STORYLINES MARGARET MAHY LECTURE 2021

Julia Marshall, recipient of the 2021 Storyline Margaret Mahy Medal

It takes a village to raise a reader

Kia ora e hoa mā

He Whakaputaputa ahau o te Gecko Press

Ko Julia tōku ingoa

Nō reira, Tēnā koutou, Tēnā koutou

Tēnā tātou katoa

Thank you to everyone at Storylines for this extraordinary and unexpected honour. Storylines is New Zealand's only organisation that promotes literature especially for children and young adults, and it is fuelled by volunteers. And it is wonderful also that Storylines takes this chance to celebrate the stories and the great character also of Margaret Mahy.

To be awarded the 2021 Stoylines Margaret Mahy Medal on the shoulders of the writers and illustrators who have received it ahead of me, is a gift.

I am the third publisher on the list, alongside Barbara Larson and Ann Mallinson, and I'm proud of that.

Regarding this lecture: Once I was over the astonishment and, I confess, a small moment of pride, I spent valuable weeks reliving a moment at school when we were told to make speeches about a topic of our choice, and I had so many possible topics that I never actually decided what to talk about and so I did my speech about something I knew nothing about, on the spot, very badly, refusing to give up and get off the stage, and the English teacher told me that if he had had a banana he would have thrown it at me.

This speech is my sixth version, or sixth version started. I didn't want to talk about myself or Gecko Press, but it turns out that when it comes to children's books, that is all I know.

At this moment it feels to me as if Gecko Press is like *The Little Engine that Could*, a book I remember well from my childhood. Except the Little Engine got up the mountain all on its own, something Gecko Press could never do.

I imagine instead a stubbornly small-by-choice Gecko Press puffing up the hill, surrounded by snakes and lizards and hippos and elephants and detective toads and baby wolves, and families of rabbits, a vulture, hopefully some children, all pushing and pulling. Maybe there would be a tuatara and a dinosaur advising on the side, representing our elders and betters…

If I had ever stopped to think about it, I would have thought – and I know I am not alone in this – that Gecko Press was unlikely to get far up a hill, let alone that mountain.

The beginnings of Gecko Press were in 2003, though I had wanted to work with publishing and children's books since I was at school. I was working in Sweden for a company where we made international corporate magazines that were translated into up to 22 languages.

After 12 years in Sweden, I wanted to return to New Zealand. I figured out that the only way I was going to be able to publish children's books was to start a publishing company; and so I decided to visit the Frankfurt Book Fair, which turned out to be eight rugby-field-sized halls of publishers and a completely bewildering experience. The next year I went to the Bologna International Children's Book Fair, a much more manageable four rugby fields full, and I walked up and down the aisles of stands, eight aisles to a hall, with my good friend Annika.

Eventually she said: "This is hopeless, Yulia. There are the big publishers and there are the small publishers, and the small ones are not looking so good. Why don't you go and work for one of the big ones, and let's go and buy shoes?"

And I said, "You go and buy shoes, I'll go round one more time." On my way round again, I stopped to talk to a man who said: "Come back tomorrow and I'll answer all your questions, because someone did that for me 25 years ago."

That man, the original publisher of *Who's Driving?,* told me how I could buy rights and to get myself a good distributor, and not to reprint too soon.

When I asked to buy the rights to what became *Can you whistle Johanna?*, I could see in the catalogue that it had been translated into 20 languages but not English. "That's odd," I said. "No," they said. "That's normal."

Can you whistle Johanna? is the story of Berra and Ulf, and Ulf has a grandfather but Berra doesn't. Ulf says, I don't know where they come from, but I know where we can find one, and off they go to the old people's home and they adopt Grandpa Ned.

This little book, still one of my favourites and rereleased this year, is a guiding star for Gecko Press.

