Storylines Margaret Mahy Medal Lecture 2016

Making it up as I go along, or Finding the Cornerstones of Creativity

– Presented by Barbara Else

I doubt I can find adequate words to give thanks for this award. When Libby Limbrick phoned and asked if I'd accept it, I was dumbstruck. I am deeply honoured to be part of the stunning line up of previous recipients. It starts of course with Margaret Mahy herself, a light brighter and steadier than anyone else could ever aspire to be. Yet why should we not *aspire* to any goal whether we reach it or not? That is part of what being creative is about – seeing how much you can achieve. With each project large or small, my challenge is to see how far I can go in perfecting it.

But in my first stunned hours after the phone call I wondered: How on earth did this happen? What brought me to this pinnacle (on which I still feel giddy and teetering)?

That led me to wonder what it is that makes a writer, or forms any creative person. What are the key factors? That is what I want to explore today. How I became a writer, and why I became the sort of writer I am.

Of necessity this will be 'all about me' – but I hope it will make people think about what drives them and, more important, what gives their drive its specific direction.

Early on I sometimes felt I had 'no right to write' because I lived such an ordinary life. In some ways I thought I'd have had more right had I been (for instance, and don't be shocked) – Jewish or Roman Catholic. Those writers have such deep background to excavate for material. Then, writing my second novel for adults, *Gingerbread Husbands*, I found myself mining my own Anglican upbringing and had an oasis-in-the-wilderness moment. Even a very ordinary life has hidden treasure. By now in my writing for any audience, child or adult, I see signs of the same seams of ore. Subversion and humour in the treatment of the material, and obstinacy that keeps me going.

I've always written for adults and children. But these days some people try to explain my 'switch' to children's writing by asking, "I suppose it's easier because it's shorter?" Well, no. For one thing, the children's novels are not much shorter, and a short story for grown-ups is – well, short. Picture books are so very short, poetic and coded, that I find them far too difficult.

And that question implies that 'little' stories are not completely worthy. I've never understood that dismissive attitude about any kind of story. It's the belittling way many regard genre

fiction, and the grouping of novels by women under the banner of ‘domestic’ fiction as if *domestic* is something to be ashamed of. Though when men write it, it’s ‘literary’. More on feminism later.

The difference for me between writing for children and adults is in the degree of playfulness in the treatment. But there is subversion in both. Keep that in mind as I rattle on.

Rattling and clattering, the discordant tries of the apprentice. In Dunedin as Children’s Writer in Residence, each morning I pass a day care centre. I can’t help smiling at the industry and earnest play of those small humans. One day I heard determined random notes and a tuneless song – a little girl, bashing a xylophone and chanting *aaahh* on a monotone. She was utterly absorbed, copying what she had heard grownups do, thoroughly enjoying herself. Who knows? One day she might play percussion at the Met. She might become a panel beater, or compose overtures to rival the 1812.

To my mind any author, musician, composer, painter, sculptor, anyone engaged in a creative pursuit at any level of a career is likely to begin a new piece by the equivalent of tuneless bashing. It is play, of a kind. What happens from there? To what extent does the life inform the work? And how does the process of writing begin to inform the author about his or her own life? It is worth thinking about the mine of your own creativity.

I have come to see it in a way I hope others could find comforting. This idea was given me by Vivian Lynn, a New Zealand artist in mixed media. I met her at a writing course given by Chris Else and myself. Years later I met her again and said the notion had resonated with me. She had no memory of it at all. But she was very pleased and thought it was probably true.

The idea is based on three key features – the cornerstones. First is the background you’re born with – your family, their situation (rich, poor, indifferent; urban, rural), your gender, your place in the family (first child, middle child and so on).

The second is your experience as you grow up: how you’re treated, how you respond, accidents good or bad, schooling and so on.

These first two basics, you can’t change.

But as we grow, we make small incremental personal decisions and observations. So the third feature is your angle on all that has happened to you or that you see in the world around you. For authors, that tends to come out in what we write, whether we know it or not while we’re setting words down.

