**The Sorcerer's Apprentice**

*The Margaret Mahy Medal and Lecture Award, 2013*

by Bill Nagelkerke

First of all, my sincerest thanks to Storylines for the great honour of bestowing on me the Margaret Mahy Medal. Less thanks, perhaps, for the other honour that comes with it, that of having to give a lecture! Writing this text, however, has been a very useful exercise in thinking about things that have been, and continue to be, important to me. My thanks, too, to all of you who have come here today to listen. This year's award, the twenty-third, is significantly different. As we are all so very sadly aware, Margaret Mahy is no longer with us, other than in spirit, in memory and, of course, in story. I was re-reading recently the very first lecture, *Surprising moments*, given by Margaret as long ago now as 1991, in which she talks about those special moments from which stories spring: *moments . . . [that] link one into fantasies so vast, so profound, they . . . seem to be the source within ourselves which we feed with stories and out of which stories come*. A profound statement intimating, perhaps, that it's not we who write and tell stories but story and the structures of story that tell and write us.

Robert Macfarland, in his idiosyncratic travel book *The old ways: a journey on foot* – a real word-fest for those of you who, like me, revel in the rich viscosity of language and are full of envy of those who show themselves to be such brilliant wordsmiths – asks: *What might we call such incidents and instances . . . where one experiences a "transition" from a known landscape (into) somewhere we feel and think significantly differently. . . or, rather, how to describe the lands that are found beyond these frontiers? "Xenotopias", perhaps, meaning "foreign places" or "out-of-place places" a term to complement our "utopias" and our "dystopias."*

Although Macfarland was referring to actual, physical places his *xenotopias* might equally refer to the imaginative landscapes of story. It's about story, and about stories that I want to speak today, in ways both personal and theoretical. Like all of you, I love stories, which probably explains why, looking back, I seem to have spent so much time reading them, writing them, promoting them and, more recently, translating them. The best stories have not only a strong narrative drive and pull but also metaphysical qualities. They introduce us to ideas, both simple and profound. They help us understand better who we are. I like that. And it seems that the longer I write, the more interested I am in those metaphysical aspects of story. Age, as the author of *The Wind in the Willows*, Kenneth Grahame, once wrote, "carries its penalties". In the end, the process seems to be a reductive one. Doctor Who put it so succinctly in episode 13 of series 31, *The big bang*: "We're all stories in the end. Just make it a good one . . ."

As I'm sure all of you did, I came to story early on. My parents emigrated from the Netherlands in 1955 and so Dutch was my first language until my sister, who is two years

older than me, started school and brought English home with her. My mother loved books and reading. She read to us in Dutch, including stories that were serialized in the issues of a magazine that her own mother posted to her at regular intervals. These tales featured a rather diminutive but pugnacious character named Paulus de Boskabouter: Paul the Wood Gnome. It somehow sounds better in Dutch, doesn't it? His adventures involved regular run-ins with a gnarly and frightening old witch, the wonderfully named Eucalypta. In addition, for several Christmases in succession we were given the latest Rupert Annual whose stories we thought were not only magical in themselves but included the characters of Tigerlily and her sorcerer father, named The Conjurer. So it's hardly surprising that tales of magic have retained a lasting appeal for me. In consequence I seem to have developed a propensity for writing stories that feature magicians, influenced no doubt by my own early interest in prestidigitation and legerdemain.

One piece of advice that apprentice writers often receive is that they should write about what they know (although, in typically contrary fashion, the exact opposite advice has also been proffered) and so, as I knew a little (and the emphasis is on 'little') about conjuring, my first published story was about a magician and his dragon, while my first accepted piece of writing for the School Journal was called 'The magic trick'. The latter story was about a trick, performed by a magician at a school, which goes awry. I also knew first hand about tricks that didn't always go the way they were intended! A magic club I was briefly a member of many years ago formed the basis for "The young magicians' club", a short story that appeared online several years ago and was later bought for inclusion in a Canadian educational anthology. The magician I wrote about for the School Journal reappeared, as magicians have the habit of doing, in a Kiwi Bite title called *Going Bananas*. More recently I've written a novel, as yet unpublished, called *The Houdini Effect* inspired, as you can guess, by the grand master of illusion himself, Harry Houdini. A work in progress includes yet another magician, completely fictional but also inspired by a couple of real people, local and international personalities both of them. One was a man named Edgar Benyon, born in 1902 and died in 1978. He was a renowned New Zealand conjurer, still conjuring in his sixties after more than four decades on the stage. I saw him perform when he visited my small Catholic primary school (destroyed by the recent earthquakes) and have never forgotten him. It was perhaps inevitable that he should one day contribute to a story.

