Legends of the Swamp

Storylines Margaret Mahy Lecture by Kate De Goldi

Kia ora tatou. Good morning everyone. My thanks, firstly, to the Storylines family for this wonderful award. One never feels ready for such things – and especially when considering the distinguished line-up that has come before. But I am very grateful. Any writer stands on the shoulders of those who have preceded her. In a young country like New Zealand this is perhaps even more the case – the permission to dare is provided by the people who have taken one's art form seriously and worked so hard within it. So, I want to acknowledge with much admiration all who in their different ways have provided inspiration and support: I can't name everyone, but some have particular significance: Dorothy Butler, one of the doughty bunch who began the Children's Literature Foundation and whose remarkable text, *Babies Need Books* I re-read often; Jack Lasenby and Joy Cowley, whose work and wisdom have been both nourishment and spur; Tessa Duder, whose seminal book *Alex,* planted the YA form firmly in New Zealand soil, and whose advocacy of children's literature in New Zealand has been very important; Gavin Bishop, who drew the skyline of my city in a marvellous children's book and got me thinking; Elsie Locke, who brought my two heartlands, Canterbury and Westland, alive in that influential narrative, *The Runaway Settlers;* and, not least, Margaret Mahy, whose deep footprint on the path of New Zealand children's literature this award acknowledges, and whose thinking aloud about writing and reading and the imagination has profoundly affected me.

I must thank Kim Hill, too; her enthusiasm for children's literature on the radio over the last decade has been a lovely thing; and the two generous New Zealand publishers I have had, Geoff Walker and Barbara Larson. But, you know, I am continually grateful to all the publishers of children's literature in New Zealand, and all the independent children's bookshops and all the reviewers, and all the children's libraries and librarians and all the teachers throughout the country ... they are, all of them, crucial links in the literature chain we here are dedicated to forging.

I have called this talk: *Legends of the Swamp,* and for several reasons: Firstly, because my working life as it has evolved rather resembles a swamp, a glorious soup of book-related ingredients - reading, reviewing, teaching, chairing, writing - and in the children's and grown-up forms. These activities are so interconnected they have melted together, each seasoning the other and deepening my appreciation and sense of good fortune.

Secondly, the writer's unconscious, the place where character and story begin their long gestation is a kind of gorgeous swamp - if not actually wet, it is certainly overgrown, fecund with material, everything that has ever been experienced: language, events, sensory memory, the concrete and the particular, the metaphysical and the abstract, music, faces, gossip, weather, smells, colour, love, bitterness, jokes, last night's dinner, and ... place - which is the third swamp. My place has always been

Christchurch, the shining city, as Stevan Eldred-Grigg once styled it, though large parts of it are built on swamp - to its recent misfortune; Christchurch, my funny flat, natal earth, the site of all my stories, past, present, and, I expect, for ever more ...

Like many children's writers around the country I have, for the last two decades, been visiting schools, courtesy of the New Zealand Book Council's Writers in Schools scheme. Occasionally I am asked to talk about one of my books, but mostly I do creative writing workshops with the students. I like to begin a workshop – whatever the age group – by asking the students why we are doing this; why is it that their teachers and parents believe it important for them to read and write Imaginatively; why so much emphasis is placed on this aspect of their education.

It is always interesting to hear their responses. Someone very practical generally points out that literacy is vital for functioning in the world – to read instructions, road signs, letters from the City Council, the ingredients on a cereal packet etc. And someone will always say: Reading is to learn Spelling! But, of course. Slowly, tentatively at first, but then with increasing assurance, they build a list of reasons: we learn vocabulary, they say, we learn story techniques, we are entertained, we can escape ... Always, at some point, someone will say, 'you can learn about other people and other worlds...'

Ah. There we have it: when we read, we all agree, we learn that we are not alone; we are explorers, looking for a confirmation of our world, and for something beyond the world that we know. Reading is, then, I suggest to them, a mirror and a window. And we are reading to find out: often concrete things: about trees, perhaps, car engines, world music, Pablo Picasso, the star-nosed mole, the history of the Balkans, how to build a hamster's hutch, how to speak Portuguese. Or we are reading to speculate: about possible worlds, imagined species, other ways of being. Or - and perhaps most importantly – we are reading to understand the mysteries of the human heart and mind, what it is to be human in all its variation, how it is that people do and should live in this eternally complex world.

It is the same, of course, with writing. And it is writing and reading's intense and fertile twinship that I most want them to understand. That, at its heart, writing, too, is exploratory. I tell them: Bill Manhire has said, 'a poem is an instrument of discovery.' I read them Grace Paley's statement, 'We write to find out.' E.M. Forster said the same thing, I say, just a little differently: 'How do I know what I think until I see what I say .. .' And then we go on to experiment with writing exercises based around other peoples' stories and poems, exercises that give them structure and a road map, exercises that help bed in the connections between reading and writing. Writers, I say to students over and over again, are readers ... zealous, questing, fanatical, readers.

Certainly that's a description that fitted me as a child; I am - to borrow Margaret Mahy's lovely description - formed and made by what I read. Not just a child that books built, as Francis Spufford's title has it, but an adult fuelled by story and language.

It is reading that has made me a writer. It was my sole creative writing class, until I began teaching and was obliged to analyse and articulate how the thing I did instinctively actually worked. But firstly, reading was my telescope on the undiscovered, complex world emerging around me. Story and language translated that world for me and simultaneously set up new and alluring mysteries.

Each of you will have compelling memories of those early intersections with printed story; perhaps the moment when the words on a page arranged themselves into a pattern and meaning was illuminated. Or the lulling repetitions of bedtime favourites with a parent. Or the addictive library habit, the almost erotic sensations of browsing and discovery. Or the collecting and owning of one's own books, the building of a private, fiercely loved library.

