

Grazing the Longacre

Storylines Margaret Mahy Lecture by Barbara Larson

My first association with Margaret Mahy was in the mid-90s when Paula Boock, Lynsey Ferrari and I first set up Longacre Press. Margaret, unannounced, came to visit our Dowling Street office in Dunedin. She chatted and walked around our large open plan room, while poking at a few of the many cardboard boxes we called manuscript files. She offered some encouragement, and said something about Longacre being a 'brave enterprise'. And then said, 'Is there anything I can do for you?'

We were star struck. Paula and I looked at each other and shrugged and shuffled a bit, clearly not knowing what to say.

But after Margaret left, Paula turned to me, grumpy, and said, 'You know, if we were real publishers, we'd have said, "Sure, send us your next book!"'

Perhaps in the long run Margaret did help us indirectly; she taught us to identify an opportunity and act.

A former recipient of the Margaret Mahy medal, Robyn Belton, called me a few weeks ago. 'It's really great news!' she said. 'Congratulations,' then a pause ... 'Pity about the lecture!' But then Robyn went on to say, 'Really, all they want is to hear about your journey - how you got to where you are.'

So I hope she's right, because that is what I've prepared for you today.

I had a wonderful childhood: even though my mother kept a fairly close eye on my activities, I was still able to roam the nearby bush with my cousins the nearby, bush, traverse its many creeks and trails, and although it was forbidden territory, visit, on a fairly regular basis, the local tip. I had the mountains to the north (I grew up in Vancouver, British Columbia), the wide sky to the south, and every day was a new sunrise. Our modest backyard provided me with space to grow, and our summer holidays seemed to go on forever.

I grew up in a house with very few books. A battered copy of *Dr Spock's Medical Guide to Childhood Illnesses* was kept in the cupboard above the fridge along with a small Bible that at one time belonged to my grandfather. Placed inside the Bible were a few handwritten poems along with several newspaper clippings - these were of more interest to me than the good book itself. I'd sneak a look at these precious bits of paper every now and then, thinking that maybe they held a secret about my departed grandfather.

The first book I remember receiving was *Alice in Wonderland*. As I've written elsewhere, it was a casebound edition complete with the original line drawings; at the time I thought they'd been hand-coloured. The dust jacket displayed Alice alongside her unusual friends. My father thought Alice was a bit off; he quickly lost interest and I had to read the book for myself. And this I did, over and over

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again. I loved Alice's inventive and wonderfully imaginative world. It was a long way from my own.

I printed my name on the half-title. Alice helped me develop a love of adventure, but also an affection for the physicality of a book: the smooth, fine paper, the gold lettering on the spine, the artwork and typography, and mostly, an appreciation of line drawings - black line on white paper.

Back in the '50s, our primary school library was a fairly dusty, dreary place. The most exciting reading was found in the pile of well-worn National Geographics - I'm not sure we ever read any of the articles; we liked the photographs and looking at the naked people, especially the men.

After receiving my first bicycle, I joined the local community library, the Collingwood Public Library - it's still there - and every second Saturday I'd ride to the library and take out my allotted four books. I loved the adventure stories, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Treasure Island* and anything about children living on their own, especially if their animals were allowed inside the house - along the lines of *Pippi Longstocking*. One Saturday morning I was brave enough to ask the librarian about a specific topic and she pointed to the adult section. 'You'll find several books on that subject over there.'

But that's for adults,' I reminded her. (I was a well-behaved child.)

'My dear, you can take out any book you like from anywhere in the library.'

I've always been grateful for the ease and grace of her invitation. It's a small example of the influence a librarian can have on a young person's reading. Children don't necessarily know what to read next, hence the popularity of book series and trilogies. Most children need guidance and suggestions, along with an absence of restrictions in order to develop their sense of curiosity and joy in discovery.

My first book review was given in front of my fourth grade class. I felt sick, not because it was my first go at public speaking, but because I hadn't finished the book. As I remember it, I gave a fairly good rundown of the plot, enthused about the story then said, 'If you want to know what happens you'll have to read it yourself.'

For my efforts I got an 'A'. Mrs Duddles pronounced that mine was the best book review because I hadn't given the story away. And that was the first time I remember having to think on my feet. It's a skill that has come in handy.

At high school we were introduced to Thor Heyerdahl and *Kon-Tiki*; Shakespeare - we compared *Romeo and Juliet* with *Anthony and Cleopatra* - and we were steered towards the 'great poets' with wonderful enthusiasm and humour by two, at least to us, unusual men who later quit teaching and joined a liberal political party - a then Canadian equivalent to the Values Party. Both were youngish, rather irreverent men who loved and understood Tennyson and Wordsworth as well as *Mad Magazine*.