I've given my lecture the title *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* for several reasons. Firstly, it's a well-known tale whose narrative can be seen as a kind of metaphor for the notion of story itself, stuff created from nothing and from everything, where one event leads to another, where words both constrain magic as well as set it free and where we might learn who and what we are, and are not. Secondly, it offers an opportunity for me to acknowledge not only Margaret but all those other previous winners of this Award which is named after her, all those sorcerers and magicians, all those word witches and word wizards before whom I stand as a humble apprentice. Thirdly, I feel connected to this old story in various ways. Its basic plot, which I'm sure you're all familiar with, describes how an apprentice sorcerer badly reconstructs the spells of his master magician conjuring up, in

consequence, a series of disasters. Looking back at my scribbling over the years, my efforts seem to have produced as many, if not more, disasters than triumphs. Last, but not least, I chose the title of this lecture for a Margaret-associated reason. The Disney version of the tale of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, starring Mickey Mouse, is part of the 1940 film *Fantasia*. The makers of the television version of Margaret's 2005 novel *Maddigan's Fantasia* were understandably diffident about it being called that. It became *Maddigan's Quest* instead. As you can see, there are many unexpected connections between all kinds of stories, some, like this one, more random than others of course.

There are different ways of defining and thus understanding the essential nature of story. I'll dip into a few possibilities as I go along. Here are a few for starters. This, incidentally, is the theoretical bit and I've probably got a bit carried away by it, but I hope you find it interesting none-the-less. Steve Haywood, an English television producer and canal enthusiast, wrote in *One man and a narrowboat*, a book my brother sent me for Christmas: "Stories . . . don't exist in isolation, they're just part of other stories. They're like strands of a rope which are woven into other strands which themselves are woven into bigger strands until one fragment becomes so much part of the whole that you can't say where it begins or ends." Robert Macfarland tries to pin down the meaning of story through etymology: *Stories, like paths*, he writes, *relate in two senses: they recount and they connect.* "In Siberia the Khanty word usually translated as 'story' also means "way"... our word 'book' derives from the High German bok, meaning 'beech' – the tree on whose smooth bark marks and signs were often incised in order to indicate routes and paths. Our verb 'to write' at one point in its history referred specifically to track-marking . . . so writing and wayfaring are continuous activities, a running stitch, a persistence of the same seam or stream..." He finishes: "The compact between writing and walking is almost as old as literature – a walk is only a step away from a story, and every path tells."

Another possibility might be to utilise the neurobiological terminology described by Nobel Prize winner Eric Kandel in his fascinating book *In search of memory* to characterise the ongoing transmission of stories – the multiplicity of strands of the rope - as 'action potentials'. The action potential is an electrical signal that travels along a neuron's axon to its synaptic terminal where it sends a chemical substance, known as a neurotransmitter, to another synaptic terminal. This firing up of neurons, especially in the brain, generates amongst other things, memory, and within memory, it seems to me, lies story or at least one very important source of it. "*Memory has always fascinated me...,*" writes Kandel. "Remembering the past is a form of mental time travel; it frees us from the constraints of time and space and allows us to move freely along completely different dimensions." To adapt the neurobiological terminology for literary purposes, one might say that the synaptic gap between the neurons of ideas is bridged by the chemistry of words, those fine creations that fire up our personal as well as shared narratives, constantly altering and adding to them, changing our understanding and interpretation of the lives we lead and the world in which we lead them.