I had all of these – and the boon of a family where book culture was greatly privileged and the habit of reading modelled on a daily basis. Lately, though, I've been thinking about an early experience of being read to that was, I think, crucial in my imaginative formation and that clearly connects with aspects of the reading/ writing nexus I set such store by.

We lived, until I was nine, in a secluded crescent in St Albans in Christchurch. It was a half-acre section, with large stretches of garden and an abundance of trees. The section was located on the bend of the crescent and the house set back from the road, so that in some vital way we imagined we were both the hinge and the heart of the street. Certainly, our back yard and the street were a total and self-sustaining world, and in the way of childhood we harnessed everything around us in the service of our imaginative games ... fauna, flora and neighbours.

A throbbing animism prevailed in our immediate universe – the wattle tree, the walnut tree, the stylotus bush and the asparagus patch were living entities, endowed with human qualities. Conversely, the actual humans in the neighbourhood became almost deracinated, cipher-like actors, unaware of the parts they played in our elaborate narratives... Mr Collins, the butcher, who kept mowing our shared daisy patch, the evil Philpott boys who called us Catholic dogs, George and Annie Utslag, redoutable Oma Keis, the elderly spinster sisters on the corner, mysterious Mrs Ebert, the Brethren family seven houses away, who disapproved of our mother's lipstick.

Our nearest neighbours made up a curious little European outpost – the Dutch Utslags, the Dutch-Indonesian Taiewes, and our very next door neighbour Professor Meyer, a Jewish refugee from Hitler's Germany, his wife, and their daughter, Margaret; we called her Dr Meyer because – as our father explained reverently to us – she had a Doctorate in Botany from Zurich University.

It was in the Meyer's house that I first remember being read to, and by Dr Meyer; the memory is very strong because it was so hung about with ritual, a gentle grandeur, and my strong sense of experiencing an exotic otherness.

Going over to Dr Meyer's house was to step outside of early sixties, mono-cultural Christchurch and enter a world that for the most part I would otherwise only come across in literature or film. Simply opening the garden gate and walking up the front path was to merge with the sensory ambience of fairy-tale. There was a forest of old trees, over-hanging and lichen-encrusted; the garden was overgrown, and a little damp, and rich with the scent of grape hyacinths or winter sweet.

Dr Meyer's pets, Tommy and Tiger, patrolled the boundaries – plump, pampered, deeply loved cat princes, her only companions after the deaths of her parents. Dr Meyer was no witch, but she did have a storybook quality – her hair was woolly and wild, her clothes carelessly shabby, she was plump and large bosomed and she spoke with a sibilance and a strong German accent. Her kitchen smelled rather different to ours; everyone's kitchen always did when you were young, but in our street the smells were very different: rendang and shrimp paste and satay sauce at tile Taiewes, sweet pastries, cumin cheese and home-made yoghurt at the Utslags, and Dr Meyer's kitchen with traceries of rich soups, dumplings, clove and cinnamon and ginger...

Sometimes I was invited – with my friend Lily – to afternoon tea (boiled eggs with knitted hat cosies, eaten with heavy silver spoons; strawberries and cream, sweet tea and spice biscuits). Sometimes I visited alone, uninvited. Whichever, I was always welcomed and the routine was reliably and deliciously the same: some time spent in the dimly lit kitchen chatting by the wood-burner, nibbling biscuits (yes, the tree branches blocked the sun, they knocked eerily against the windows in the wind...)

Then I would be allowed to wander slowly to the front room – slowly because I liked to stop and look at the pictures in the dark hall; I liked to sneak a long look through the open door of Dr Meyer's bedroom, the quilt so different to our candlewick bedspreads; I liked to stand in the doorway of Professor Meyer's office and smell the old tobacco smoke lodged somehow in the very walls. I liked to stare at his heavy desk, the elaborate inkwell and pens, the line of meerschaum pipes, the books with impenetrable titles, the gold-rimmed glasses, forever folded now...

I'm taking my time leading you through the house to the front room because I want to convey as much as possible of the setting, the atmosphere, the props, the sensory accessories in which my expectation of the next bit was wreathed. It is always this way with story and reading; the intersection of the physical and sensory world with reading is such an important part of the pleasure derived; it beds in the memory of the story as surely as the words on the page. (So, the deep satisfaction in my first reading of *Pennington's Seventeenth Summer* in 1972 is somehow inextricable from the happy fact of Friday night, the rain beating on the roof, the warmth of my bed, the caramel biscuits I'm eating. In 1967 *The Bobbsey Twins at Mystery Mansion* is thrilling me in the back seat of the family Vauxhall, but so is the fact that it is high summer, we're driving over the Lewis Pass, we've had a swim at Maruia hot pools; soon we will see our grandparents and all our cousins. In the winter of 1975 my glee while reading the aberrant sex in *The Group* (already retrieved from my father's sock drawer where he's rather ineffectively hidden it) is reinforced by the heat of the study gas heater on my back, the happy fact again

of Friday night, and my father in the next room, unaware, listening to soaring arias from *Faust.)*

And so it is, in 1963, '64, '65, in Dr Meyer's front room, when we finally sit down to read on the fading sofa, me on her lap with the clutch of picture books I've taken from the bookcase. The room is dim, redolent with old dinners, pipe tobacco, the sweat and perfume of older people, there is cat hair everywhere, but Dr Meyer's lap is welcoming, she reads in a sing-song, softly guttural voice, she enjoys the ritual as much as I do.

And what are these books? Half a dozen or more, but I remember with perfect clarity only four and always in association with Dr Meyer. I remember them because of that marvellous childhood intersection with her and her house; I remember them because of the great contentment induced by the experience of having them read to me. I remember them because they're splendid books. But I believe I remember them also because they so perfectly illustrated that great service all good children's literature offers: confirmation of the known, intimation of the unknown, the aforementioned mirror and the window.

