

Story and Serendipity

Betty Gilderdale Award Spring Lecture

By Lorraine Orman, 2020 winner of the Storylines Betty Gilderdale Award



Tena koutou. Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for coming to this extra-special Storylines event and listening to my speech, which is entitled **Story and Serendipity**. My gratitude goes out to Storylines for deciding to give me the 2020 Storylines Betty Gilderdale Award. And much love and gratitude goes to my husband Jim who has put up with me and my world of children's books for nearly 50 years.

A shout-out goes to our Auckland son and two of the grandsons, who keep me in touch with the real world of New Zealand families.

My best wishes must also go to Betty herself. Having read her memoir *A Life in Two Halves*, I am in awe of all that she achieved.

But my most important felicitations go out to everyone here who is celebrating Storylines' twentieth anniversary. That's 20 years of achievement, fellowship and hard work. Congratulations to all of us.

A few days before I started making notes for this speech, a neighbour called Annette contacted me. Very soon Annette and I were chatting over a cup of tea. Her seven-year-old grandson isn't getting on very well in his big open-plan classroom – too much movement, noise and distraction. He's lost interest in reading. Annette wanted to know how to help him.

Initially I was nervous about advising her. Since we retreated to a retirement village in Christchurch two years ago, my contact with children's books has been patchy. I am 72, I have mostly retired from writing, I had to give away my beloved children's books when we moved – and I have black holes in my memory. But before I talked to Annette, I nipped into Whitcoulls and browsed in their children's shelves. Real books are comforting.

Annette and I talked about popular authors such as David Walliams, and crazily popular graphic novel series such as Aaron Blabey's *The Bad Guys*. I warned her that the scatological humour and the silly illustrations may not appeal to her personally, but are generally loved by boys of her grandson's age. We agreed that she would continue with reading junior novels aloud to him at bedtime, but she would also buy him a graphic novel to see if he would eventually take over some of the reading himself. I said that if they can both become familiar with a few popular authors and series, she should find it easier to keep him reading.

At the end of our chat, I realised that a part of my brain had woken up. It was so nice to be of use again, and hopefully to make that important connection between child and book.

This award is for services to children's literature and literacy. When I read the names of the previous winners, I doubted that I've done enough service to warrant an award. In my case, the award would be better given for longevity – and even perhaps for being a dilettante. When I look back over the last 45 years of my involvement with children's books, I remember a bit of hard work, many enjoyable experiences, and friendships with a group of fabulous children's book enthusiasts.

So my talk is going to be a blast from the past, hopefully enlivened with some personal anecdotes relating to writing and reviewing (that's the **story** part of my title). And you will also see why I am a great believer in **serendipity**...

Previous winners have tended to begin by describing their favourite books from childhood. All I am going to say is that when I was ten, every week I spent my pocket money on a new Walt Disney comic. But when I was 13 I started reading my way through the classic British authors in the Otahuhu College library – all of the Just William series, all of Rider Haggard, all of Dorothy Sayers, all of Dickens ... and so on. It was a feast of story.

But that's all I'm going to say about old books. A few months ago I decided to update my CV, which is the kind of thing you do when you hit your seventies. I also did my Care Plan and my Will, and it's a great relief to have everything back in the drawer and out of sight.

Under the section of the CV labelled Early Writing Experience was a paragraph which said, "I began writing stories for children, teens and adults in the late 1970s. From 1982 to 1992 I had seven stories published in the *School Journal*."

What a lot of story **and** serendipity lies behind that statement. In the 1970s and '80s the editors of the *School Journal* actually wrote critiques for promising authors. They sometimes even asked to see more stories. That kind of feedback is rare these days.

One of the first stories they bought from me (after several kindly rejections) was a bitter-sweet story called *Sisters*. That story encouraged me to open a box of childhood memories and to draw upon the experiences of being a latchkey child at the age of eight (this was in the 1950s, and my parents were going through a protracted divorce).

Every school day I had to walk or bus home from Remuera Primary School to the Upland Road shops (often stopping at Remuera Library on the way) and let myself into the empty flat where I lived with my mother, who worked full time to support us. I cannot remember any kind of government allowance. We were poor. A bag of cast-off girls' clothes from the wealthy family just down Upland Road was a welcome boon.

Without really being aware of it I became one of life's observers (or if you prefer, a lurker. More about lurking later.). In this case I was watching the Hungarian family who lived next door behind their delicatessen and who kept an eye on me after school while I played with one of their daughters. The parents never found out that our favourite game was dropping toothpaste on the hats of the people walking on the footpath below my bedroom window.