Finally, while the essence of story is often thought of as numinous and amorphous, I could assert that it's possible to mathematically define story using a formula, which reads

like this, (L x N) + (T x N) = S, where L stands for Lies, T stands for Truth and S stands for... well, that's easy enough, isn't it? Story. The 'N' of course refers to quantity, so the greatest number of truths and the greatest number of lies adds up to the greatest number of stories.

In this rather roundabout way we now come back to the tale at hand, namely *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. It's often been said that writers are the very best of liars and nowhere is this more manifest than in the narrative that gives us a very early version, perhaps the earliest – around 150BC – of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. It appears as one of several tall tales in Lucian's *Philopseudes*, a wonderful title that should resonate with all writers, artists, storytellers and readers as if means, quite literally, a 'lover of lies'. The *Philopseudes* was originally intended to warn people, particularly the young, against the attractions of magic and superstition but ended up, naturally, having the opposite effect. Lucian, incidentally, is credited with writing one of the first science fiction stories, involving a trip to the moon. His version of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* takes place in the equally exotic location of Egypt where a magician makes various objects, such as a broom, perform menial tasks. The story's narrator, Eucrates, witnesses this magic and, after overhearing the simple spell that causes the inanimate objects to come to life, attempts to emulate the magician by making a pestle carry water and fill up a jar. Sound familiar? The sort of consequences that afflicted Mickey Mouse when he conjured a broom to carry pails of water, which then flooded the sorcerer's house, were suffered by Eucrates as well, although in Mickey's case the results of his mixed-up magic were magnified when Mickey hacked the broom into pieces thus allowing each individual piece to spring back to life as another animated broom. What a wonderful way to describe how stories can evolve and proliferate from a common ancestor.

One of those story descendants was Wanda Gag's *The Sweet Porridge* reprinted by the New Zealand Department of Education in 1963 in a Ready to Read anthology. This was one of the first stories I remember encountering when I started primary school. The story of the porridge overflowing the cooking pot when the mother in the story forgets the spell to stop it cooking must certainly be a variant of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. And, for me, yet another encounter with magic.

One of the things I hear myself saying over and over again when I visit schools is that stories are magic; a wonderfully vague yet, at the same time, precise and truthful statement. I sometimes perform a magic trick or two to drive home the point. Usually it works..., the trick that is, but hopefully the message, too. Occasionally the trick has gone wrong and when it does I find myself the anti-hero of my own story, *The magic trick*. A salutary reminder that not all stories work all the time, either. *How* stories are magic takes a bit longer to elaborate. I do like the way Naomi, the narrator of Sharon Creech's most recent novel, *The Great Unexpected*, explains it:

> "…a teacher read a story about a young knight on a quest... and while the teacher read, I was that knight... as surely as I was ever anyone else... when the teacher stopped reading, I could not move because I was still in the book...
>
> Nula... said, "Naomi, you know that is a story, don't you?"

> "But what is 'a story'? It's in here now" – I tapped my head – "with all the other stuff, so maybe everything is a story."
>
> If I could be a knight, then I could be... an eagle or a bear or a fox, or anything at all... I could be anywhere and everywhere."

Naomi's perfectly right. And this is wonderfully metaphysical stuff as well. Stories take us from ourselves and put us somewhere else, or make us into someone else. It's intriguing to note that Naomi's reflection on the power of story to transform the reader has its parallel in a much earlier book, that of Kenneth Grahame's *The Golden Age*, first published in 1895 and from which I quoted earlier. Here we have a group of children who enact the author's thesis that the worlds of childhood and adulthood are diametrically opposed.

"Let's pretend," suggests Harold, "we're Knights of the Round Table." And so they do. Charlotte wants to be her *special hero* the hunter and harpist Sir Tristram. "Once more were damsels rescued, dragons disembowelled, and giants... deprived of their already superfluous number of heads... The varying fortune of the day swung doubtful – now on this side, now on that; till at last Lancelot, grim and great... unhorsed Sir Tristram (an easy task), and bestrode her, threatening doom; while the Cornish knight, forgetting hard-won fame of old, cried piteously, 'You're hurting me, I tell you! And you're tearing my frock!'"