Ulf Stark writes uncompromisingly with the voice of the child, he is unafraid of emotion, and he understands a child's sense of fairness and honesty. He writes funny and sad in the same sentence. *Can you Whistle Johanna?* is extremely satisfying as a book. It is moving yet unsentimental, and it is also funny in a human nature sort of way, something which has always been high on the list for Gecko Press books. And I couldn't understand why this and some of the other great Swedish children's books I had been reading, initially to help me learn Swedish and later for my general enjoyment, were not available in English.

Back then, in 2005, only one percent of all books published in the UK were in translation. But when I reported this number to the Swedish publisher of Margaret Mahy, he said: "I'm surprised that figure is so high."

When I told him that I was planning to start a publishing company based in New Zealand, translating some of the best writers and illustrators in the world into English, he said: "Well either you're an idiot, or it's a niche. Let's hope it's a niche."

It wasn't an immediately obvious or a lucrative niche.

Publishers from Japan and Europe found it astonishing that a publisher like Gecko Press, in New Zealand of all places, was intent on bringing foreign books into the English language.

They were very keen to support Gecko Press, as having an English version made it much easier to sell rights to other languages.

I was naïve and optimistic, and I had nothing to lose apart from my house.

It made no sense to me that our reading was confined to books written only in the English-speaking world, barely including Canada.

I didn't like making the world small when we had access to a big one – especially when my own growing up reading experience had been peppered with the work of far countries, Sweden and Denmark and Germany and Switzerland and Finland and Russia and South America – but there is a lot of world missing in that list too.

Gecko Press is still one of a handful of English language children's publishers in the world who focus on books in translation. Translations make up 85 percent of our list, the rest being a small number of the key-to-our-soul New Zealand writers and illustrators we publish and take to the rest of the world – Joy Cowley, Gavin Bishop, Barbara Else, Juliet MacIver and Sarah Davis among them.

We are in a golden age of picture book making. Publishers have got over our digital fright and are putting enormous effort into making books beautiful objects, exploring extraordinary ideas on paper, using different formats and pushing the boundaries of paper.

Of course, the most important stories in any society are our own and there is a movement now, worldwide and here in Aotearoa New Zealand, to look our culture in the eye, as Gavin Bishop did back in 2000 with *The House that Jack Built,* first published by Scholastic and later by Gecko Press in English and te reo Māori. It is a landmark book for us in New Zealand, the grandfather, the *koro*, of many children's books I hope will continue to emerge about our place and ourselves.

At Gecko Press we have also quietly through the years been translating our best loved books into te reo Māori, led by Paora Tibble who wanted a te reo Māori version of *Who's Hiding?* – and we are now coming up to eight on our list including *Paraweta* or *Poo Bum,* and this year*, Te Hipo Huna*. It always seemed natural to me that there should be more books from

the rest of the world available in te reo Māori, as well as our books written here. We are careful about it at Gecko Press, as it is not our language and we have a close group of advisors whom we trust to help us do right by the books.

Gecko Press was always intended to be a sort of push me pull you, bringing stories into English and sending our New Zealand stories back out to the rest of the world.

But I also discovered that I loved working with books in translation: I enjoy the process, and it allowed me to publish really good books right from the start and it was a good way to learn how to publish. It helped also when Gecko Press started to sell first in Australia and the UK and finally the US, now our biggest market, as our books are geographically neutral, because they can come from anywhere. Our New Zealand books enjoy being in international company, in the rest of the world. We have always been an outward-looking nation.

People talk about things being lost in translation, but I prefer to think of things found. In Sweden I learned that a bad translation feels like looking through a dirty window, but that with a good translation you don't know the window is there.

Producing a good translation is a process of translating, editing, reediting, reading aloud, and then reading aloud on the page, until every word, pause, and page turn feels right. For picture books at least, we try to translate the spirit of the book rather than the words in the order they come in. Picture books are like small poems.

At the core of the books, of course, are the words, and for picture books, the special bond between the words and the pictures that can set up a constant vibration, a circle of looking and understanding, where the two are greater than their parts.