My own background was not dramatic or traumatic – except in moving to different towns or cities rather often. I am a middle child. My brother and sister, twins eight years my senior, thought I was cute till I was old enough to annoy them. That might be why I went through a stage of tantrums which I still remember, and why after that I learned to get my own way in stubborn silence. I was little, I didn't know as much as they did, and I didn't like being laughed at. Or patronised. I should add we often played very nicely together despite the age difference and I love them. But by the time I was about six I had become more of an observer and very shy.

One of my most-loved books when I was about four was *The Five Chinese Brothers* by Claire Huchet Bishop. It is now probably thought politically incorrect. But! What did it mean to me as a child? I was the young one, the small one. Then a new baby sister arrived and I was an in-between. In *The Five Chinese Brothers*, each family member is crucial to the unfolding of the tale. Each brother has a particular skill that helps save the life of the one falsely accused of drowning a very naughty boy. I think this reassured me on a deep level that everyone has a special place. It was also very subversive: the family gleefully trick the authorities at every turn. What child wouldn't love that? If it's non-PC, so what? It has a moral centre that reassures the child audience.

Very early I was collecting and arranging books of all sorts on a shelf in my own room. I am still full of resentment at my otherwise wonderful mother for giving most of my childhood collection to one of my nieces when I was away at university. I still want my copy of *Mr Galliano's Circus*; of *Into the Happy Glade*. It wasn't just the experience of the particular story. It included the look and feel of that particular copy, with my name in the front and all the changes of address. Last year on my shelves I rediscovered my copy of *Our Street* by Brian Sutton-Smith and noted my Kelburn address in my eight-year-old printing, the Mt Eden address in my 10-year-old hand, and, in my 16-year-old italics, the Oamaru address. How fantastic it is that my parents, in the '50s, were happy for me to read and own *Our Street*, a book that many strait-laced critics and teachers of the time considered shocking. Did that book have impact on me because it was written by MY school teacher in Standard 2? Because as a writer and finally internationally-respected educator, Sutton-Smith understood children and their ordinary Kiwi lives so very well? He most certainly understood the significance of the small moments in a child's life.

My mother had been a teacher, by the way, first woman at Otago to graduate with a BA and teaching certificate in the same year. She never pushed us, simply put within our reach things that might interest and encourage us. I found her collection of Greek drama so

interesting as a teenager that I preferred it to bothering with boyfriends. Whether that was good or bad, who knows?

She was neither prescriptive nor proscriptive. She also bought Superman and Batman comics and my favourite, the Phantom. So she provided a smorgasbord of reading and of theatre. When I was about 12 she took me to three performances in Auckland by The Old Vic Company, starring Vivien Leigh. I still remember the *Twelfth Night* and Alexandre Dumas' *Lady of the Camellias*. Perhaps Mum found it easier to give any sex education through literature rather than be direct. Well, I learned eventually.

Another part of my background was the feminism of the 1970s. I'd had my own waves of angry surprise during the sixties, but in university days felt voiceless. For instance, there were several women medical students. The male med students used to call them a 'bunch of dracs'. I'm still not entirely sure what that meant. Was it that they 'sucked the blood' out of the male-dominated medical profession? It included 'not beautiful'. To my mind many of them were. But why were their looks relevant? The men's looks didn't seem to be. Those women were intelligent, dedicated. What was wrong with that?

I had done a double BA, intending to go on in History. But the history courses available focused on facts rather than what I was most interested in, human beings, the little people, the fabric of society in different eras. What did the Russian revolution mean to a peasant? What did the Great Fire of London mean to an urchin? I didn't respond to dry facts. I preferred the detail that illustrates the general. I wanted history made human.

So for my MA I went on in English Literature and Literary Criticism. That year, I married and my first baby was born the following January. While I was busy with her I felt the feminist movement itself swing past overhead. I tutored English at Otago for a year or two. Then the very month my med student husband and I were leaving Dunedin to live in Christchurch, I saw a university crèche had opened. What a brilliant idea. I felt a lift in the heart that such things were available now. I felt a plummet, that it was a little late for me to take advantage of it myself. Day care – it's for the little humans, and their parents who want to or need to work. The little people, big and small.

