of his eyes. “Don’t die,” he whispered. “I’ll save you.” It was a foolhardy promise and one there was no way to keep, but it hardened in him, swelled in him, beat like his heart in his chest, and he knew he would try.

Below him the women and children drifted away. The acid-burned underlings bound the clerk’s broken elbow to his side. He had woken from his faint and groaned with pain. The deputy clerk strutted importantly, ordering Whips to singe the men raising the water cart. The Whips pinned under it were carried away. One was dead.

The underlings lifted the clerk onto his cart and laid him down. Hari, seeing how close Tarl stood, thought: My father could kill him now with a single bite. He could tear his throat out like a hunting cat. But Tarl only smiled
and said to the clerk, “You hurt now but soon you’ll hurt more. You’re a broken part. Company will throw you away.”

“It’s not true,” screeched the clerk. “Company cares.”

“You quota was two hundred men and you bring ninety. And you bring a dead Whip. Company doesn’t like mistakes. Perhaps you’ll join me in Deep Salt.”

“Kill this man. Kill him,” cried the clerk.

But the sergeant made no move and the deputy clerk said, “We must not waste an able-bodied man. He belongs to Company.”

“You see,” Tarl said. “Already someone stands in your place.”

“You will die in Deep Salt,” hissed the clerk. “Salt worms will eat you. Your soul will be sucked down into the dark.”

“So be it,” Tarl said, shrugging.

“And your son is dead. He drowned like a rat. Think of that.”

“He did not die a slave, he died free,” Tarl said. “He has conquered Company today.”

He knows I’m not dead, Hari thought. He knows I’m close and can hear. He tried to send a message to his father: I’ll come to Deep Salt and set you free. Tarl had never been able to hear in that way. But he feels me, Hari thought. He knows I’m here.

He watched as the carts rolled round the sloping stones by the swamp, until the Whips and clerks and underlings were at the gate. Tarl turned his head at the last moment and looked past Cowl’s sunken head. His eyes found the hole in the broken window frame.
He knows, Hari thought, and he risked pushing out his fist that clenched the black knife.
His father nodded once, and was gone.
I’ll save you, Hari thought.
He drew back his hand and made his way down corridors and runways into the burrows.