Creative non-fiction

Storylines Margaret Mahy Lecture by Andrew Crowe

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When I heard that I had been nominated for this award my first response was, 'But you do realise that I am a non-fiction writer?' As a writer of factual books for children, I do not expect to be eligible for such as award, unless it's one specifically for non-fiction.

This is curious for, in school libraries, I understand that non-fiction titles generally exceed fiction by a factor of around 3:2.

It is perhaps significant, then, that the genre in which I write is defined in negative terms. As a non-member or non-white, the implication is generally that one is not the real thing - an outsider.

In the book world, I do think there is a perception that only fiction constitutes *real literature* and that non-fiction is its dull cousin, inherently lacking in imagination and creativity. So, I have a tongue-in-cheek proposal: that these two genres of Fiction and Non-fiction henceforth be known as **Factual** and **Made-Up.**

In New Zealand children's non-fiction writing, I think it was Lloyd Spencer Davis and Janet Hunt who turned the tide. Until 2002, I would make quiet mutterings at book award ceremonies that non-fiction would never win Book of the Year, for example, in the New Zealand Post Children's Book Awards. In 2002, however, Lloyd Spencer Davis proved me wrong by winning this overall award with *The Plight* of *the Penguin.* And again, in 2004, Janet Hunt did the same with *A Bird in the Hand.*

The creative approaches these authors took to their subjects effectively communicated their sense of fun and personal values. I think their recognition was well deserved.

I also want at this point to question the naming of a more specific non-fiction genre: CREATIVE NON-FICTION. This is a term given to writing that uses literary styles and techniques to create factually accurate narratives.

The idea is to communicate information as a reporter does, but to shape it in a way that reads like fiction. This genre is relatively young and has so far received little critical analysis, compared with fiction or poetry.

Dava Sobel's book *Longitude* would perhaps be the best-known example. An example of my own is *The Dalai Lama Story,* a biography written in story form; and a Pacific travel book I am presently working on about Polynesian languages.

I have a special interest in this genre because I have been employing it now for a long time, though at a much simpler level, in my writing for young children. For example, all my early children's' books (in the **Wild Stories** series and **Patterns of Nature** series) are written as factually accurate narratives. Some call this genre FACTION or NARRATIVE NON-FICTION, though it is, as I say, perhaps most widely known as CREATIVE NON-FICTION.

Surely, this is another loaded term. For naming a category of non-fiction 'creative' implies that non-fiction generally lacks creativity either in its conception or in its techniques. It perpetuates the myth that non-fiction suffers from an inherent lack of imagination. My presentation will attempt to challenge this assumption.

'Imagination is more important than knowledge,' wrote Albert Einstein. 'For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand.'

Creativity is an essential ingredient of most things, including good science and it needs to be modelled in all methods of teaching, including non-fiction books. Creativity is what brings facts to life. Without it, intelligence suffers. Indeed, a lowering of IQ among British teenagers has been attributed by researchers specifically to a growing tendency in schools to 'teach to the test', thereby reducing the ability of youngsters 'to think laterally.' *(New Zealand Herald,* 10 February 2009.)

Since I am also going to talk about the importance of context, I should perhaps give a little backgrounder about my writing. In 1974, when I began my writing career, I was living in a cave, where life outside the money economy gave me the freedom to write. At the time, I was writing about edible plants of the forest, undertaking occasional forays into the busy without food supplies or having boats drop me off on deserted islands to do vital experiments.

This was my first writing project and it spanned seven years, three of which were spent researching and writing full-time. Like many writers, I did this in spite of assurances that there was insufficient interest in this subject to warrant a book. Almost 30 years after the resulting book was published, it remains in print, having just gone into its tenth printing.

I wonder whether my off-beat, boots-and-all kind of writing apprenticeship has contributed to my taking an unconventional approach to my subjects. Writers of fiction must take their readers into the minds and hearts of their characters and thus – to some extent – into the mind and heart of the writer. I try to do the same. This might involve my occasionally switching perspective with my subjects, for example, telling kids that the 30cm-long tongue of a hawk moth is the equivalent, in human terms, to being able to lick an ice cream on the other side of the road. OR

That the jumping ability of some click beetles is equivalent in terms of body length to a human being able to leap onto the roof of a three-storey building.