It's curious, looking back now, that we never read a Canadian author; we didn't know they existed. A Canadian writer never visited our school. We didn't visit

bookstores nor had we ever heard of a 'lit festival'. Throughout my high school years, the most dramatic event to occur was the death of President Kennedy: our Social Studies teacher tearfully sent us home the day Kennedy was shot. It was as if she thought it was the end of the world as we knew it. We all watched television for three days.

The world did change: a restlessness and unease emerged. It was reflected in the music we listened to: the poetry of Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Pete Seeger, the Beatles. To the displeasure of our parents, we started to question war politics; our middle class values; racism and feminism and all the other isms were heatedly examined and we were big on consciousness-raising. We grew our hair. We live together. We decided to go back to earth and bake our own bread.

And it was about this time when I took heed of Doris Lessing: she wrote in an epilogue to *The Golden Notebook*, 'There is only one way to read, which is to browse in libraries and bookshops, picking up books that attract you, reading only those, dropping them when they bore you, skipping the parts that drag - and never, never read anything because you feel you ought, or because it is part of trend or movement: ...follow your own intuitive feeling about what you need... allow your instincts to lead you...'

I read the feminists and like many of us was outraged to discover I was a second class citizen. But the books I remember most were the novels of the time: *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and the magnificent Russians.

In my 'back to earth' days I spent a lot of time on arts and crafts but the simple act of drawing a line on paper was what captured me most. I attended life drawing classes and drew flowers and headstones and anything else that didn't move around too much. I felt that I was working towards something but had no idea of what. Then one day I woke up and decided to be an artist.

My first job in publishing was through illustration. I was offered the job of supplying drawings for Monte Holcroft's *Carapace: A History of the Car in New Zealand*. I hadn't drawn a car up to that point but no one needed to know that. I set out in the Mini with my drawing pad, looking for car enthusiasts.

I didn't have to look far – petrol heads were thick on the ground: I met the proud owner of a 1962 Cadillac convertible; a bloke who kept his magnificent Morris Minor up on blocks; another who thought heaven lurked behind the wheel of his custom-made truck. Not one of these car lovers cared a hoot that the book was diatribe against cars. But instead of working in isolation in a studio, here I was involved in a world I knew nothing about. The stories were fascinating, hilarious even, and I absolutely loved the passion these guys had for their vehicles. Perhaps I wasn't cut out for the solitary life of the artist after all.

The car drawings were nothing remarkable in themselves but that didn't stop me from telling the publisher, John McIndoe, that I thought of their book and cover designs. I didn't know what I was talking about but he listened and later offered

me a part-time job as an editorial assistant. (I should explain that John McIndoe Ltd was at that time a printer with a small publishing division.)

I was put to work reading unsolicited manuscripts: piles and piles of badly written novels and stories as well as screeds of substandard verse. And if I started reading them, I kept reading... hoping they'd get better. I wrote rejection letters by the truckload and felt terrible about each and every one of them until I learned, eventually, to encourage the talented and not waste time on the mediocre or worse.

My real love was spending time at the light table: we used bromides which were glued onto grids with beeswax. I designed title pages, and pasted-up books. And proof-read: Owen Marshall's first collection of short stories, Hone Tuwhare's *Selected Poems*, AK Grant's hilarious piss-takes, along with Cilia McQueen's poetry, and the dark genius of Michael Henderson.

It was a rich and happy time and a wonderful apprenticeship. I worked with the old tradesmen: the compositor, the linotype guy, the colour printer. Brian Turner was the managing editor and of course John McIndoe kept a watchful eye over everything.

I sat at the light table and pasted up Eric Olssen's grand *History of Otago*, and every day, on his way home, Eric would call in to check up on my progress. I remember the last book set in hot metal type: the typesetter made only one typo in the entire book. The book was *Cork of War* by Ray Grover, which went on to win whatever was the then equivalent of the Montana Book Awards.

Later I became the managing editor of McIndoe Publishing and worked with Paula Boock. She injected a fresh and youthful enthusiasm into everything we did. The first young adult fiction book we published was Margaret Hall's *After the Earthquake* and from that one book we could see there was a hunger for this type of story. Then we published Diana Noonan, took on Jack Lasenby – you take on Jack Lasenby – and read, but turned down, Bernard Beckett's first novel.

And then one day Paula surprised me by leaving a manuscript on my desk: *Out Walked Mel* changed the direction of young adult fiction in New Zealand. It's still in print to this day.

In 1994, Paula and I upped-stakes and moved down the road to set up our own publishing house with the assistance of Lynsey Ferrari. For a short while we struggled to find a company name, especially one that had some resonance for the three of us. We didn't want to sound like a fly-by-night operation, nor too this nor too that. The name had to have 'lasting' qualities.

During one of our 'let's make a list' meetings, I happened to pick up Neville Peat's *Falcon and the Lark* off the book shelf. It opened to a passage referring to Peter Hooper's farmlet on the West Coast, which he called Longacres.