The first book was *Millions* of *Cats* by Wanda Gag, a classic, celebrated for its pioneering of the double-page spread and reviving of hand-lettered text, and for its folk-art quality. I didn't know any of that, of course; I merely loved the gentle absurdity of the story, the musical repetitions that I learnt to chant, the entire page that I could shout out with Dr Meyer - 'cats here, cats there, cats and kittens everywhere ... hundreds of cats, thousands of cats, millions and billions and trillions of cats.'

It's a simple fable - about conjugal devotion, vanity, gratefulness. At the time I felt warm about the book for other reasons too. Firstly, it had cats, and cats were a strong presence in my childhood - we had our own, Bimbo, but also Tommy and Tiger, who assumed a strange authority in our world and games. And, Dr Meyer, a cat nut and co-founder of Cats Protection, had a particular love for *Millions* of *Cats* - and that communicated itself to me, too, somehow heightening the reading experience.

Secondly, the story was so evidently set elsewhere, an elsewhere emphatically not New Zealand, somewhere foreign, somewhere vaguely similar to fairy-tale setting, somewhere vaguely like, well... Dr Meyer's – the old couple were a little like her parents: European, devoted, pipe-smoking, their house was quaint, they wore different clothes. But something else, too – and this was particularly important for me - they were like my grandparents who were also foreign, devoted, elderly, hardworking, simple. You see the point I'm making here – there was a conflation in my mind of story element and life; the story confirmed several things to me about my known world, but it also subtly suggested an elsewhere that I was only beginning to put together in regard to my own family.

So it was with *The Story About Ping* by Marjorie Flack and Kurt Wiese, *The Cow that Fell into the Canal* by Phyllis Krasilovsky and Peter Spiers, and *Springtime for Jeanne-Marie* by Francois Siegnobosc. Each in different ways mirrored something

m my world - Ping had 42 cousins, just as I did. Hendrika the cow was Dutch – like my friend, Lily, next-door-but-one. There were bicycles in Holland, just as in Christchurch, and those big rounds of cheese – they were precisely like the ones our grandmother described, back in Italy.

And Jeanne-Marie? She was, somehow, me. She gambolled around outside, picking flowers, ordering Patapon and Madelon around, just as I did my sisters, press-ganging them into my baroque narratives; she had minor mishaps, occasionally transgressed, but always ended the day safe and happy.

This was the mirror – the recognition and confirmation – the books offered. The second part of the literary deal – the window to otherness – was just as powerful. These books have also endured in my memory because there were all, in a sense, foreign. *Jeanne-Marie* is translated from the French, and on some precognisant level I recognised this – the cadence was mysteriously different. In one of her outings Jeanne-Marie goes to Gay Paree; how hungrily my eyes sought out the buildings, the cars, the berets, the dogs (there was every French cliché imaginable). I poured over this chaotic display of otherness just as determinedly I did the quaintly different shops along the Amsterdam canal Hendrika the cow sails past in her raft. Perhaps there was some atavistic urge at work here – as in *Millions* of *Cats.* From as early as I can remember I was attracted to 'foreignness', searching somehow for elaboration on that branch of otherness in my own life – my foreign name, grandparents who ate and drank differently and spoke eccentric English.

But my real point here, I suppose, is the multiple, fertile fusions occurring in this out-take from my reading history: the small child, Kathleen, as I am known by my family, the kindly German woman next door, the stories so generously read and re-read, the echoes of family history, relationships, minutiae arising from the texts, the glorious seeming unity of the entire experience, as if conducted by some heavenly uber storyteller: European reader, European stories, European friend, German, Dutch and Italian accents somehow harmonising, folk tale books, fairy tale house of books, cats and ducks and cousins, and cows and cheese and elderly couples, lost animals, found animals, cosy firesides, cosy laps, wet and dry and light and dark and... and... 'and now, zat is the end, my dear, your mother vii be looking for you ... it is time to go home ... '

Oh, horrible intrusion... actual life crossing over story life and prevailing...

* * *

I do believe very firmly that a writer does not lie around in wan poses waiting for The Muse to strike and conveniently provide story. On the contrary, a writer must be an ever-alert pilot fish, lurking in the shadows of the big fellas, feeding off the leftovers. A writer, I say to students, though formed by reading, must also be decidedly in the world, looking and listening and gathering. Again, I quote Margaret Mahy to them: 'a writer must go out and wrench story from the world'. To this end I am a naturally watchful person, attentive always to story possibility and the sinuous life of language. I keep notebooks; I am somehow engaged always in trying out events, people,

overheard conversations, random lists, glimpsed signage, the words of hymns, the curve of a river, the wind in the bamboo, the texture of a blueberry muffin - you name it, everything that comes my way - as potential for a re-imagined written reality.

But, while I acknowledge the mercantilism of the dedicated writer, I believe too that there is also a way in which much story material is already laid down deep inside a writer, is present before they ever leave the house. It is a kind of muscle memory, a way of being in and thinking about the world that has been accruing since the writer first breathed. If it is not actual material inside the writer, it is an already determined inclination towards certain story material, certain preoccupations or magnetisms. Annie Dillard put it perfectly in a passage I keep as a kind of epigraph for the writing life, and which I often quote:

> *'People love pretty much the same things best. A writer looking for subjects inquires not after what he loves best, but after what he alone loves at all. Strange seizures beset us. Frank Conroy loves his yo-yo tricks, Emily Dickinson her slant of light... Faulkner loves the muddy bottom of a little girl's drawers visible when she's up a pear tree...'*

Why do you never find anything written about that idiosyncratic thought you advert to, about your fascination with something no one else understands? Because it is up to you. There is something you find interesting, for a reason hard to explain. It is hard to explain because you have never read it on any page; there you begin.

Thoreau said it another way: know your own bone. 'Pursue, keep up with, circle round and round your life ... Know your own bone: gnaw at it, bury it, unearth it, and gnaw at it still.'