I like to give my books a quirky look and feel, showing my readers how to make flippers out of seaweed, for example, or devoting a whole page of my *Life-Size Guide to the Beach* to rubbish. I attempt to depict what one actually finds, trying to blend aesthetic appeal with fresh and surprising information. In this way, the point I make about pollution of the ocean is somewhat subliminal, for I think it comes

across better when not spelt out in words. A fiction writer of course employs comparably indirect techniques to express their own thoughts through the words and actions of their characters.

Perhaps the most defining feature of my work, however, is immersion research.

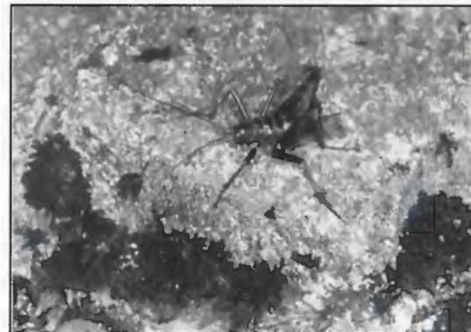
No matter what the current project is, I immerse myself fully in that topic. In my efforts to trace the origins of Maori nature names, for example, I sail through remote parts of the tropical Pacific.

For a year or two or three (or, in this case, longer) I will surrender to my new obsession. I go off into the mountains looking for weta and grasshoppers, visit bird sanctuaries, search for elusive wildflowers, read everything I can on the subject and track down the relevant experts.

And to write a biography of the Dalai Lama for a family audience, I go up into Tibet to the places where he once lived, then spend six months in the town where he spends his life in exile. To try and write from his point of view, I experiment with some of his techniques of meditation. Meanwhile, I interview Tibetan refugees and torture victims, fleeing their homeland on foot for months in the snow. I do all this in an effort to go beyond a clichéd view of the China/Tibet problem.

When learning about New Zealand insects, I set aside two years to examine everything that crawls on six or more legs, exploring the length of the country in the process, talking with experts in all fields on entomology (or should I say 'bug study'?) to make sure I haven't overlooked anything too important or intriguing.

One's avenues of research are limited only by one's imagination and level of interest. To learn how Māori found New Zealand, I will spend weeks determining the positions of stars and planets during the sailing season in AD1250, or ascertaining the actual route of the Dalai Lama's escape from Tibet by networking with NASA and cartographers in Paris. Much of this will not be directly evident to the reader, but a taste of my commitment to getting it right may nevertheless come through onto the page.



When I begin, I'm certainly no expert, but, by the time I have finished, I may be finding species new to science - like this delightful gold and black tumbling cave weta from Gertrude Saddle, near Homer Tunnel, Milford. Or be in a position to accurately draw up the first ever detailed map of the Dalai Lama's remarkable escape in which he and his entire party managed to evade the Chinese army back in 1959. As you can imagine, my rather labour-intensive approach brings its personal rewards.

Photography is a key to much of what I do.

I always look for the child's perspective. As a novice myself, I ask what it was that most struck me about making this particular step of discovery. How did I get here? Like an instruction manual, I try to capture this as I take my reader with me on a similar journey. I am a jargon-buster, trying to unravel 'scientific speak' to state things as basic as 'if your little critter has wings, you can be sure it is an insrct and not a spider or any other kind of arthropod' .

While I have no children of my own, I do spend time with children. Like most of us here, I suspect, I am inspired by their sense of wonder, by the freshness of their observations.

To develop the concept of my *Life-Size Guide to Native Trees,* I observed kids, and also spent hours in the forest alone in an effort to drop all that an adult knows about trees. I tried to imagine or remember what it is a child notices. Most of all, I found that I and they noticed the little things on the ground, the fallen flowers and their colours... Perhaps I should build my conceptual framework from there, I thought. Likewise, I noticed the berries and seeds on the forest floor and thought how a child-friendly logic would also allow these to be sorted by colour.

Snail Meets Worm

Underpinninq most of my work is an appreciation of enquiry-based learning. I have seen in others and in myself the joy of following the thread of one's own natural curiosity. This is, I believe, the key to cultivating A life-long love of learning, which – to my way of thinkinq – is far more important than knowledge. Give a family a fish and you feed them for a day; teach them how to fish and you feed them for life.