Through the years, even though I am the most distractible person I know, very easily led, and with appalling time management as the result of those other things, somehow with Gecko Press I have never diverted from the original plan, to bring the best books from the rest of the world into English and to take a small number of our stories in the opposite direction. This is astonishing to me.

The reason I know I was not alone in thinking that Gecko Press would be lucky to survive, was because when we turned five, the late John McIntyre of The Children's Bookshop reminded me in his speech that one day I had turned up with a copy of a book in German about a pair of geriatric donkeys, wanting to know if he thought this was a good idea. He said that when I went on to follow up *Donkeys* with a book translated from Swedish about three children who had set up a funeral business for dead animals, and a story about a dying duck, a book that offended a number of school librarians, "he must confess he thought the chances of Gecko Press surviving were slight".

At this point I wish to divert a little from my thesis, which I have not yet got to or even decided upon (that's a joke), to thank the many people, including John, who decided that the Gecko Press notion of translating stories from some of the really good writers and

illustrators for children in the world into English, and sending some of our really good New Zealand stories back out again into the rest of the world, was a notion worth the doing.

It takes a village to raise a publisher.

People have gone out of their way at every step to champion Gecko Press – all sorts of people, both here in New Zealand and overseas. There are other children's publishers overseas who choose similar books to us, but translate them into their own languages, and these friendships are an additional richness for me. A small group of us meet for long lunch at Bologna to discuss books we have seen and we alert each other to ones we have missed. One of the reasons I like to go to Frankfurt is for the annual potato soup party at my friend Markus's house, a gathering of 40 or so children's publishers from around the world. The world of children's publishing is mightily congenial, as is the whole book industry.

I learn much from the publishers and rights sellers I meet every year about what makes a good book. We have generous access to the sales and marketing teams of our international sales and distribution partners, Bounce, Lerner and Walker/Arotahi, who each do the best they can for our books out in the world.

Gecko Press was greatly helped in our early years by Bill Nagelkerke, who had been on the jury of the Hans Christian Andersen award and therefore well knew about the work of writers and illustrators in other countries. Kate De Goldi has been a great supporting force, especially on that fantastic RNZ programme she did with Kim Hill. Kate gave me the confidence to publish *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, now one of our best-selling books and one I am proud to have on our Gecko Press list.

And of course Frances Plumpton, a stalwart of Storylines, was my annual companion at Bologna. We have shared some really terrible accommodation over the years, along with many good dinners. And many others of you have helped Gecko Press and are here today.

High on the list of Gecko Press supporters are my family, who have at various times been the marketing and acquisitions department, the special sales department, the event management, business development and accounts departments, as well as the pick-me-up and stick-at-it departments and occasionally the bank.

They also undertook quality control. Occasionally my mother will say: "I like that book very much," and just once, "I thought the paper was a bit thin."

Gecko Press now benefits greatly from the sensibility and wisdom of co-publisher Rachel Lawson, and I would not like to do this now without her. She manages the 500 or so decisions that are a necessary part of publishing, for a book to be the best it can be. It is our job as publishers to then make sure it comes into the hands of a maximum number of readers. We are a small and cheerful group at Gecko Press: Sarah, Shona, Emma, Rachel and me.

At the head of my village is the calmest person I know, co-owner and husband Martin, who knows how to survive droughts and storms and price hikes and troughs and all the other things that can happen to farmers. The farm itself must be thanked, those hills that looked after me. Martin even managed to combine my habit of reading with practical farming: “Can you take your book and go and sit on that hill,” he would say, which would stop the sheep coming my way at mustering time.

My mother says that farmers, fishermen, and people who run racehorses have got to be among the most optimistic of people. Publishing must also be on that list, being in essence another form of gambling – but the rewards, especially for a publisher of children’s books, are especially great; at least I find them so.