What we have here is evidence not only of the power of the imagination but also of the multi-layered nature of stories. This childhood game of pretend, both simple and profound, sits within the framework of Grahame's own fiction but at a deeper level than either of those narratives lies the sequence of romances that make up the Arthurian cycle, in their own turn deeply layered and resonant and, at some point, emanating from a historical reality.

I mention these things because I, too, as a child, under the influence of stories, tried to transform the ordinary world around me. Reading Enid Blyton's *Tales of Brave Adventure*, retellings of the Robin Hood stories and those of the Round Table, helped turn our backyard orchard into Sherwood Forest and the woods around Camelot. Likewise I devoured Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan novels whereupon the orchard became the African jungle. Kenneth Grahame describes the metamorphosis so well:

> "If you crept through the undergrowth and crouched by the water's rim, it was easy – if your imagination were in healthy working order – to transport yourself in a trice to the heart of a tropical forest. Overhead the monkeys chattered, parrots flashed from bough to bough, strange large blossoms shone all around you, and the push and rustle of great beasts moving unseen thrilled you deliciously."

Malcolm Saville's intense evocation of rural Shropshire, in a series of books that began with *Mystery at Witchend*, deeply embedded in me a sense of "those blue, remembered hills" long before I had read any of A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*. It was in no small part, at least, that all these stories directed me, years later, to travel to places connected

with them: Nottingham, Church Stretton and the Long Mynd, and also to Africa where the first and only sight I had of a jungle-like vine, on the border between Zimbabwe and Zambia, propelled me immediately to swing from it, attempting in a rather feeble, albeit deeply symbolic way, to once more live out the Tarzan tales, somewhere on the elusive border between story and memory.

The omniscient narrator of David Almond's book *The Boy who Swam with Piranhas* describes the magic of stories, and *story-making*, very well. He says:

> "...let's look down ...and see if we can see what has happened to the other fragments of our story.... Let's travel through the night and move closer.... How can we do this? You may well ask. But it's easy, isn't it? All it takes is a few words put into a few sentences, and a bit of imagination. We could go anywhere with words and our imaginations. We could leave this story altogether, in fact, and find some other story in some other part of the world, and start telling that one.

Yes, it *is* easy but it's also, at times, very difficult to imagine stories and *then* to translate them into words. That's certainly been my experience. And as time goes on, it becomes more difficult, not easier. It's becomes more difficult, I think, because writers want to do better each time they begin something new. Their next story is always going to be their best one. We've all heard writers say that. That very first story I had published – the one about the magician and his dragon - gave me the illusion that the process could be plain sailing from then on. And, to a certain extent, it was. The newspaper which had accepted, and then paid for my story, bought many more and it was only when I started sending material to the School Journal and came up against the barrier of rejection after rejection that it dawned on me that perhaps the stories I had been writing up till then might not have been quite as good as I had liked to believe they were – or, at least, they hadn't *improved* significantly enough over time to pass the scrutiny of the Journal editors. So that breakthrough into Journal territory was especially significant for me as it was and still is, I'm sure, for so many writers. It was a signal that yes, at last, what I was writing had achieved a certain quality but, at the same time, it also made clear that my apprenticeship was likely to be an ongoing one. And so it's proved to be. Just when I think I've written something where the words actually seem to do what I've intended them to do, I read the words written by another writer and realise how much better that writer has done it, and how much better I could have done it!

On occasions, writers for children have said to me that they don't read many, if any, children's books for fear of being unduly influenced or, worse, that they might unintentionally plagiarise what they've read. I understand what they mean but I don't agree. I think that the more writers read, of anything, the more likely it is that they will absorb the necessities of the craft and be better prepared for the challenges they encounter. Hopefully, ideally, we will transmute what we learn into original gold. I've always gravitated towards children's, and young adult, literature not only because of any metaphysics they might contain but because of their strong narrative values, their *storytelling* strengths and capabilities, a reason that Philip Pullman once gave in

explanation of why he felt that children's books were more to his taste than books for adults. In his 1996 Carnegie Medal acceptance speech he said: "There are some themes, some subjects, too large for adult fiction; they can only be dealt with adequately in a children's book. The reason for that is that in adult literary fiction, stories are there on sufferance. Other things are felt to be more important: technique, style, literary knowingness...." He went on to say "...what characterises the best of children's authors is that they're not embarrassed to tell stories. They know how important stories are, and they know, too, that if you start telling a story you've got to carry on till you get to the end."