My first husband and I did discuss feminism. We agreed that society depended on men and women doing equal work though it might well be, and often had to be, different work to keep the family going. Domestic or dollar earning work, both should be respected.

Somehow, over time, though I was working outside the house much of the time, I experienced the female being regarded as secondary. Hang on. How had that happened?

By then I'd started to write short stories for adults and at this stage, the writing started to bring in female protagonists. However, even the male protagonists of my first stories were marginalised in some way, or at least observed other people being marginalised. My stories are still usually about misfits. Everyone who isn't a narcissist probably thinks they're at least a bit odd and many of us hope nobody else notices – though some extraverts might long for any attention. Though I wasn't a misfit as such in my own family, I was the only introvert which was, okay, a misfit. My problem child, my mother called me, with some affection (even when I was 42. By then she had some cause).

I think it's probably important that I knew no other New Zealand writers till into the 1980s. I'd been published here, but had worked on my own. It's up to someone else to say if that was an advantage or otherwise.

It was by accident that I began to write. Because of my university studies I'd always thought writing would be far too complex and difficult for me. But I went to a night class in creative writing thinking it would be little lectures about the principles of a short story and so on. Oh no. You had to do the writing yourself! So my first attempts at writing were simply to see if I could. I wasn't driven in terms of being published, or of thinking I had something to say about anything. I remember asking Fiona Kidman once if it was arrogant to think anyone else would want to read what you wrote. In hindsight it might not have been wise to ask this of an eminent New Zealand author. But I was asking, *how do I dare*? She replied with a stern frown: I had stories to tell and I must do it. So I stopped fretting about that at least. She said I had stories to tell!

And I was certainly driven to explore the challenge of making something. Finding my own way to do it.

Once you've begun a creative career, what keeps it going? Some aspects of your makeup come more and more into play. (I use the word deliberately.)

I had some success with short stories. But there were failures. Sometimes that was a blessing. If the first novel I wrote had ever been published, I'd have been too ashamed by now to poke my nose out of hiding. There were touches of subversive humour in it, but I was a long way from realising that would be the sort of thing I could build on. I learned a lot from trying to make something as long and complicated as a novel. I learned a lot by throwing the attempt in the bin. At that stage I sensed where I'd gone wrong. It was like a badly-packed suitcase but I had no idea how to unpack and do it again.

Then good feedback keeps you going: a man at a reading of my first one-act play toppled backwards with laughter. I could be funny! I immediately wanted to write something else that

would have a similar effect. The comment from a critic of that play that it was ‘comic existentialism’ … I’d written *that*? I hadn’t even known existentialism could be funny.

After I’d had short stories for both audiences published, radio plays, other bits and pieces but still no novel, I applied for a Creative NZ grant and didn’t get it. I was discouraged, which is normal, but I knew slightly someone who did get a grant. And I thought, well, I’m just not good enough yet.

I knew I needed to be more aware of technique. One way I hoped to improve was by doing the Victoria University Creative Paper, ‘the Bill Manhire course’ (before IIML). There wasn’t much directly about technique. But the undoubted help it gave was unexpected gold: to value my own judgement. We had to articulate our response to the writing of other students. What a wealth I learned from that, and could carry into my own work. It also helped almost at once with doing assessments with Chris Else in the first days of our business, TFS. I see it this way: at last I had somewhere to combine that early training at Otago and my own writing experience. I have learned something more with every assessment I’ve done since then, 1988. I’ve learned to recognise and communicate what succeeds, why something feels awkward or flat. There is no excitement quite like seeing a flash of genius in something raw and hoping you can find a way to bring that writer up where they belong.

In the maybe 1,500 manuscripts I’ve seen over the years, there have been some common errors or problems. I’ve also sadly seen them in published work.

One is message-pushing, soap-boxing. Here writers are not making it up as they go along. Instead the author is so determined to give a message that it causes plot holes and unbelievable characters.

Another bugbear is the undigested information that can clog, for example, historical novels. Or background detail as impenetrable as a barricade. The reader can’t be bothered struggling over it and goes off to scrub the bathroom.