Coming to know and then gnawing away at her own bone is the writer's task. And the well-gnawed imaginative bone is, I believe, what produces the really good, and enduring books. You see evidence of the gnawed bone again and again in the great writers: they are always propelled by preoccupations, recurring motifs, obsessions they are not quite in control of. They are arguing in some way with the world and themselves (to paraphrase Yeats) and that argument or puzzlement is obvious throughout their work. It is the thing that pushes them forward, makes them need to write. It is the thing that makes us want to read them. So, the great Canadian short story writer, Alice Munro, again and again in her stories serves up invalid mothers, directing their daughter's lives, malignly or otherwise, from the sick bed. So many of Maurice Gee's characters are fuelled in their present day by guilty past secrets. Richard Ford winds around and around the ordinary American man's negotiations with the receding American Dream. Lorrie Moore puns and plays and juggles dazzlingly with the language, alerting us constantly to the obfuscations and trickeries that bedevil human relationships.

The best writers for children and young people are no different. They have always been propelled by questions and fancies that originate Lord-knows-where. So, in the pages of Margaret Mahy we are always tripping over the agents of anarchy and

transformation: pirates, wizards, witches, writers. In Jack Lasenby's fiction we often see the half-orphaned child, or the unstoppable raconteur, both just slightly to the edge of acceptable behaviour. Gavin Bishop has his drifting oak leaf; William Mayne his eternal treasure hunts. Like the boy in 'The Emperor's New Clothes', Elaine Konigsburg and Ursula Dubosarsky's children see always the brute nakedness and dissembling of the adult world. Shaun Tan must have his bottle tops and dislocated aliens. Kate di Camillo plumbs allegory and religious mythology to figure out contemporary human behaviour. There is nearly always an older mentor in a David Almond story, an opaque, fragile, very human character, even when he is an angel. Tessa Duder's heroines are always somewhere near or in water...

These writers know their bones. They have not dissected and parsed an audience or a market; they have come to their story or their palette driven by something they find interesting for a reason hard to explain. They are exploring, working out in their writing some eternal and personal mystery.

The children's writers I love best are always engaged in this act of discovery; they are returning – often helplessly – to their obsessions. It is these writers that I want to press on other readers. There is a sense in which I trust these writers. I may not find all their books wholly successful, as it were, but because I am caught by their fascinations – as they are caught – I am prepared to go along for whatever ride they're inviting me on. So, I will always read a Richard Peck book because I have for over thirty years been consistently intrigued by his wrestling with American small town and urban life, his puzzling over the strange oppositions at the base of the American value system. I have been interested because that preoccupation is always fuelling his story, no matter its setting or time – and also, of course, because he is a consummate story-teller with a strong sense of character, a rich lexicon, and writes confidently – and unapologetically – about his place.

Similarly, I will always seize a Chris van Allsburg or a Thoby Riddle or a Ron Brooks picture book, not only because they're masters of the illustrative art and have each in their own way transformed the modern picture book, but also because their preoccupations and motifs carry from book to book building a singular and fascinating oeuvre, a creative life at play in the world.

Of course, obsession without discipline simply equals mania and a lunatic on the page is never going to sustain reader interest, young or old. So a propelling vision or obsession must always be harnessed to real craft, must be transformed by art. Story – the how and why and when – is foremost in the business of craft, but, as I suggest often to students, one shouldn't confuse story with plot. Good story, for me at any rate, is much less about action – and then and then and then – as it is about character revelation and a textured sense of place, and wandering though and around relationships and history and information and moral universes. So, Alan Carner's *The Stone Quartet,* say, or Leslie Howarth's *Maphead,* or Rebecca Stead's *When You Reach Me,* or Elizabeth Knox's *Dreamhunter* or, Ursula Dubosarsky's *The Red Shoe,* while there is plenty happening, these are for me terrific stories primarily because of the writer's careful unfolding of character and motive and_

consequence. And because of the very particular sense of time and place and cultural sensibility each evokes (rural Cumbria across a century; contemporary English suburbia; 1970s New York city; fantastical, steam-punkish, South Island New Zealand). And because of the singular narrative voices that relate the stories.

And, very importantly, because all of the foregoing is achieved with writing that is distinctive and careful at the very sentence level – that is, sentence construction, language choice and arrangement, rhythm and cadence all combine to convey as much meaning as the facts of the story. And, finally, because each of the story worlds the writers have conjured perform the trick of making us – their readers – see our world, our humanity, anew, in a subtly different and thrilling way.

Satisfying story is entirely possible, of course, within the relative concision required of a picture book. So, too, is character depth and revelation. And a singular narrative voice. Take, for a lovely example, one of my favourite picture books, *Shaker Lane,* a late-career effort from Alice and Martin Provenson, whose life-long collaboration was so significant in the development of the American picture book. *Shaker Lane*, as the title suggests, concerns a distinctive American sub-culture, poor white trash, it might be said. The raggedy close-knit bunch of hillbillies within a town, their pets, their habits, and the stuff of their lives – ('old dressers waiting to go inside, cars that would never roll again, parts of old trucks, stove-pipes, piles of rotten rope, rusty tin, bedsprings, bales of old wire and tin cans') – these are described in unornamented, arrhythmic, noun-heavy prose that is perfectly congruent with the rawness and pragmatism – and the practical kindnesses – of the lives portrayed. The opprobrium of the town's middle-class for them is conveyed in a couple of devastatingly plain lines. The specificity of place and culture is palpable, the text's clues are underscored by faux-American primitive illustrations.

The heart of the story is the displacement of the neighbourhood as the result of a dam's construction. *Shaker Lane* is a very political book, really, suggesting the tragedy of material progress at the expense of community; but the social comment is implicit, never rising in volume above the gentle notes that convey individual character, relationships, ordinary dreams and lurking sadness.