Our goals at Gecko Press are pretty simple, that we can pay our bills and publish a small number of books that resonate deeply and lastingly with a child or a family, even, and that contribute something to humanity, books that are of good character and strong heart. We cannot ask for more or less than that.

If a book is to successfully make the jump from another language, it must be an extraordinary book.

Quite early on I took some books I was considering to the chief Wellington librarian, to see what she thought. She was quite blunt – which I find helpful – in her opinions about which books might work and which wouldn’t. Why, she said, would I buy a book from you like that when there are equally good options by local writers?

And so at Gecko Press we made the decision as publishers to stay away from princesses, pink books, books about potty training and teeth brushing, books that are idea-based with no story. We have a simple strategy, which is to choose books by the best writers and illustrators in the world, excellent in story, illustration and design, with a big heart, and able to withstand re-reading hundreds of times. We choose books that stop us in our tracks and have a direct line to a child. We try to choose books that will build resilient, thoughtful children, who understand that there are many different sorts of people and behaviours in the world, who are able to appreciate a joke and read between the lines and who have built-in empathy.

We like to publish books where children can practise the art of living, read bravely and dangerously and adventurously. It is much better to do that within the safe pages of the book, that you can always close if you wish. On the back cover of *I am the Wolf and here I come*, it says: Snap the book shut to keep the wolf inside. And I always add when I am reading it aloud: And isn’t it nice that he stays there all night.

Not everyone will love every book we choose, because publishing is all about curation – it is a matter of choice, and that is why publishing houses have personalities.

I love a book that makes me laugh, but ones that make us laugh over and over are very rare. Humour is the greatest tool in encouraging children to read, but it too comes in all shapes and sizes. And humour is matched by tenderness, truth, honesty, pleasure in sounds and rhymes.

Here are some of my favourites, published over the years; hopefully you will recognise some of them: Detective Gordon, Dani, Simon, the little rabbit in *Tickle My Ears*, *The Noisy Book*, *My Dog Mouse*, the Duck, *Snake and Lizard*, Tell Me, *Inside the Villains*, *All the Dear Little Animals*, *You Can Do it Bert*…

We don't know which books are going to be stayers, to continue our link with horse racing, until they have been in the world a number of years. It is the connection with readers that makes a book great, in the same way that clothes are not finished until they are worn.

When enough readers like a book in all the different parts of the world, then you know it is a good one.

In the beginning I thought it would be hard to choose such a small number of books from the sea of good ones being published.

Now I think it is the other way round: there are just a few exceptionally good books in the world every year, ones that might still be around in 20 years' time, reaching a new lot of children. There are some exceptional books that don't make it, and fall away unknown, in the same way that an egg only chooses one sperm out of all those millions. I think it might be the same for books, sometimes. We don't know why some become bestsellers and others not. Even Moby Dick was not a success in Herman Melville's lifetime, and sold only 3000 copies. Its success came much later.

By exceptional books, I'm talking about books like *Goodnight Moon* and *Owl Babies* – the books that become part of the fabric, the vernacular, of so many families. We have ours in New Zealand: *Down the Back of the Chair*, *The Nickle Nackle Tree, Hairy Maclairy, Mrs Wishy Washy…*

If I say, Down the Back of the Chair, like that, we are immediately transported, all of us, to that particular pale-yellow chair of Polly Dunbar, and also to our own hairy chairs, and to all the times we have had to look Down the Back of the Chair and the things that we may well find there if we were to look. A singsong thing starts happening in our brains. It is instant.

This is the thing I love the most, the way the language in books becomes part of a child's own language, like when I heard a child at the supermarket saying, Mother, I think this will taste exquisite!

I especially love that it is this word that children notice in *Poo Bum*, rather than the obvious one.

Or last week when I was in The Children's Bookshop, and Ruth McIntyre was reading *The Nickle Nackle Tree* out loud to a customer, a man quietly reading two shelves over popped

his head up and sang the words along with us. We see it also in the way generations of families play Pooh Sticks.