But – what about the uncomfortable moments I could see in the relationship between the two sisters? And the way the parents treated their two daughters so differently? There was a story to be told.

These childhood memories were painful but they resulted in a successful *School Journal* story, published in 1983. The memories were **useful**. More short stories based on my childhood followed as I started to practise my new writing skills.

Second Wedding was a story that captured the feeling of not belonging anywhere when my father married again, a childhood dread that stayed with me for many years. *The Budgie Man* was based on a real event – one day my budgerigar **was** stolen from the cage on the porch while we were out. He certainly didn't open the door himself. The police were flummoxed.

The Puzzle Box was a real trinket box belonging to my beloved grandmother who often had me to stay in order to offset my experiences as a child of divorce. Her garden in Mt Albert was a magical place where fuchsia flowers turned into fairy dancers.

Fortunately, writing short stories for children wasn't all doom and gloom. One day in 1987 my husband came home from his work as an air traffic controller at Auckland Airport and told me a true anecdote about an elderly gentleman who mistakenly drove his elderly car on to the airport runway and promptly ran out of petrol. Not surprisingly, the planes couldn't land or take off. Cross my heart – this is a true story.

What a gem of a plot, what serendipity. It was one of those stories that almost wrote itself, once I invented an old Austin Seven car called Ethel who spoke her own Austin Seven language to the spiders who adorned her bonnet. The icing went on the cake for me several years later when Bob Kerr, the illustrator, told me that he visited the Southward Car Museum in Paraparaumu to make sure he drew Ethel as a perfect replica of an Austin Seven.

These stories were the beginning of my long apprenticeship. They kept my brain active while I cared for two pre-school sons, both born in the mid-1970s. I had wanted to become an author ever since my childhood days when I had several stories and poems published on the children's page of the *Auckland Star*. I am forever indebted to Peter Pan and Wendy who gave me so much early encouragement.

Back to the 1970s. I wrote stories. I read books to my children. I worked as a volunteer helper in their primary school library, mending picture books that had been loved to death.

And then serendipity struck. The School Library Service was just along the road from where we lived in Tawa and one day I called in to say hello. (I had previously worked for other divisions of the National Library. Those were the days when the National Library was spread around 13 different locations in Wellington.) They asked if I would like to write short annotations for new children's picture books for their school newsletter. I was already surrounded by picture books in those days, so I said yes. No pay, not even any books to keep, but I loved it. I was beginning my training as a gate-opener, also known as a children's book reviewer.

My only regret is that I have read a thousand picture books, but have never managed to write a successful one, despite many attempts.

We moved from Wellington to Auckland, eventually settling in Browns Bay. After ten years of being at home bringing up the children, I went back to work part-time as a library assistant at Birkdale College library, now Birkenhead College. No more picture books or pre-schoolers – now I had a library full of noisy teenagers and tough teenage books. YA literature was just getting going as a genre at that time, and I decided the best way to become an expert in YA books was simply to read them.

Most of the time it was fun. But I must admit that when I read the most popular books in the library, the ones that had 20 reserves on them, I was horrified and would have gladly burned the whole series. I'm talking about Virginia Andrews' *Flowers in the Attic*. Enough said.

I was only a library assistant, despite my tertiary qualifications, and the teacher with library responsibility keenly guarded the right to buy the new books. But I was able to start developing my skills of matching the right book to the right reader. And I got to know some of the teenage students, which helped me plan and write short stories for a totally different audience.

After a few years at Birkdale College I needed to expand my wings so I took a job at Carrington Polytechnic (later Unitec). I spent seven years there, developing my understanding of computers and information literacy as the library moved into the digital age – more serendipity, because all librarians at that time had to develop their own skills, as well as the ability to teach others to find information online.

I was working full-time, but I kept on writing. The writer's clock was ticking. I managed to get the odd short story published. I was particularly proud of three light-hearted stories for teens that were published in a short-lived magazine called *Charlie*. I also sold stories to Radio NZ, *New Idea*, and *Landfall*. When I look at the two *Landfall* stories today I feel as if they weren't written by me. They are so literary, so emotional and over-written, I wish I could attack them with a red pen.

I was working on novels, both children's and adults. I have forgotten how many I manuscripts I sent off to the publishers and had rejected. I remember getting up at 5am most mornings to write for a couple of hours in the rumpus room before the family woke and we all had to get off to work and school.

I attended writing courses and publishers' seminars – anything to help me learn more writing skills. I did courses with Michael King and Michael Morrissey and Kathy Dunsford.