A third annoyance is ‘poetic’ writing that might be very beautiful but is about nothing. It’s like eating air rather than sinking your reading teeth into a narrative with convincing character and credible incident that illustrates an aspect of human nature.

Then there’s the writer who is not interested in the necessary marriage of craft and ‘truth’ in the narrative. Readers of fiction like characters who are flawed, as we all are. We’re all nice people in someone’s view. But in other eyes we’re probably monsters. Remember, the monster is hero of his – or her – own domestic tale.

The most important thing I've learned from my own struggles and from assessing manuscripts is story structure. Structure is character. Character development is the arc of the narrative. That movement in a story keeps a reader involved. I believe every reader unconsciously expects that sort of pace, movement and development.

I come to my first published novel, *The Warrior Queen*: the story of a faithful wife who finds her husband is *not* faithful, and how she gets subversive revenge. The first draft spilled out, 2,000 words a day. The next drafts were slog, inspiration, slog again. Those were the days when the New Zealand bestseller list combined fiction and non-fiction. My particular brand of humour – subversion and absurdism – kept the novel on the list for about a year. And there were overseas editions. Unexpected! Nice! But it was actually the third novel I'd written. First *published*, that's all. I'd learned to pick myself up, to persevere, often with the help of family and friends. I know disappointment. I had hunched weeping by the shadowy privacy of the compost bin because of rejections, some that strangled the spirit. I'll quote one – in full: "Barbara can do better". That was for an early version of *The Warrior Queen*. The thing is, that publisher was right. I gritted my teeth. I firmed my jaw. I buckled on the buskins of obstinacy and wielded the keyboard of *bugger him*.

I sent the result to another publisher. After two weeks a fax came saying, "*We want it"*. I thought, *But I haven't suffered enough yet*. Good oh.

I wrote four more contemporary novels about the apparently insignificant person, the tiny incident or put-down that can change lives. The thing is, often 'a little person' only has humour as a weapon, as a defense. The subversive humour often led to the label 'feminist writer'. Not really. The humour is more from my general attitude to any authority. I wasn't writing *on behalf of* women – that would be message-driven. I *observed* male-female relationships and showed the ironies and absurdities, thereby giving some male critics uneasy moments. If the truth hurts…

During that time my first two children's novels came out. And there was the Victoria University Fellowship. Bill Manhire was on sabbatical that year and that was a pity. He'd have helped when, on my first day, a senior staff member glanced up, off-hand, by the photocopier and said, "Oh, Barbara, don't be offended if nobody speaks to you. We're all very busy people, you know." I kept my head down for at least three months, creeping in and out like a mouse-shadow.

During that year I also edited a small anthology for Random House, *Grand Stands: new Zealand writers on being grandparents*. That was fun and led unexpectedly to something bigger.

Random had published *30 Stories for New Zealand Children* and needed a new editor for the second collection, *Another 30 Stories*. Harriet Allan, the editor I'd worked with on *Grand Stands*, suggested my name to the children's editor, Jenny Hellen. She thought I'd been efficient and that my background as a literary agent and assessor would be an advantage – plenty of contacts. I hesitated. I really hesitated. But the notion was intriguing. With encouragement from Chris who believes more of me than I do, I said yes.

I remembered the way stories pleased and satisfied me as a child, and the responses of my own children when I read to them. But this was a much harder task than the grandparents' collection. I really had to figure it out as I went along. How best to call for submissions? How to choose the 30 stories necessary? How to word the rejection letters, those awful papers of doom that darken the soul? Then how to place the selected stories in the best order to keep a child picking through and turning pages? I balanced happy with sad, short with long, male protagonists with female heroes and in one collection struggled against the preference of the illustrator and managed to keep all the dead grandparent stories well-separated.

Working on that first collection I noticed many local authors writing science fiction and fantasy, areas that New Zealand publishers traditionally were loath to support. "There'd be enough to make a separate anthology," I told Jenny Hellen.

A few months later I asked her if they were going ahead and, if so, who would be editor. She said Random wanted to do it, with me again. I was a bit taken-aback. But I figured I'd learned something from doing that first one. It led to another six children's anthologies and one for teenagers, *Like Wallpaper*. Two of the anthologies scored Storylines Notable Books listings –something must have gone right!