Thus, it is often my own sense of surprise and wonder that I am moved to share, as in this *School Journal* article depicting a carnivorous snail devouring a worm, or in this photo from *The Life-Size Guide to Native Trees* of a bright yellow slime mould steadily creeping across the forest floor in search of fungi and bacteria to eat.

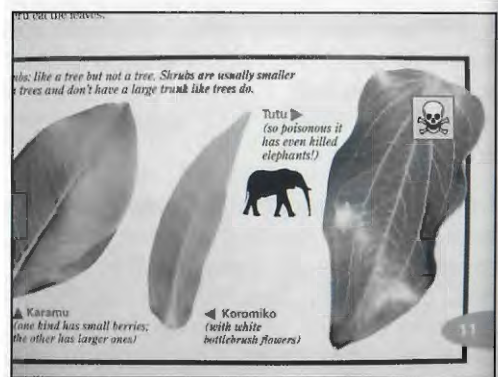
In a world so strange, who needs fiction?

I live for the aha moment. Not just the sparkle in someone's eyes that shows when they are truly engaged, but the moment that inspired Archimedes to leap from his bath, shouting 'Eureka!' as he ran naked through the streets. (As a non-fiction writer, I have an obligation to point out that there is evidence that the scene of him running naked was a later embellishment.) Anyhow, he had been puzzling how to measure the volume of an irregular mass, when he climbed into his bath to relax. When the bath overflowed, he made a lateral leap in recognising his own body as an irregular mass; the overflowing water was equal to his own volume. 'Eureka!'

To experience, or to be midwife to, such a moment is the true meaning of education. The joy of learning requires only for the flames of curiosity to be fanned.

In my work, I find those moments before I fall asleep, or as I wake, are analogous to the Greek mathematician's bath.

I find many fascinating jewels of information buried in dry scientific texts. These may often be virtually indecipherable to the average person, but to me these are 'raisins' that I can turn back into 'grapes'. I am a sort of translator who is committed to keeping things simple but NOT 'dumbing it down'. Here I am referring to the fact that patronising simplicity is irritating. It is perfectly possible to respect one's audience's intelligence while keeping things simple. Sophistication belongs in the context, not in how it is said. 'Raisins into Grapes'; this is my motto.



I revel in opportunities to use visual language. Here, I am referring to my highly visual approach to layout. This can take many forms, including the use of graphic symbols, such as in this example in which an elephant and a skull-and-crossbones are depicted together with a tutu leaf. These images give non-readers and reluctant readers something tangible to go on, communicating a hint that the accompanying bunch of lexical symbols may signify more than gobbledegook. A story of death, pirates or elephants may lie hidden nearby and this may be enough to coax them to tackle the task of code cracking, known amongst adepts as 'reading'.

For letters on their own can be frightening things. Pictorial symbols or cartoons are much less intimidating and can generally be understood well before someone learns to read - or finds sufficient motivation to read.

One of the most voracious readers I know refused to read before she was 11. 'When I want to find out something, I go to a children's book'. Who here has said this, thought it, or heard it said?

Danger lies in a writer knowing too much. I take comfort in my own ignorance, for I am essentially a journalist, sharing my journey. I am not a trained biologist, but am simply that library user who is looking to the children's book to find out. If I can't find the book I want, I'll home-school myself well enough to write it. It is a buzz to be able to share my journey. I am at heart a rebel for I don't want to start with genera and subspecies, the intimate morphology of the flower or insect genitalia. I want to begin right slap in the simple wonder of things. To paraphrase Pink Floyd, I refuse to eat my meat before I get my pudding. I believe that, unlike the cultivation of imitation that so often passes for education, genuine learning is essentially a pathless land. Start with the heart, with the juice – wherever you find it.

Making my books simple *looks* simple to do. That is the simple nature of simplicity, but making things simple is, without doubt, one of the most time-consuming aspects of my work. The spiral leaf key is one example; it is the outcome of weeks of work, cataloguing leaf sizes and tree species to create a searchable card index, then brainstorming. The challenge here was to find eight child-friendly categories of leaves that, when keyed out, would unambiguously place all qualifying leaves in an elegant fit across two A4 pages. Because the leaves must all be depicted at exactly life-size, there is no opportunity for fudging the fit. The rectangular box that you see here on the right of the spiral key is exactly 4mm wide by 37mm long. A reader who can say 'yes' to their chosen leaf fitting in will be led to pages 8 and 9, to find the small-leaved trees. This box alone is the result of one full day's work and is one of my personal Eurekas! Much of my work is like this.