After a move to Mt Eden, serendipity started flowing again. We lived in Windmill Road, just a block away from the College of Education. I vowed to myself that one day I would get a job in their library so I could walk to work. Lo and behold, the right job came up – Reference Librarian in charge of Curriculum Resources. My knowledge of children's books combined well with my tertiary library experience and my budding expertise in information literacy.

The librarian in charge at that time was Jan Bierman, a forthright lady who possibly thought I needed more training up – or taking down. She confronted me with a trolley-load of tatty old picture books. "Weed these," she said. So I did the standard library thing – evaluated age, usage or lack of usage, physical condition, author popularity, relevance to current themes, etc.

Jan came back after a few days. She sorted through my out pile. She pulled out one book, then another, and another, till she had a big pile in front of her. "We need to keep these," she said. "They may be old but many of them are classics. They're important in the study of children's literature. You need to do your research to establish which of these must be kept."

So I learned the hard way how to judge the importance of a children's book.

My library position had two important spin-offs. I was given the responsibility of being liaison librarian with the Languages department and also with the Information Studies department. I was lucky enough to work with several enthusiastic tertiary lecturers, including such luminaries as Libby Limbrick, Wayne Mills, and Gwen Gawith.

I enjoyed the stimulation of teaching information literacy to teachers, and promoting children's books to teacher trainees. I even got slightly involved in the academic side of things, specifically when the college staff were informed that an important new international reference book was coming out and the sections on New Zealand's children's literature were very outdated. We had a last-minute panic to update the information for top writers such as Sherryl Jordan.

In the year 2000 I saw a gap in the market and started building a personal not-for-profit website called *Story-Go-Round* in order to promote children's books, especially New Zealand ones. Some of you may remember it.

One of the reasons I created the website was to keep my name out there. But it was still a public service that hopefully was useful to many gate-openers (teachers, librarians, booksellers, reviewers, care givers). Most gate-openers simply don't have time to read hundreds of books, and need reviews and recommendations.

Nowadays most book reviews are published on blogs. Congratulations to local blog builders such as Maria Gill, Trevor Agnew, Bob Docherty, and Zac McCallum. I can remember how much hard work goes into maintaining an up-to-date review website.

I mentioned gate-openers before. I see from reading the latest newspapers that the statistics relating to New Zealand children and reading ability are not good news. Nor are the statistics relating to school libraries. All our beliefs about the value of books and reading are being threatened – again. Once again our gate-openers – and that probably means everyone in this room – will have to work even harder to keep open the connections between books and children.

Remember my initial story of Annette and her grandson? I've taken a leaf out of my own book and have started forwarding to Annette selected reviews from Zac McCallum's blog called *My Best Friends Are Books*. Zac is so enthusiastic, so happy when he writes his reviews that I feel like rushing out and buying the books immediately.

I'll check back with Annette in a few weeks and see if any of Zac's recommendations have helped her and her grandson.

Back to the past. I hadn't been at the Auckland College of Education for long before I was introduced to a couple of children's book organisations, the Children's Book Foundation and the Children's Literature Association of New Zealand. These organisations merged in 2000 to form the Children's Literature Foundation of New Zealand, subsequently re-named Storylines. I was a member by that time, because I remember going to some difficult meetings at Rosemary Tisdall's house where we had to merge the two constitutions. Rosemary's two cats provided light relief...

I joined a couple of subcommittees and became increasingly involved. I even spent two hectic years on the main committee, which was the experience of a lifetime. I got to know children's book enthusiasts such as Tessa Duder (huge congratulations must go to Tessa for recently being awarded a Prime Minister's Literary Award). I also got to know Frances Plumpton, Helen Beckingsale, Annie Coppell, Rosemary Tisdall, and the lovely Carol Arden, who was everybody's mother during the stress of festivals and Storylines events. I was so fortunate to know all these people! (Apologies to anyone I haven't mentioned who should have been mentioned, and apologies for any Storylines events I've omitted mentioning).

I was involved in the production of Storylines publications, helped out with festivals and author tours. (How nervous I was driving round the country roads of West Auckland with a van full of precious authors.) I also joined the IBBY sub-committee and helped with the preparation for International Children's Book Day in 2007. I did my best to keep up with Tessa and her non-stop determination to see Margaret Mahy presented with the Hans Christian Andersen Award.

I still remember the looks of amazement on the faces of the staff at the Royal Oak post office when I bowled up with a car loaded with boxes of Margaret Mahy books that were being sent to judges in remote places all over the world.