The story is perfectly paced – from the beguiling opening: 'Not so long ago, if you went down School House Road and crossed Fiddler's Bridge, you would come to Shaker Lane...' to the last quietly ironic lines: 'Old Man Van Sloop is still here. He has a houseboat. He has his chickens and Shem, the goat. Lots of dogs still come to visit. "I like the water," says Old Man Van Sloop.' The language is simple, but paradoxically rich and freighted because it is nouns - and often proper nouns - that are doing much of the story work. School House Road, Fiddler's Bridge, Shaker Lane, Old Man Van Sloop, houseboat, chickens, Shem the goat; in just that brief list you have compressed history, social texture, religious and cultural references, the materials of a rural life and intimations of community relationships. Old Man Van Sloop is so called because he fits into a generational hierarchy; he is part of a community story. It is all the naming that gives weight and depth to the story, that makes it echo beyond the page. There is nothing, *nothing* generic about this tale. The thing I like so much about this book is the authors' determined belief that not everythinq need be explained, their assumption that a child reader will suspend explanation of detail in the interests of story essence. The community and its back-story are complex, for sure; so is the matter of big business and small lives; and the detail, much of the naming, might not be immediately appreciated by a reading child – even an American one. The emotional core of the story, though – loss – is distinctly accessible, pointed even; it drills straight into the heart of the reading or listening child, as I appreciated again and again when we read this story to our children.

The lexicon of names, the alien particularity of some of the proper nouns and things, didn't need to be explained, or immediately understood because the spirit of the story was filling up their heads. They would – as we have all done many times in our reading lives – and as Francis Spufford so nicely puts it – 'file away impression after impression after impression – sometimes, to be sure, only in a mental container marked DON'T GET IT.'

And, in the meantime, that list of words – names, places, animals, things – provided an aural treat, a rich kind of music, whose associations and meanings would fully reveal themselves later. The cast of *Shaker Lane,* all by itself, suggests a beautiful, euphonious ballad: Virgil Oates and his wife, Sue Ann; Sam Kulich, Norbert La Rose, his wife Charlene, their three dogs, five cats, and a duck named Lucy; the Whipple boys, Jesse and Ben, Big Jake van der Loon, little Jack, Herman, Matty, and Buddy; Big Jake's mother, Big Ethel; Bobbie Lee Peach, his wife Violet, and their children, Emma, Zekiel, Sophie, Harvey and Ralph, and Violet's father – (my particular favourite) – Chester Funk. These names, their sounds and associations lodged in our children's heads, carrying on their strange music, giving permanent pleasure somehow unattached to specific meaning. And then one day, the sounds found their place in a larger story, a perfect example of story and language offering a window onto new worlds.

Sometimes still Jack will say to me, with a little smile: 'Remember Big Ethel.'

My larger point here, I suppose, is that fidelity to the particular, to specific places and people and items and weathers and curious, recurring, insistent subject matter and to the language around all this, will never confine a story, or limit it to a small – or age-specific – audience. Paradoxically, at its best, it will provide the rich sauce that heightens and deepens the essence of a story.

And that somewhat sloppy metaphor reminds me of a further aspect I look for in children's books: a metaphoric substructure at work, so that the story operates on several levels. Place and time and materiality are animated somehow within the work so that the story's subject is deepened and broadened and it becomes more than the simple events that are occurring within. No thing in the story is incidental; rather, things, place, weather, are all artfully worked so they suggest something bigger than the sum of their parts. Confluences and echoes occur; the language and characters and syntax, the setting, the colours, the sounds and smells work

in a perfect fusion to intensify the story's meaning – the meaning, as Katherine Paterson puts it, 'behind and beyond the story, the meaning of the story that ties us to the mystery of the meaning of our lives.'

So, in Lucy Boston's *Green Knowe* books, a big house and a watery world quietly underscore what the series of events is conveying: life is transient, but our collective pasts are reflected back at us, echo around us at all times; we are never alone, though the waters move and reflections shudder and are temporarily lost at times. In Virginia Hamilton's stories houses and mountains endure – though they are always threatened: symbols of African-American dignity and reminders of America's disgrace. There are always hymns lurking in Gary Schmidt books, and scraps of Scripture, reminding us that the Word – so present in the characters' lives – is vulnerable in human hands, capable of many readings and misunderstandings. Geraldine McCaughrean has a great noisy steam engine rushing through the pages of *Stop the Train,* subtly signalling to her reader what the complex action spells out: progress is thrilling and loud and dirty, and it may kill you, yet we are born to quest and forge ahead.

In *Kit's Wilderness* the geography and geology of David Almond's setting are intricately stitched to his story themes: the granite sub-structure of Stoneygate, the labyrinthine underground passages, the light and water, point up the complex legacies of historic relationships, the intransigence of certain personalities, the complicated fluidity of adolescence.

Here is my favourite passage from this wonderful book:

> *'Grandpa died in mid-January. The thaw was starting. Pools of water on the wilderness, snow turning to slush in the lanes, snowdrops peeking through in the gardens and beneath the hawthorn hedges. I was in school. Dobbs was on about the movements of the earth again. He said that if we could move forward a million years, everything we saw before us would have changed: no Stoneygate, no flowing river, no wilderness, no us.*
>
> *The earth endlessly reforms itself,' he said. The continents shift, the surface cracks, fire bursts out from below. The hills are simply blown away. The sea swells and shrinks. The world tilts on its axis and brings us fiery heat or icy cold. Deserts or the ice cap creep across us. All we see and all we know is engulfed, swallowed up, regurgitated.'*
>
> *He smiled.*
>
> *'We are puny things, ' he said. The beast called Time is our great predator, and there is no escape from it. ' He smiled again. 'However. That is not to say there is no need to do our homework. '*
>
> *And he dished out sets of worksheets.*
>
> *It was a little first year who came to the door.*
> *'Please sir,' she said shyly. 'Christopher Watson is to go to the office, please.'*
>
> *Mum was waiting there, and she didn't need to say a word.*

* * *

I guess the foregoing amounts to something of a manifesto, though that's a word I should probably resist, because manifestos are apt to be pompous and swept away by the ineluctable tide of history. But my larger point is, I think, that willy nilly, I am a writer who has been – who is – profoundly influenced by that chorus of great writing that has made up my reading – and re-reading – life – and that swells around me still. I have tried to keep that writing chorus at the forefront of my mind at all times in my book-focused life, and perhaps especially when writing. These writers' collective fidelity to their insistent songs has been like a grand permission to listen to my own ringing preoccupations, to pay heed to the ostinatos beating in my own head.