Likewise, developing a key to invertebrates that worked without jargon or specialist concepts. This involved brainstorminq for days, testing, modifying and testing again, searching for something that not only worked but that would also look elegant and be fun to use. As far as I know, this key is the first of its kind anywhere in the world and yes, I do go looking to see what other writers are doing. If my work is strongly inspired by the work of another writer, I tell the reader, for all my work is a form of collaboration. My acknowledgements are frequently rather long and quirky, thanking the visitor, for example, who brought lice to my house in her hair. I needed a photo of them, you see. So Libby is thanked for her lice and David for his fleas.

Observant readers will have noticed that I frequently employ spirals and rainbows (kurus and uenuku) in my books. I see these as bicultural themes of Aotearoa. My end aim here was to create an inclusive key that would look more like a board game than an educational tool.

The end product is a key that can be used by anyone who can count to ten. Here again, there was an added challenge in ensuring that each category keys out reliably to a full page, or a full spread, of life-size images of the qualifying creatures. If I found any area of ambiguity, I would add a trouble-shooting cross-reference. But this I mean that I would include a cockroach and a beetle page in a home-made category called 'LIKE BEETLES BUT NOT BEETLES', simply

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because to the uninitiated the difference is not obvious. If the creature is too small to count its legs, or keeps jumping or flying away, I give troubleshooting hints that involve causing no harm to the creature.

Similarly with the habitat keys in my bird book. The idea to produce a graphic key of birds according to where they are seen and how bulky they are was new. The key to forest birds involved a lot of networking with bird watchers, researching published observations and then travelling the length of the country, visiting forests to see whether in practice the key worked. In this case, the birds are further categorised visually according to whether they are likely to be first spotted (1) on the ground; (2) around head height; (3) high in the canopy; or (4) flying *over* the tree tops.

On the same trip, I checked out the country's birding hotspots. I wanted to depict these on a map in the book and needed to check whether these sites lived up to that claim. Like many writers, I often wonder whether I over-research my books and yet I do feel that this is some sort of hidden requirement anyway.

I *have* used a ***life-size*** approach in several of my books and this has proved very effective and popular, for the concept of scale can often be difficult to grasp, particularly for young children, but also for anyone unfamiliar with a subject. My first book to explore this concept fully was published in 1997 and it is an approach to identification that has since spread to look-alike life-size children's books around the world.

Though extremely simple to use and such an obvious idea, it is difficult to execute. The technique involved using a calibrated macro lens, noting the reproduction ratio of each photograph, then scanning the slide at the corresponding magnification. For example, a beetle photographed at 1:2 would be scanned at a magnification of 200%, with exacting care being taken during the layout that the stated magnification is adhered to.

I rate simplicity very highly, yet always *weave* threads of complexity into my work. This helps give the reader confidence that what they are reading has been genuinely distilled from a larger body of study. That the writer has in fact done her homework. Or his homework.

In fact, I generally aim to make my books *multilevel.* I do this partly to meet children's various needs and abilities but also because, if children's books are to be shared, they must also genuinely engage adults.

Filmmakers like Martin Scorsese speak of how they lead their viewers to ask a question – what, how, when, why or where and then reveal the answer. This cultivation of relevancy is also an important part of non-fiction writing.

My most ambitious multi-level book to date is probably *The Life-Size Guide to Insects* & *Other Land Vertebrates* of *New Zealand.* 'Try catering to different levels in the same book and you will fall between two stools', I was warned. Penguin pointed out that people may be interested in birds and trees, but not in insects. I knew I was taking a risk, for my concept was to meet the needs of a four-year-old

while making the book detailed enough to satisfy adults. In-between tapping on the shoulder of my publishers, I got on with the writing. After a year they *gave* in. Now I am told that there are four-year-olds who will not go to bed without their copy, and that Landcare scientists keep one by the phone to help field public enquiries. The book has gone into seven printings. But achieving multilevel functionality takes time. It involves a kind of hypertext layering of the information. The entry level is signalled with colour panels, big type and child-friendly graphics or photos, the minutiae appearing unobtrusively in small type.