The Gecko Press translations and the books we choose do a job of expanding our local village, providing balance and counterbalance, an alternative view both in story and illustration, which might also help us see our own stories with new eyes and ears.

I hope that Gecko Press stories ask something of a child and the adults reading them. They bring the sensibilities of the different cultures they come from. We actively choose books that are different. We try to be unafraid in the books we choose and to offer books that are not mainstream, or formulaic.

Every year we choose at least one book that is a challenge, what we call purposeful publishing, that deals with a topic that people are afraid to talk about, as with our books on puberty, gender and emotion in *Tell Me* and *How do you Make a Baby,* both frank, honest, and cheerful in tone and covering topics little talked about.

In our Anglo-Saxon culture, we sometimes forget that reading doesn't always happen in isolation. I hear this from my overseas counterparts, when I say that this book is too hard for us, and they look at me in astonishment and say, but is this not an excellent chance for a conversation about these things?

In lockdown I listened to an interview with Kim Hill with UK author and feminist Caitlyn Moran, who was talking about her daughter's anorexia. She couldn't understand it as she said she thought she had brought her up with a pretty good body image.

But she said she learned through her daughter that her failing as a parent was her fear of sadness – she'd struggled to cope with her daughter's sadness.

"I was scared of it," she said. "In my family we weren't really allowed to be sad."

Books and reading have a huge part to play in talking about all things with children: fears and hopes and dreams and sadnesses.

Book have the power to grow with you and change you, and the book you read as a child is not going to be the same as when you go back and read it as an adult. We bring our own selves to books, and as we change, so do the books.

I can't see *Duck, Death and the Tulip*, for example, in the same way I did when I first saw it. I remember how it was when I first saw it, the pleasure in the funny duck followed by the shock of the skull figure of Death. Now I see the kindness, the dressing gown, the humour, and it has changed the way I think about my own mortality. Some books can do that.

Children don't appear to be bothered about it at all, but it is often to be found in the "only accessible on request" area of the library. But it is not meant for a three-year-old, and maybe we need to do more to encourage picture books for older children, as in other parts of the world.

I believe we do an enormous disservice to children if we do not acknowledge the full gamut of emotions – hurt, fear, courage, hope, sadness, happiness, joy. It is terrifying for children to not be able to speak the truth. We must talk about these things with the children around us, as they face a world that appears to be without control.

Children are not reading books in a vacuum: we make many adult decisions about what is or is not suitable for a child, that a child should not read a book like *Migrants* because it is too dark; that this book has too many words, that one too few. In this we do children a disservice, I believe, as they can often decide themselves what they want to read. I often think back to the man who told me to keep reading, to read past the trouble and get to the end, the resolution.

All good children's books finish with resolution and hope.

We do children an equal disservice if we try to make them read ahead of themselves, as the person I talked to who was trying to buy a novel for a very intelligent two-year-old.

On the Gecko Press website it says it only takes one good book to spark a lifetime of reading. I don't think it matters what the book is; if the book is right for a reader at that moment, then it is a good book.

Each of us here, I imagine, has a book that we could say is the one that started us reading. But really, it is never just one book; it is more likely to be, as everyone here knows, a person. Or ten people, each being the right person with the right book, at different moments.

So in a way the idea that one good book sparks a lifetime of reading is complete bollocks. And I feel sure that Margaret Mahy, who never spoke bollocks, would approve of that word being used here.

For me, publishing has always been about people, and reading is too.

It is people that inspire children to be readers, lifetime or otherwise.

My people were my family.

I had the great fortune to grow up in a family of readers – my mother says if she was to bring us up again we probably wouldn't be allowed to read at the table. We were reading omnivores. My father, who is not reading now because his eyes have packed up, varied his reading diet well into his eighties between entertainment and substance, carefully following a thriller with an investigation into the politics of the Middle East.