So, when aunts and grandmothers persist in peopling my stories, long and short, I submit. Or when, for some reason currently impossible to fathom, a constipated cockatoo and a Cathedral and a young man wrestling with matters of Faith are the inciting relationships for a new novel, I cross my fingers and hop on for the ride. Or when a buried secret and the eternally tricky business of family communication is yet again being reworked in some way, I know that I have dug up my bone and am circling it once more.

Or, when stories insist (as mine always do) on being set in Christchurch, I am confident now that there is a reason for this that I don't yet understand, but which will reveal itself as the story unfolds.

Which brings me to the mystery of place and its confluence with the imagination in the service of story.

Writers digging up their bones, I suggest to students, will often find them buried in a particular geography, a landscape, a place, that for one reason or another has become inextricably entwined with the subject matter they find themselves returning too. Often it is a childhood land – or city, or suburban scape – whose contours are etched so deep that the writer's internal eye finds it difficult to visualise another site for story. And often these geographies - or geologies, or interiors have become metaphorically loaded through the writer's long association and consIderation of them.

Alan Garner drills down into his native Cumbria, exploring a kind of vertical history of the people and place, suggesting an eerie timelessness about our daily round. Margaret Mahy has her characters crossing the volcanic divide between Governor's Bay and Christchurch as they chart the journey between childhood and adolescence. The bush and mangrove swamps are both Jack Lasenby's fictional playground and the place where his characters learn their bitterest lessons. For Helen Clare and Rumer Godden and Sylvia Waugh it is miniature domestic interiors: they shrink their characters and politicise household relationships and give us some of the most chilling character studies in children's literature. Barry Faville's stories take place near Lake Taupo. The huge body of water broods and storms and menaces,

the keeper of ancient legends and the trigger for Faville's interior mythologies. When I first began writing I really had no idea how actually to do it. I knew only the lessons I'd learned from reading over and over the kind of literature I've been quoting to you. I knew then, on some instinctual level, that one could write about anything as long as it was propelled by the pressing mysteries in one's own head. So, it followed for me that I would write about family, because it is the contours and secrets and oddities of family - or proto-family - that have always filled my head and seem naturally to shape stories on the page. But I knew too that I wanted to set my stories emphatically in my place, because the geography and buildings and landmarks and details of my place provided the natural textures of any story I ever attempted.

It's always instructive for a writer to look back on her writing history and see patterns and preoccupations and habits forming themselves. Luckily for me my mother kept my early primary school storybooks, so I've been able to spot early evidence of personal writing tics. In my primer three book is a strange little story. The main character is a fairy – I plundered folk and fairy tales in those years for my own deathless prose; I stole its characters, its syntax and its story shape. But, I'm fond of this story because it has the first indication of place, of owning place, in any of my early imaginative work. 'Once upon a time there was a little Christmas Tree fairy called Jean. One day it was Christmas and Jean did not like Christmas – comma – so she flew away. She flew to Timaru.' Jean's existential and professional crisis is pretty hilarious, but it's the confidence and pleasure with which I have her escape to Timaru for redemption that I find arresting. I remember writing this story. I remember writing Timaru. I'd never been there, but my cousins had, they talked about it, the word was interesting, attractive in some indefinable way; it was a piece of language and texture from my everyday life and place that I felt compelled to lay down on paper as part of a story. I was literally bringing my place – or part of it – that legend on the map, to life, in a way I knew was important.

Twenty-five years later when I began writing the stories that would eventually become my first publication, *like you, really,* that desire to bring my place to the page had solidified to something approaching an ideology. So, all I knew for sure as I wrote a story – again about Christmas – was that it must be a Christchurch Christmas because the sensory and seasonal elements of all that this meant was what gave truthful texture to the larger idea I was trying to explore.

I can't tell you the glee with which I wrote down the proper nouns, the names of suburbs, streets, buildings and businesses. I can't tell you the deep sense with which I felt my inner mythologies were being properly served by these specific legends, that it was all of a one:

> *'It was the day before Christmas Eve. This is what happened. Shoppers criss-crossed Cathedral Square, moving from Ballantynes to Minsons, from Whitcombe and Tombs to Hays, from Woolworths to Millers, from Dormens to the DIC. In the early morning the sky was milky blue and cloudless and the shoppers were calm and pleasant behind their counters.* By *mid-afternoon the nor-wester was up and customer and assistant, harried and tired, tasted the grit and dust in their mouths. The Government Life temperature read eighty-eight degrees. '*

In a later story, I wanted to show the family at the heart of the stories on holiday, and the route they travelled not just as places on a map, but a kind of geomorphology of regional and family narrative.