That's also the reason I chose to work as a children's librarian for twenty-five years, a job in which, perforce, I read many books. All of them contributed in some way new skills, ideas and inspirations to layer my own attempts at writing stories. I'll talk about children's librarianship a little because, as many of you will know, the profession provides inspiration in so many ways. For me library work reinforced my understanding of the power that stories have to influence the lives of readers and of our responsibility to get stories into the hands and heads and hearts of children.

Over the last few decades people generally, and parents in particular, have become much more aware of the links between early literacy and later success in life. Research and practice overseas, not to forget the pioneering work by local people such as the two Dorothys, White and Butler, had already shown that an early start in literacy is vital to a child's – indeed a baby's – development. I was lucky enough to be able to initiate Christchurch City Libraries' Books for Babies programme in 1990, to coincide with International Literacy Year. Since then over 100,000 Books for Babies packs, which have included a free board book, have been distributed to Christchurch babies. From amongst those many storied babies, whose parents and caregivers have attested to the benefits of this early literacy intervention, may come the readers, writers and illustrators of the future including, maybe, some future recipients of this prestigious award.

As a librarian, I always tried to take whatever opportunities presented themselves to bring writers and readers together. I know from experience how important these sort of encounters can be for the reading and writing life. Living and working in London for a little while in the early eighties, and writing the occasional short story as time allowed, I had been looking forward to meeting many of my literary heroes. In those days however, unlike now, the opportunities turned out to be rather limited, other than at the occasional book-signing session, where I did manage at different times to exchange a few - far too few - words with luminaries such as Roald Dahl, Richard Adams and Leon Garfield. In more hope than anticipation of receiving a reply, I also wrote to some of my favourite authors. One of those was Peter Dickinson who wrote back saying that "there are children's book groups, but in my experience they don't flourish in the capital because of the lack of local community spirit". However, his community spirit wasn't lacking. As we were living quite close to one another he suggested that I pop round for a chat. Which I did. Of course! We exchanged books, although at that stage I was far from having any of my own to give to him. Instead, I gave him a copy of *The Second Margaret Mahy*

*Storybook*. He had heard of Margaret although I don't think he had read anything by her. But this was before she won her first Carnegie Medal for *The Haunting.* Peter was the first author to win the medal twice, Margaret was the third. I should mention here, too, that while I was in London *The Magpies Said*, a New Zealand collection of stories and poems selected by Dorothy Butler, was published. I think Tessa Duder had her very first story in this anthology. An elderly writer friend of mine, Winifred Owen, who I often think of as one of a triumvirate of Christchurch writers that also included Elsie Locke and Phyl Wardell – they all knew each other and were of a similar age – also had a story in this book. Hers was the first in the collection, which as a whole was a kind of validation of New Zealand writing and writers. It certainly encouraged me to continue my apprenticeship in writing.

As far as author visits goes, my library career was sandwiched between Judy Blume near the beginning and David Almond near the end, with many visiting writers and illustrators in between. Inspirations, all of those writers and illustrators, to all who heard and met them, not only for their work but also for the way in which they freely acknowledged the egalitarian nature of libraries and reading. There was the occasional unexpected visit. Robert (Bob) Swindells and his wife Brenda joined us in the library staffroom for tea and scones one morning – I wasn't the best of hosts because I gave them serviettes rather than plates although, in my defense, the scones *were* very buttery and the serviettes – rather plain ones – were needed later on. The iconic American author Phyllis Krasilovsky, on holiday in New Zealand, also arrived unannounced. When her identity was discovered, she was very happy to sign a library copy of her classic 1958 picture book *The Cow who Fell into the Canal*.