Being quiet and stubborn definitely helped with the anthologies. I knew Random could well have objections to some pieces. So each time, I made sure I accepted all the 30 stories before I showed the set to the publisher. I was prepared for big arguments. There were a couple, but only genteel ones.

With each new anthology I felt more confident and could streamline the process. The bashing away gradually became more efficient, more tuneful. (Except for my scream the day I found a weta clinging like a bulldog clip to the chosen stories for *Weird and Wonderful*.)

I'm proud of the anthologies. In each I think there is at least one previously-unpublished writer. It is so satisfying that many went on to publish more, some very widely: picture books, non-fiction, novels for children or young adults. Some of them have become award-winning, stars in our literary sky.

The ‘making it up’ of any book continues with the publishing process. That went beautifully with the anthologies. Those good-looking books are still pounced on in school libraries, preferred ‘wet-day’ lunchtime reading for many children. The hard covers have had plenty of use and even battered still look appealing, saying to children, ‘Here’s something that’s been loved, you try it’.

I’m deeply grateful to the wonderful Harriet for her part in it all. I’m very aware that those anthologies published between 2002 and 2011 played a very significant part in bringing me here today.

The MNZM in 2005 should maybe be mentioned, for services to literature. I wasn’t sure I’d earned it but by then I’d had grants (for which I heartily thank Creative NZ), had been a judge of the children’s book awards among other things. If I turned it down would it be offered to another writer that year? No. And the Governor General, Dame Sylvia Cartwright, had read *The Warrior Queen*. As she pinned the medal on she told me she’d loved it. But she’d been overseas and ‘at an exciting part’ had come upon a series of totally blank pages. Misprint – in the hands of Dame Sylvia? *Argh*.

In 2007 came the publication of my historical novel *Wild Latitudes*. Writing that playful take on the 1860s had been a massive challenge full of pleasure. It had my best reviews ever. I started a new historical novel but the effort of research in tandem with writing as well as keeping the assessment service going was horrendous. I applied for a grant, didn’t get it and thought *fair enough* – I don’t like bleating and nobody has a built-in right to any grant.

But I couldn’t move on to anything new. I was exhausted. I felt all mined out. I had lost the joy of writing.

Then the idea for a new children’s novel rose up: a chance remark from me about the fun of tricking cranky toddlers into eating and how there could be a novel about a specialty restaurant for that; my first grandson months later asking if I’d written that book yet …. Working on *The Travelling Restaurant* rekindled the joy of writing many times over. I thought it might never be published: it was a novel in a crammed field – I often assessed other manuscripts in this area and saw how hard it was to be original. Was I bringing anything new to the genre? Or if not new, was there some angle that came out of my background, or experience, or personality? I decided it was the humour. It’s a subversive humour, the child’s view of the mess adults have made of the world.

I’ve talked about history being made up of the tales of the insignificant person who illustrates what is happening in the wider political background. *The Tales of Fontania* turned into a quartet of novels about little people, different child protagonists each time, with an overall

political story in the background. *The Travelling Restaurant* begins with an autocratic monarchy, *The Queen and the Nobody Boy* moves to benign monarchy. In the fourth book, *The Knot Impossible*, comes the first attempt at democratic government in the Council of Wisdom (acronym COW). There is a constant rebalancing, between nature or spirituality, and magic, and science.

I chose Gecko Press when we came to try for a publisher for *The Travelling Restaurant* because of their reputation for beautiful books, insistence on quality from paper to design to cover artist. I hoped Gecko would choose me in return. When they did I danced around as lightly as a 12 year old. (Thank goodness for the privacy of your own home.)

The process of working on *The Travelling Restaurant* drew me back into the crucial state I'd lost touch with for a while, the state any artist needs: an almost meditative state where the angle from which they apprehend the real world is fully focused on the task. It's that I credit for its success. And for somehow bringing me here today.

While writing that book there were moments when the words flowed easily and the editor hardly touched a sentence. Such moments are usually rare, precious but somewhat bewildering. Writers in all genres, fiction and non-fiction, know them. You read it again and think *where did it come from*?