> *'In summer we drove south from the city, down Lincoln Road, through Halswell, towards Banks Peninsula, where our trimmed and tidied bach, with its plastic fly-strips and saucers of rat poison, sat waiting in an eastern bay.*
>
> *We drove past the Addington Showgrounds where every November sideshows still boasted the pink baby walking-stick dolls, whose tulled and tinselled and feathered glory we had coveted* as *small children... We drove past St John of God, the old stone convent, off in the distance, sunk deep amongst willows and oaks. Here in the 1940s Rose and her sisters played piano trios to the Mount Magdala nuns... We drove further, curving, through* a *belt of birches and poplars, into Tai Tapu, which we called Tie-Tap... We were at the very edge of the Plains. Out of Tai Tapu the Port Hills thrust suddenly forward like giant paws, singed tan, rounded and softly padded.*
>
> *'Volcanic rock,' Tommy told us, 'lava solidifying* as *it met the sea. Millions of years ago.' There were four volcanoes,' his story began. We settled back dreamily into this ritualistic retelling of the peninsula's birth.*
>
> *'Twelve million years ago they began spewing forth lava, and layer by layer the peninsula emerged. ' But first the peninsula was an island, it was an island until the plains spread out to meet it.*
>
> *The mountains eroded continually, ' Tommy said, 'and the debris was carried along and deposited by the rivers.' Thus the plains were built up and the coastline pushed ever forward. It was a creed,* a *geological system of belief. We described it, professed it,* as *we travelled its physical incarnation ... '*

You can hear the zeal of the new writer in this, the determination to lay down the co-ordinates of an imaginative map, insist on one's own place as a legitimate site for story.

But I think it's more than that, too, because as one story has followed another it is more as if my own internal propulsive myths (family negotiations, family fracture, how an individual defines and differentiates oneself against family and the weight of the past) have melded with the geographic iconography of Christchurch and Canterbury – and their dark cousin, Westland – so that those landscapes have become somehow the only possible place in which the stories can be told. So, in *Sanctuary* – a tale of suppressed guilt and family sadness – the principal character Cat attempts to distinguish herself from her pampered, chain-smoking, femme-fatal mother by asserting physical fitness and asceticism, which entails monumental

bike rides around the unfamiliar eastern suburbs:

'I plotted a route on the map which took me around the river, through Dallington and Avondale to the estuary and then in to New Brighton and down to the beach. I saw canoeists and kayakers training on the river, old men fishing, people waiting stolidly for buses. The suburbs and streets and parks were all new to me, dingy and bare after the lush, well-groomed gentility of the north-west suburbs. This was an older, poorer side of town, damp and worn out. '

'I've ridden past streets you've never heard of,' I told Stella.

'Niven, Edna, Sharlick, Wooley,' I chanted quietly to myself as I sped past. 'Edwins, Bathurst, Stour, Brooker ... '

This last, by the way, mirrors my own habit of reciting the street names leading off Papanui Road as I biked home in the late 'seventies from the Redwood Library after a day's work. Dormer, Perry, Paparoa, Tomes, Mays, Chapter, Western, Knowles. It was a kind of litany, a recital of the legend of my place ...

In *Love, Charlie Mike* – a story of dementia, buried family secrets and thwarted love – the evocation of Christchurch's tinder-dry, wide-open metropolis and Plains, and the West Coast's contrasting lush, rain-bowed landscape, and the train journey between the two, become metaphors for callow love and the clogged recesses of the memory and the past.

Similarly, I couldn't imagine a story of family rupture, adolescent tumult and erotic adventure without invoking the Port Hills, the Crater Rim, Godley Head – and ultimately Whitewash Head, that site of regular self-erasure. When, in *Closed, Stranger,* I needed to describe the principal character, Max's, extreme distress in bereavement, I reached for a geologic and temporal metaphor to evoke his heavy denial: *'Geological time:* writes Max,

'is such a tremendously long period to try and visualise; a useful way to understand the proportions of time in building the Port Hills is to imagine the earth is just one year old. The oldest rocks therefore, would be laid under the sea six weeks ago. The Lyttelton volcano would have erupted just eight hours ago. Recorded history covers only a minute and the Canterbury settlement is only two seconds old. All of which means that Meredith Robinson will not be born for another sixty years and therefore could definitely not have died in a car accident seven weeks ago on the crater rim of the merely eight-hour-old Lyttelton volcano... '

Writers evolve, of course – or at least we hope they do. So while the fascinations at the heart of their stories generally stay the same, the techniques with which they deliver up their narratives change over time – if only because a writer must keep herself entertained and challenged. So when I wrote a couple of picture books, though they were set decidedly in Canterbury, I didn't feel the same need for overt regional statement. Lolly Leopold's school is obviously in Tai Tapu – if

you investigate the pictures – but I preferred to imply Canterbury, and in ways that maybe only Cantabrians might recognise. So, for example, the high-toned Mrs Western-Wyn-Williams's surname is a conflation of two venerable Christchurch law firms. Dr Rolleston's provenance is clear; and Lady Robinson references Ready-Money Robinson of 19th century legend. They're in-jokes and private emblems within a story, that, while I hope has universal appeal, nevertheless and importantly for me, literally rises out of and is connected to the soil and history and nomenclature of my place.

Of course, as soon as a writer commits a place to the page it becomes ever so slightly somewhere and something else. Realism, as we like to think of it, is something of an illusion in fiction. Events, even if straight from 'real life' are subtly transmuted and transformed – translated – once they're put through the fictional mouli, and it is the same for place. Even if it is faithfully reported, it is somehow still 'imagined'; it is hung about with personal importations, personal legend. I only understood this slowly, I must say, though once understood, the concept is delightfully liberating for a writer. That is, a story can spring from and be absolutely within and from a particular place – your own place – without one ever naming it or its constituent parts – or at least not 'realistically'. As Melville would have it: True places are never on any map.'

Of course, Margaret Mahy has been doing this with consummate skill for decades. *Catalogue of the Universe, The Tricksters, 24 Hours,* to name just three of her novels, are very definitely set in Christchurch, but – consistent with her supernatural mode – it is a version of the city, a supercharged version at that – veritably, a legendary Christchurch.