Fiction writers and journalists know of the need to use a hook, but hooks are no less a legitimate tool of writers of non-fiction books.

For example, when I write about insects, I notice that some people profess to hate them, so I think of the butterflies. I look for butterflies that might catch their eye. The Lemon Migrant Butterfly and Japanese Swallowtail have each been seen only once in New Zealand, yet good looks alone were enough to qualify them for inclusion in this book.

So my hooks can be good looks, or attention-grabbing sidebars, or whacky off-beat stuff. My work is educational, but I try to avoid creating text books.

For example, although eating is not (yet) part of the school curriculum, this is the kind of thing you'll find in my books – partly because it is sure to get a response.

There is no question that the internet is a useful, and often convenient, source of information, but I don't think we should let it replace books. Two obvious shortcomings are (1) that the junk mail is filed in the reference section; and (2) the content has undergone almost no peer review and is frequently unreliable. But there is something less obvious that I want to draw attention to: loss of CONTEXT. By this I mean that information often relies on a specific context to be of any real value, and that this often involves the role of the elder. As our cultures move from tramsmittinq knowledge orally, to using books, to internet, it increasingly tends to overlook the importance of human relationship, human values and environmental responsibility. The context provided by the storyteller is important. Yet, if non-fiction books are to thrive, we must actively maintain their edge in reliability and aesthetic appeal, ensuring that they become quicker to find and easier to use. To take an example of one library book I ordered recently, interlibrary loan charges of $21.70 for one title seem anachronistic. Libraries of the future will need to be attractive to use as the internet. That is, we must learn from the successes of tile web.

The context that gives knowledge meaning requires more than just books and the internet. When I met the Dalai Lama in North India I asked him about where he saw the greatest need in education for young people. He responded by telling me that 'Osama Bin Laden is a very intelligent man, but in here' he said, pointing to his own heart, 'very poor'… I think it is universally accepted the importance of the brain but in many cases we are not yet, I think, fully aware of the importance the heart.'

People have called me in a conservationist, but I write because I love nature and the sense of peace I find here. The sanity I find in natural surroundings is something I want to share with others. In making my books, I try not to harm anything. While I value the discipline of scientific enquiry, I don't go along with the need to kill every interesting insect and skewer it with a pin. When I show my entomologist colleagues a photo that they identify as a rare or hitherto unknown insect, they look at me with dismay when I tell them that the little beast is still walking around.

Others, on seeing that I have written about the Dalai Lama, assume that I am Buddhist. However, I am more interested in promoting human values and in finding the common ground. I see a hunger in teenagers for role models – that bedroom wall poster of a sporting hero or a rock star. Often the fascination is with fame and success. Thinking of other kinds of role models, the Dalai Lama leapt to mind: suddenly I could see in his life the archetypal hero's journey, his quest to conquer the dark forces. At just 15, this teenager was asked to lead his country as it went to war. Sixty years on, it seems that he is still able to 'walk the talk' – to remain a powerful but peaceful warrior. His life had already been made into a film, but it had never been told in story form as a book. The incredible feat of his month-long escape from Tibet had largely been glossed over. I decided to avoid the genre of an educational biography – the facts-that-you-should-know kind of book. I wrote *The Dalai Lama Story* in a style that I hoped would transport teenagers to another culture, but one in which they might see themselves and be inspired to be positive leaders. Yet, like most of my books, it is intended to also satisfy an adult readership.

Of my own books, my favourite is still probably *A Rainbow in the Forest.* I like this book because of its absolute simplicity, its alliteration and the ease with which it translates into Māori.

There is a *rainbow in the forest.*
Where is the red? The red is in the rata.
Where is the orange? The orange is in the karaka.
Where is the yellow? The yellow is in the kowhai.
Where is the green? The green leaves are everywhere.
Where is the blue? The blue is in the turutu.
Where is the purple? The purple is in the poroporo.
All the colours of *the rainbow.*
He Uenuku Kei Rota I te Ngahere