I saw a TED Talk by Elizabeth Gilbert where she talked about these moments that feel like gifts, and how the word genius comes from the Greek for wall, meaning the spirit that dwells there and sometimes breathes on your shoulder. For me I think the author reaches that liminal mode of being between self-criticism and self-belief: you move back and forth along that boundary, immersed in the narrative of your own creation. All the experience of craft and all you know about your story, character, essay or whatever you're working on comes together. It's a combination of the hard work you've already done and instinct.

Those moments show me what I have to do to make the work overall consistent. That includes finding for each page the detail that gives something for the reader to react to on a level of realism and identification even though the children's stories may be fantasy. The domestic – the small thing – is crucial.

But most days I chant the tuneless *aaahh* then wrestle through days, weeks, months of crafting and recrafting. There is a different relish to be had, finding out how to shape the narrative in the best way, experimenting to find the right tone and voice for that particular tale.

George Saunders, who writes children's books and essays for places like the New Yorker, has said: "Your own discontent with the story urges you to higher ground." Knowing there is something to reach for is a crucial drive for the stubborn author.

When to keep going – and when to let go. There are still wrong turnings for me, but I don't say that as discouragement. For instance in the Children's Writers Fellowship I'm working on a new novel. The initial idea was kindled by the Old English story of Beowulf with the monster son and more monstrous mother. I had done three quarters of a rough draft and prepared to leap into the finale. I thought, right – now remind yourself what the main character has at stake. My next thought was, oh – not as much as another character. Then – I have the wrong protagonist. The best way into the fortress of this particular novel was not the first door I'd found. The story is the same. It just must be told a different way with a different voice. Thirty-six thousand words down the drain? No. I was ruefully amused, and delighted with the new angle. The thing is to make the novel as well as I can.

In each first draft, to some extent I am the reader finding out as I go along. Readers usually have an idea of where a story might go but exactly how something will happen is a mystery. They expect surprises. I feel, why would I bother writing at all if I know exactly how it ends? So the 'making it up as you go along' it isn't a glorious swoop to the final line. It is the journey that holds enchantment, wrong turnings included. It takes those sisters of stubbornness: discipline and perseverance.

Being stubborn includes preserving your creative time. Can you take the risks with family, friends of saying "G*o away, I can't meet you, I'm busy"*? Dilemma: how to find a balance between respecting your own work (even when it's at the sow's ear stage) and honouring your family. My own daughters Emma and Sarah were – still are – patient and I admire their own creativity and abilities. Chris is unendingly encouraging. I learn a lot from seeing his own creativity at work, his dedication.

But yes, artists do need the 10,000 hours at least if they're to build and sustain a career. Raw talent can take you so far and often creates something more exciting than a highly-polished piece. But craft helps with the continuing journey. And, making it up involves saying no, giving yourself time to make it up. I've been far more productive in the last two months in an office where I refuse to get my daily emails, or to indulge in FaceBook.

Here's a quote from Kevin Ashton in *How to Fly a Horse — The Secret History of Creation, Invention, and Discovery*: "Saying 'no' has more creative power than ideas, insights and talent combined. 'No' guards time, the thread from which we weave our creations. The math

of time is simple: you have less than you think and need more than you know." I'm afraid he's right.

A close relative of being stubborn is being thick-skinned about those demeaning asides. The 'domestic fiction' label, even the 'oh, a children's writer' if it's said with a certain twitch of the nose. Support from family and friends helps with that. So does your own sense of humour. The wife of a prominent public servant commented, 'Oh yes, *The Warrior Queen* – there was not much philosophy in it.' *Er* – isn't a novel built from feeling and image? Should it not leave readers to figure out their own philosophy? That was her failing, not mine.

Let's have a moment about the imposter syndrome. As I mentioned earlier – *why do I dare write anything? How do I dare* – for example – *accept this award*? The self-critic is good for your work. Anomie or the imposter syndrome is not. When it tries to slide its dripping snout over the threshold, heave the door shut. Have a wine while it whines out in the cold. But that beast can be hard to dislodge.