I have been writing away from Christchurch for fourteen years now. The city hasn't faded in my mind's eye at all – in any case, I visit there constantly – but it has become somehow more internalised, and thus intensified, filtered through visual memory and accrued legend. And it has become even more bound up with the genesis of any given story – so much so that when a story is in its very early stages, when nascent characters or a narrative are coming into focus, they generally do so not just in Christchurch, not just in a specific suburb, but usually in a particular street, and often in a particular house. And yet, oddly, that very particularity has gone hand in hand with a relinquishing of other specifics. In *The 10pm Question,* though the geography of the story corresponds more or less with a map of Christchurch, I found myself resisting naming the city or specific places at any stage. For any reader who cares, there are all sorts of references to, and intimations of Christchurch and Canterburyness; on the other hand an interesting – and difficult to articulate – freedom in the progress of the story arose from allowing place to float just above its usual tethering nouns.

The September earthquake and the terrible events of February 22nd have erased much of the iconography of my real and remembered city. The earth has been reforming itself, as David Almond would say. But the imagination persists along its

own deepening furrows, and it's interesting to stand apart from oneself, as it were, and observe the process. Somehow, for me, even as the earthquake has intensified the enmeshing of geography and story, the exact correspondence between place names and actual place has receded even further. The language of the place has become separated from its usual moorings, because it has a lively aural and associative life of its own and doesn't have to be exact in its denotings. So, I enjoy lifting, say, the Ernie Clarke Reserve from its proper place and bestowing it on an alternative school that doesn't actually exist. Or hijacking actual Thorrington School's name and donating it to a rest home. And this, because of a recent story that insisted on being in a particular part of town.

I do love the way a new story makes itself known. It begins as a faint – but insistent – hum, and requires the intersection of certain crucial elements to bring it properly into focus. In this case, I had been thinking for some time about a small book which might be a sort of abc; I say, sort of, because the straight abc has been well and truly, and often notably, raked over, and bringing something new to it is increasingly demanding. I'd been playing with a kind of alternative abc, which I hoped might refresh the form - for me at least.

Additionally, in the last couple of years my sisters and I have negotiated the painful business of our mother's increasing dementia and the urgent need for her to have 24-hour secure care. We finally helped her settle into a place about a month before the September 4th earthquake in Christchurch. The rest home is a wonderful residence in the Beckenham Loop – for those of you unfamiliar with Christchurch, the Loop refers to the circular way the suburb arranges itself around the winding Heathcote River.

Thirdly, I was in Christchurch for the September earthquake – an event well-overshadowed now, but at the time unsettling enough — and in the days afterwards, as we were returning to a semblance of normality, I went running around the river in the Beckenham Loop, and in that irresistible way life and imaginings start to fuse and language performs its nifty sleight of hand – especially when you're running – I began to connect the huge cracks in the road around the river with the fractures in the community calm and the fractures in my mother's memory. I thought about the crazy-making unnavigability of the Beckenham Loop – how one often ends up back in the same place – and how strangely it was like the nutty loopings and repetitions of my mother's conversations and obsessions.

I thought about the river as the city's sinuous spine, how it begins in the mountains and ends at the sea, but how in between, though it pushes predictably ever forward, yet it intersects only randomly with people; we criss-cross it or it crosses us unpredictable ways. And somehow that reminded me of a human life and a human mind, with its ever-forward momentum to an inevitable end, and it's unexpected loops and coils and madnesses along the way. And that in turn somehow led me to the alphabet: structured, orderly, progressing in a particular and predictable way from A to Z - an organised legend if ever there was one - but how in a given day, at a given place, and in the recesses of a mind released to the anarchic, the alphabet might be something else again – a partially remembered legend, like a series of elusive melodies, hinting at so much but needing to be stitched together by someone else to make the kind of sense we seek.

I thought about all those things, and I thought about that old alliance between the very young and the very old and pretty soon I had the essential co-ordinates of a story, which is born out of the Beckenham Loop and the Heathcote River and many places along the way... though they will never be named so.

And so it continues, language's supple magic and the irresistible temptation of story's darkened room and one's eyes becoming slowing accustomed and opening wider. I hope I have suggested how fully this fuels my reading life as my writing One. As much as I want to make my own books, I want to bury myself in others, and then tell you that – say – you must read Barbara Else's, new fantasy, *The Travelling Restaurant,* because it is so deliciously creepy and effervescent and deftly comic, or that you must read Ursula Dubosarsky's *The Golden Day* because it is a quite remarkable and transporting piece of prose, or that you must read Daniel Woodrell, or Jennifer Egan, or all of Margaret Wild, or the latest Margo Lanagan, or, or, or...

I will end with William Mayne, who years ago wrote an exquisite abstraction of fiction's vertiginous processes. Using his creative home, Canterbury Cathedral in Kent, as a metaphor for fiction and life's labyrinths, and the elusive treasures along way, he says this:

> *'In the cathedral* of my *childhood were many doors not readily opened. Behind those doors were the spiral stairs leading into tribunes and triforia, in the Olympic cocklofts* of a *great building, over the topsides* of *the vaults* of *choir and nave,* so *vast that footpaths were built; and going down unknown dark* ways *to secret vistas* of *crypt and stillitory; or over* roofs *themselves, over leads and parapets, under the arches* of *flying buttresses, or amid the gargoyles grinned to death by the wind; or up* a *hollow tower on* a *wisp* of *ladder, or into the slow throb* of *the great cathedral clock with the hammer cranking up to sound the twelve strokes* of *doom or dinner; and far below the people gazing up dizzy, ready to fall into the sky from the steady ground; the chamber where* a *king once lived; the places where treasure lay: once even carrying* some of *that treasure to* a safe, *deeper hollow where the walls had been secreted ten feet thick on all sides and above, the pyramid* of *our time.'*

That is it exactly: reading and writing... scaling the great pyramids... meeting doom and dinner... knowing and not knowing. May it ever be so: the priceless opportunity to 'qaze up dizzy, ready to fall into the sky from the steady ground.'

Thank you all.