However, despite the enticements, opportunities and challenges offered by librarianship, full time work proved to be at odds with being able to write anything of any substantial length. A couple of project grants, one from the QEII Arts Council and another from its successor Creative New Zealand, in 1993 and 2003 respectively, greatly helped me to work on longer stories. *Old Bones* was the result of one of those periods of time enabled by the grants. It was such a great pleasure to me that Margaret agreed to launch this book of mine in 2006, a couple of years before I left the library. Characteristically, Margaret forgot to bring her launch notes but, equally characteristically, she didn't need them. "Once a librarian, always a librarian," was one of the things she said that night. How true.

Around the same time that *Old Bones* was doing the rounds of publishers, I happened to meet with Tessa Duder who was researching her literary biography of Margaret. This meeting – to cut a long story short - eventually led to my participation as a member of Hans Christian Andersen Award juries in 2006 and 2008, representing Storylines which, as you'll know, is the New Zealand section of IBBY, the International Board on Books for Young People. Each juror, or judge, had to read and re-read approximately 600 books each time. This took most of my leisure moments and very little of my own writing got done but I didn't mind because the experience was so enriching.

One highlight of jury membership was, of course, the wide exposure to the children's and young adult literature of so many diverse countries. IBBY's aim of building bridges of communication through children's books is certainly fulfilled by the greater understanding and appreciation gained by jury members of the dedication that underpins the creation, dissemination and promotion of children's literature by often small and under-resourced, but highly dedicated, bodies and individuals. Another highlight was having the opportunity to spend two days in the jury room not only debating the nominees but interacting with fellow judges who, like the candidates, came from all over the world. I also had to read many books in Dutch, both original titles and works which had been translated into Dutch from other languages. Needless to say this amount of reading helped me to reconnect with my first language and, as serendipity would have it, the timing coincided with the establishment of Gecko Press in Wellington by Julia Marshall.

Julia was looking for translators and I offered to try my hand at a picture book if one should happen to come along. One did, in 2006: *Who's Driving* by Belgian author and illustrator Leo Timmers. This book, seemingly a simple story involving a range of vehicular noises, was a perfect induction to the sometimes complex craft of translation requiring, as it did, a visit to a fire station to listen to the different sounds made by fire engines based on the realisation, after reading the Dutch text, that the sound of a European siren – at least a literary one – was actually different from a New Zealand one! A trial by fire, you could say. Translation has opened up a whole new area of interest for me. Part of the excitement of translating is being able to introduce readers to works that they might never have otherwise encountered. I try to be faithful to the original text but there are always challenges in this regard, particularly when a book such as *Wolf and Dog*, recently published by Gecko, contains such a lot of word play, including many palindromes and near-palindromes, untranslatable as such and needing to be reshaped to the English language. The satisfaction here for the translator lies in using his or her own creativity to find solutions that are true to the spirit of the original. The Dutch word for wolf is . . . wolf . . . but spelt backwards with the vowel becoming a diphthong it means wishy-washy. To find out how this problem was tackled in the translation, you will have to read the book.

I still haven't managed to persuade Julia to do a title I encountered as part of my Andersen Jury work but I do want to read you a short piece from that book, which I've translated for your delectation, or otherwise, because it's a wonderful summation of the nature of story and how it embraces and encompasses us. The book is called *Reus* which, as a noun, means a giant. The book is written and illustrated by Klaas Verplancke.

> *A book is a roof,*
>
> *once upon a time is the ceiling,*
>
> *and they lived happily ever after*
>
> *lies in the cellar.*
>
> *In between, lives half the world*
>
> *on thousands of pieces of paper*