I was inordinately pleased to learn from Crissi Blair last week that there is a much-loved book author, bookseller, memoirist and reading advocate who like me loved the books of Dick Francis. I'm sure you all know who that is, well represented by the legacy of her bookshop, here today.

In my family we were particularly lucky that our parents thought reading was a useful thing to do. Dad hardly moved from his chair on holiday. None of us did. (My mother says people who don't read get a lot more done).

I was also lucky to have a mother who took me to the library and the bookshop. I remember the exact place. I was in Hayman's PaperPlus, in Marton, when my mother suggested I might like to try something other than the next book in the Jill and the Pony series, nudging me firmly in the direction of National Velvet and Noel Streatfield.

I had an uncle who could make puffball soup and Turkish Delight, who spoke Spanish and read *Winnie the Pooh* in Latin, and lectured on William Blake at Auckland University, who sent me parcels with the *Green Book of Fairies* and *Don Quixote*. I didn't much care for them, but I can see them in my mind, even where they lived on the shelf. And I felt singled out, and special.

There was a man who visited our house and asked me what I was reading, and when I said I had put my book down because I didn't like that things weren't going well in it, told me that I must keep going, because that was the point, knowing how to get through moments that are tough. You have to have those moments, he said.

There was a teacher who told me I could be a writer when I was seven and I spent the next 20 years believing that. There was another teacher who sing-songed us poems in class along with her daughter who was an actor. Another teacher let us choose any writer we liked for our projects, and I chose Roger McGough.

My grandmother read the books she gave me for Christmas first, something I now do often myself, and one year she said she hadn't much liked the book but was interested to see what I thought. She also gave me the biography of the open marriage between Vita Sackville West and Harold Nicolson, which let some fresh air into my early teenage reading.

My point is not only that I was lucky, but how important these people all are, creating a reader.

For every reader there is this group of people, this village, that nudge the children to find those good books at just the right moment.

The act of nudging a child to read is really the act of noticing. It is not enough to hand out books in an assembly and expect that to change the lives of those receiving them.

We could take someone like Gary Paulsen, who Ruth McIntyre reminded me of last week, who was running wild, at absolute cross purposes with school, and in some miracle of humanity, was given a book by a librarian that reached his spirit.

Without that librarian, we wouldn't have *The Hatchet*, as it says on the back cover of his memoir, and I'm about to read that next to see what I have missed out on. But the real moment that set him reading, I believe, and as I'm writing this I'm only up to chapter five,

was when he was given his own glass of water beside his bed. It was that moment of being noticed, and then absorbed into a family that was at one with the wilderness, that was a prerequisite for him being able to accept the book from the librarian.

Because nudging is not a single act; we need armies of people who understand this and support the teachers and the librarians who are constantly making the link, that reading is a way out and a way in.

Once the connection has been made, for it to stay alive, there need to be more books, more nudges from more people, and they need to be meaningful to what that particular child needs at that particular moment.

I believe we can, if we are lucky, read around and in advance of our lives – we never know when something we read as a child or as an adult is going to come in handy, in the same way we pack an umbrella or a raincoat. What we read helps us become the people we are to be, where we try out other people's lives, like Margaret Mahy did in her booklet on gathering flotsam on the beach. She practised being all sorts of people.

Reading is really up against it right now – our libraries are at risk, our school libraries are disappearing, and people spend more and more time on our phones. Of course we do.

It is our job in this room to advocate on behalf of children having access to reading and on raising the value of reading, on maintaining our reading village.

In this room there is enormous generosity of spirit, because we all know how important children's books are to them going on to become fully rounded human beings, good citizens, able to participate in the world on their own terms and to take and create opportunities, and to solve problems too.

I love the idea that reading is a way of practising for real life. It's where you try out things, sit in other people's shoes, survive bullying, take on the baddies, be the baddy – anything, as long as it has a beginning and a middle and an end. Children are capable, intelligent, resilient, smart, funny, open to subversion and all the rest.

They get the joke.

It takes a village to spark a lifetime of reading.