Something to remember is: any creative person 'makes it up' on the body of work already done by others. Knowing what has been written gives permission to authors coming along, lets them begin working with their own special angle and unique eye. As far as my own contemporary adult novels go, in New Zealand, there is of course Fiona Kidman, first to ride the feminist wagon (rather a Wild West image and she'd look great on a horse). There are Marilyn Duckworth, Shona Koea, Fiona Farrell, Linda Burgess; just a few names, but each one tackling contemporary New Zealand life in her own way, with her own angle.

I'm not sure how the next thing I want to say fits here but I feel it does: I believe writing for children carries an added responsibility. More so than work for an adult audience, it requires awareness of its effect on the reader. A children's author needs first to entertain and also to stay aware of the moral or ethical elements in the narrative and handle them carefully. But you all know this. I'm not saying be prudish, or push a worthy message as I've mentioned before.

There's a story I heard about a foster child who was having trouble learning to read. One day she looked up astonished at her foster mother and said, 'When I read, I get pictures in my head. Does that happen to you?' That is what it is about. Hoping to open up possibilities in a young reader's imagination. If you feel you do that, it is a deeper joy than praise from adult readers. Well, both are very nice, I won't kid you.

A recent joy for me was learning that at the end of this year Kate De Goldi, Susan Pearce and Gecko Press are bringing out a Children's Annual. Kate described it to me as building on the achievement of the Random House anthologies. I felt deeply satisfied. I hope it will be

something that continues each year and offers space for new and established authors and illustrators. I believe it will excite young readers and, most important, encourage more of that age group to love books. Without readers, in the end we have no publishing.

And it's very hard in the market at the moment. It has been for some years. It's not improving fast. But there are one or two good signs. The big local publishers are limiting what they do for children's writing but smaller presses are finding their feet. Duck Creek is now well-established. There is Makaro Press.

In the current market I wonder if there's room for some sort of self-publishing collective to bring local children's stories to their deserved audience. But there would need to be stringent quality controls. I've heard booksellers say that in the past the poor quality of some self-publishing and vanity arrangements have damaged reader appetite for New Zealand writing.

But I'm – *chuffed* is the only word – to see such good quality self-published books on this year's Storylines Notable Books List. They're a special triumph for the authors, to write such excellent work and also understand the utmost importance of professional editing, design and production. Respect to them.

As I said, there are hopeful signs. I have seen and appreciate the collegiality at work among writers for children. I believe it comes from their understanding of and respect for their audience. I wish everyone could see how important it is to encourage variety in our local literature. I hope I see glimmers that a 'classism' among adult authors might be weakening.

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After this, what next for me? There are some things I can never learn to do and I won't try. Picture books. Poetry. What I most admire and can never hope to emulate in narrative fiction is effortless minimalism where one slender sentence carries a weight of meaning. Our own Fleur Beale is a master-mistress of this especially in her *Esther* trilogy.

I'd love to edit another teenage anthology. Teenagers are more edgy and sophisticated these days and it would be delicious to get to grips with work that celebrated that.

I'd like to write at least another three children's books. Maybe three adult novels, including that second historical one, are getting agitated in the waiting room.

But, this is the moment. Here I am. I give thanks to Margaret Mahy herself. For her example. For the name I'm now associated with. Someone congratulated me by saying I had fitting shoulders for her mantle. Well, no. But I thank the unique Margaret for what she did for New Zealand writing for children and continues to do nationally and internationally.

It’s a privilege to be able to give public thanks to Storylines for its continued support of writing and reading for local children. The increasing prominence of the Notable Books Lists – the innovation of the posters – this is crucial in an era when traditional publishing opportunities are curtailed and excellent books are being passed up by publishers.

And I thank Chris Else for his unfailing wisdom with regard to my own writing and that of all the authors he works with.

Modern children are increasingly sophisticated about life in general, and about narrative. It might be hard for any of us to keep ahead of them. But I will keep toiling at the literary xylophone. I am grateful to the readers who have enjoyed the results so far.

And I thank today’s audience.

Storylines – thank you.

– Barbara Else