*and that is my house.*

*'Sometimes I live in a forest,*

*Tomorrow on an island*

*And even on top of a mountain.*

*Every day another page,*

*and another story,*

*and another house.*

While this poem says a lot about the prolificacy and continuity of stories, in terms of format, story has undergone a tremendous revolution, or should that be evolution? Ten years ago an article about the work of Professor Mark Billinghurst in the field of augmented reality alerted me one of the 'action potentials' or, in this case, 'potential actions' that might one day change the dynamic between books and readers. A meeting with Mark led eventually to the world's first augmented reality 'eyeMagic' picture book, *Giant Jimmy Jones*, written and illustrated by Gavin Bishop. Amazingly, what was pioneering just a few years ago is now fairly commonplace. A search on amazon.com reveals a number of picture books on the market that feature augmented reality. Over time, stories have been communicated in a multitude of ways: as oral narratives; as inscriptions on clay and stone; in scrolls and codices; on radio, film and television; as Playstation and computer games; to their most recent incarnation as cyberspace entities, especially as e-books. All these ways of communicating and transmitting story seem proof positive of Robert Macfarland's etymological links between 'story' and 'way', because the journey to tell stories in different ways is just that, an ever-changing pathway whose twists and turns make the final destination – if there is such an end point – unseeable. Many libraries, not to mention many individuals, have been quick to embrace the variety of different story formats, to the delight or consternation, even disapproval, of their customers and friends. But that is part and parcel of the joys of librarianship and reading. For me, personally, e-books have provided new opportunities.

In 2011, I had an idea for story that focused on the claims by a young girl that she had received a vision of Mary, Mother of God. This may seem a strange and indeed unfashionable topic for a children's book but for me the theme fitted well with my interest in things metaphysical and aetiological. It wasn't an original idea by any means. My own Catholic education had made me familiar with several stories that involved children claiming to have been witness to Marian apparitions. (As an aside, did any of you know that there used to be a Catholic School Journal?) Anyway, no one, as far as I was aware, had written a children's novel about such a thing, at least not in dispassionate terms. What I wanted to do was bring the story up to date so I set it in the here and now. In *The Field* Mary appears to a twelve year old girl called Jacinta, on a flat screen television in a rugby stadium and, when Mary vanishes, her pixels disintegrate. The nature of the story gave me the opportunity to play with structure. The book, which is actually very short, just

seventeen thousand words, is divided into three parts, the middle part offering readers multiple viewpoints: those of the media; Jacinta's peers; a psychologist, among others. Religion is, of course, essentially about mystery. Like a good story, it poses questions rather than answering them. Soon after I'd written *The Field* Michael Thorn of ACHUKAbooks (and the long-established, England-based, Achuka children's literature website) started asking for submissions to his new e-book project. He wrote that what he was looking for was "books that regular publishers simply find too difficult to place on their lists . . . books out of kilter with current trends, books that do not have an easily definable audience, books that individual commissioning editors may be keen on but do not get past the sales-oriented final-decision meeting. As a digital-only publisher," he noted, "ACHUKAbooks will be free to be more adventurous and speculative compared with regular publishing houses*."* I sent Michael *The Field* thinking that it might fit his criteria. He liked and it became the first title in the ACHUKAbooks list.

A second book I was able to work on as a result of the 2003 writing grant began as a short story about a teenage romance, written originally as a submission to Tessa Duder's 1993 anthology *Nearly Seventeen*. The story didn't make the cut and I put it aside for a decade until I began working it up into a novel for young adults. Now called *Demons*, the book explores one young woman's experiences of family and growing up – positive and negative – in the light of her family history, particularly her Catholic upbringing. Incidentally, the romance still plays a central part in the story. Books for young people that have religion, either mainstream or cultic, as a thematic aspect tend usually to be overtly dogmatic; they become either religious tracts rather than stories in which religion features, or else rather judgmental. I wanted to write something that was both realistic and respectful of an experience that is surprisingly common to very many young people, even in this day and age. A story that questioned rather than answered. Some people have asked me if *Demons* reflects my own journey and I answer in all honesty that, no, it doesn't. But, at the same time, I'm aware that in writing Andrea's story I followed her journey very closely, so in some ways her story has become my story as well. That's the way it goes with any literary endeavour. *Demons* took the usual paths to different publishers. While feedback was almost uniformly positive no one thought they would be able to sell enough copies to make the cost of publishing it viable. I shelved it on and off for another ten years and went on to write other things. Then with the advent of e-books and ACHUKAbooks in particular, *Demons* received another chance at seeing the light of day. Whether it will find many readers, or only a few, is impossible to know but perhaps it doesn't matter. The cycle of the story, from writer to reader and back again, is now complete. I'll share a little of it with you, though, seeing as you are a captive audience... *Demons* is about stories of various kinds, including hi*story*. The term 'history' was codified to some degree by the ancient Greek writer Herodotus who used the word 'historia' to define the parameters of his book. It means an *enquiry* or *a learning by inquiry*, but it also means a *narrative* and if you have read any of Herodotus you will know what a wonderful storyteller he is. To set the scene, Andrea and her boyfriend Chris are at a night-time vigil outside a restaurant where ancient Māori bones have been discovered. They are protesting at the potential desecration of the site by developers who

are reluctant to wait until the find has been properly dealt with. Andrea and Chris are at a crucial moment in their relationship; anticipating travelling overseas once they have gone through university they are both soon, in different ways, to betray one another. Andrea narrates the story:

> "The candlelight reminded me of Gran's funeral. After an hour or so I fell into a contemplative mood and my mind drifted off. I thought about the history I'd learnt at school over the years. About the ways in which mistakes kept on being repeated, how the new ones papered over the old, how civilisations vanished as they were overrun by invaders or overtaken by events, how human structures fell and got built over, about the way in which time spiralled, curving inwards and outwards, forwards and backwards seemingly forever, into eternity; and the cold hard fact that there were endings as well as beginnings.
>
> Gran felt very close that night. Was it just my imagination or was she actually there? I couldn't help but hope it was Gran, out among the wintry stars. Her notion of turning points seemed particularly meaningful then, as was her comment that people's lives needed colour. Mine had developed a lot more of that as the year had gone on. There had been several turning points and more to come.
>
> I wished I could have talked to you again Gran. I wished I'd talked to you more. All those stories in your head, I only ever heard a tiny fraction of them. They've all gone with you, to wherever you are.
>
> I'd asked myself, not that long ago, did I still believe in a life after death. That night I decided I did. What choice did I have? If there was only this, only us and the rest empty infinity, what was the point? I knew what Chris's rational response would be. I'd thought it myself the day we buried Gran.
>
> Dead and gone / Life's a song / So sing it while you can.
>
> But I couldn't help it. Not all things had to be rational. Love wasn't, for one. That night all I knew was that I wanted the song of my life to go on forever. I didn't know that it would. I could never know, not at least until the physical part of it was over.... In the end there could be only hope or not-hope, belief or not-belief, faith or not-faith. Never proof.
>
> Chris broke the long silence when he said, straight into my ear so I was the only one who could hear him, 'One day we'll visit the Tower of the Winds and we'll secretly add our own small piece of graffiti.'
>
> 'Why?' I whispered back to him.
>
> 'So we can live forever even if neither of us believes in an afterlife,' he replied.
>
> 'Chris...' I was about to say what I'd been resolving in my head but I stopped myself. I didn't want to disappoint him. I tried to convince myself that

it wouldn't matter to him, and that now wasn't the time to say the gap had started to close for me.

He went on: 'And I already know what we can scratch on the stone.' For a second or two I felt a small thrill, imagining us making our mark on that ancient stone but, even as I was visualising it, I knew it would end up a futile gesture. There was no real permanence in stone. Like bodies and bones, it would all eventually turn to dust and blow away.

'What will we write?' I asked.

'Life is a story.'

'I like that.'

Had he been able to read my mind after all? Life is a story. Even when it ends it continues forever. When I was small I often asked Dad and Mum to tell me stories. Tell, not read. Dad was best at it. This was my favourite:
*There was once a girl who asked her father to tell her a story. So the father told the girl this story. There was once a girl who asked her father to tell her a story. So the father told the girl this story. There was once a girl who asked her father to tell her a story. So the father told the girl this story...."*

One could argue that real-life stories never really end; and that stories in books continue to inhabit readers' memories. In talks like this, however, one generally has to come to a stop before the audience slips away or drifts off to sleep. So before that happens, and hopefully it hasn't already, I can't do any better than to let Margaret Mahy have the last word. The final sentence in Margaret's last major novel *The Magician of Hoad* – which, interestingly, was perhaps her first major novel, too, as I'm sure I can recall seeing pages from the typescript in the late seventies. (Now, is this a true story, a false story, or just a good story...?)

It provides an especially poignant ending, given Margaret's physical absence: *"A story has to end somewhere," she wrote. "This story ends here."*

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