'What about Longacre?'

'Hmmm,' said the other two.

'Peter Hooper's *Song in the Forest* was the first book I worked on when I started at McIndoe's.'

'Hmmm ... ' said Lynsey. 'Longacre is that margin by the road that farmers use to graze stock in droughts. Grazing the Longacre. I like it.'

Paula remembered going to Long Acre; a street in London. 'It was where all the posh publishers were in the days of posh publishers.'

Lynsey's daughter offered something even more attractive: The margin of radical possibilities.

Finally we had a name.

They were exciting times: we at that point had no idea what we were getting into. I've said elsewhere, our lawyer thought we were crazy; our accountant wasn't so kind. And others, like Margaret Mahy, offered help: Patricia France gave us \$10,000, Owen Marshall offered us his first novel, a friend lent us a computer. The New Zealand literary community and local Otago people were very encouraging.

After years of working in a fairly restrictive environment, we could do whatever we wanted. It was liberating and starting from scratch was probably the best thing that could have happened to us. We learned more from our mistakes than from successes, but after two years could finally pay ourselves a salary of sorts.

We continued developing the young adult fiction list and ploughed ahead with non-fiction programme: we honoured the regional and the individual southern voice.

Our first big step-up was publishing *Timeless Land*, with Grahame Sydney, Brian Turner and Owen Marshall. Our sales team at the time called it 'brave'; one of the chains said they'd take 12 copies, another told us we'd have to put New Zealand on the cover otherwise no one would know what it was... *Timeless Land* took Longacre and the three contributors, out of the 'regionalism' ghetto and to a place where we were taken seriously.

As the Longacre name became recognized, more and more writers sent work our way. We published Bernard Beckett's first novel, several more of Paula Boock's books, the most notable being *Dare Truth or Promise*.

People have often asked, 'How do you choose what to publish?' I think it's quite simple: the books choose themselves. They stand out from all the others: it was easy to publish the first books of Penelope Todd, Sandy McKay, Ted Dawe and many others. Their voices were original and engaging, the writers had something to say, a story to tell, and their stories began on the first page.

A recent success for Longacre was Kate De Goldi's novel, *The 10 PM Question*. We released this book late 2008 and it's been on the Bestseller list ever since. I've lost track of how many times it's been reprinted. It was difficult to convince the book trade that it 'defied age categories' and that it was a 'cross-over' book.

Some in the book trade were suspicious at first ... they weren't sure about the cover, the title. What is it? Is it for kids or adults? Even the *Listener* dedicated a double-paged article to this very question.

Did we care?

Readers loved the book ... young and old and in-between.

The P10 PM Question went on to win the Book of the Year award in the New Zealand Post Children's Book Awards, and to the consternation of many was shortlisted for the Montana Book Awards where it won the People's Choice Award and was runner up for the Deutz Prize for Fiction.

At the award ceremony, Kate, when accepting her prize, said, 'Thank you for inviting me to sit at the adults' table.'

We've sold the movie rights, the international audio rights, the broadcasting rights, the Australian rights, the US, the UK, the Dutch and German rights.

One of our most successful publications in a commercial and critical sense is an interesting story: we published Bernard Beckett's science fiction novel *Genesis* in 2006. It's an unusual, arresting, philosophical examination of what it means to be human – for teenagers.

Genesis won the New Zealand Post Children's Book Award for Young Adults the following year. And it sold moderately well here in New Zealand. Then an Australian publisher, Text Publishing, bought the world rights: they went on to sell it to a UK publisher, Quercus, for at that stage, a-before-unheard-of-sum for a young adult fiction book.

Quercus then went on to sell the book to over 28 territories including Brazil, Israel, the UK, the US, Canada, China... the other day we gave an okay for translation rights to Poland.

We're on the brink of signing a movie contract; the author has been invited to literary festivals in Scotland, England and Italy; he's been shortlisted for several international awards; he's been interviewed by the *Wall St Journal* and *The Guardian* to mention a few. And everyone is hanging out for his next book. Which I've just read...

Late last year Random House purchased the Longacre list. They plan to keep the Longacre imprint and this year are publishing several Longacre titles that were under contract. Although I'm sad that Longacre will no longer be operating from an office in Dunedin, Random House will be a good home for Longacre.

For me it's a privilege to work with the intelligent and passionate community one encounters in this industry. I'm sure it was . a publisher who wrote the wishful expression, 'May you live an interesting life'. It's also been a tremendous accolade to have your name associated with Margaret Mahy, as I've found out. I've never had as many congratulatory messages about anything, ever, as I've received with this award. Thank you to Storylines for this tribute: what I like most about this award is that it honours Longacre Press, and everyone who worked there, especially our children's book editors Paula Boock, Emma Neale and Penelope Todd, as well as, in a more general way, the art of publishing.