One day during the Storylines years serendipity struck again. The College of Education Deputy Librarian introduced me to a visitor – a lively little lady with a twinkle in her eye. Her name was Jo Noble. She needed a hand with writing the reviews for her children's book newsletter, *Well Read*. Of course I would do it. Hadn't I been training for this all my life?

A bit later I was lucky enough to be invited to review books and write the occasional article for *Magpies*. I collected the books for review from the Jabberwocky Bookshop. Getting to know Julie and Colleen at the Jabberwocky Bookshop was a privilege. They were always ready to host a book launch, and once more I realised how fortunate I was to know such supportive people.

While on the topic of booksellers, I also want to recognise John and Ruth McIntyre of the Wellington Children's Bookshop, who were happy to organise a book launch for an Auckland children's author they'd never met – just because it was a book about the settlement of Wellington.

And I had the honour of my book, *Land of Promise*, being launched by Barbara Murison, publisher of *Around the Bookshops* and another recipient of the Storylines Betty Gilderdale Award. Barbara lived in a house made of books – well, it seemed like that when you walked in and saw literally every wall covered with shelves of books. I miss her greatly, along with all the other friends who have gone before.

Only another reviewer can understand the joy of being handed a big pile of books for review, especially if it includes some New Zealand books. Local children's literature needs all the help it can get, and I try to be as supportive as I can.

David Walliams, Andy Griffiths, Anthony Horowitz, etc. adorn the front shelves of Whitcoulls – with a New Zealand book tucked away on the bottom shelf, if you're lucky. Don't get me wrong, I love Anthony Horowitz. (Who remembers going to his smooth-talking presentations at Takapuna Library? And who wants to admit to seeing Lemony Snicket creeping down the side aisle of a packed school hall, heavily disguised in a long coat and slouch hat? Those were the days...)

Surely those New Zealand books eternally fighting for a place on the shelves need a big red flag stuck on them saying, "Read New Zealand!" How about it, Whitcoulls?

The turn of the century seemed to be a good time to take on another promotional initiative. Countries round the world were producing top 100 book lists. People asked, "Does New Zealand have a top 100 children's book list?" No. Why shouldn't I do one? I could use *Story-Go-Round* to communicate with interested professionals and to publish the final result online. *The Top 100 New Zealand Children's Books of the 20th Century* was the result of public nominations, research within printed sources, bibliographical evaluations and comparisons, collation of awards and accolades received, and noting of critical opinions.

The Top 100 list is now only available in *The Inside Story: Year Book 2001* (Children's Literature Foundation of New Zealand). It's probably hard to find these

days. But as a librarian, I'm happy that it exists and will continue to exist in library collections round the country.

Back to the serendipity theme. I was reviewing, doing Storylines work, and spending most of my library time buying and promoting children's books at the ACE Library. But I was still writing – and hoping. That clock was ticking faster.

Then the New Zealand Society of Authors introduced a new mentorship scheme. I applied, nominating Tessa as my chosen mentor. I still can hardly believe I was lucky enough to win such a valuable mentorship. Tessa was paid to work with me on a manuscript for 20 hours but she spent far longer than that on her mentoring.

Tessa didn't connect with the first manuscript I showed her. But then I brought out a historical story set in the Marlborough Sounds involving a time-slip between the present day and the early whaling days. It was partly based on the experiences of Elizabeth Guard, one of the first European women to live in the South Island. Many years later, Fiona Kidman wrote "my" book and called it *The Captive Wife*.

I'd originally written it as a historical story for adults, but that didn't work. I had spent many months doing the historical research for the first version, and couldn't bear to waste all that work. So I re-wrote it as a YA novel.

Tessa thought it had potential but she had problems with the shape of the story. We thrashed it out together, and eventually it turned into a classic ghost story, told from two points of view, the troubled present-day heroine and the even-more troubled spirit of Lizzie from the old whaling days.

I learned so much from that mentorship with Tessa. I was part of the way to being an author, but I still needed to understand about voice and style and pace and point of view and reader expectations – and all the rest. I dreaded Tessa's red underlinings – but they were necessary.

"This is a middle-aged woman talking," she would tell me, "not a troubled teenage girl." In fact, it was Tessa who taught me to be a lurker. "If you want to know how teenage girls think and talk, go and sit at the back of a bus and listen to them," she said. "That's what I do."

Luck was still with me. Jo Noble said that Ray Richards, the literary agent (also a recipient of the Betty Gilderdale Award), was looking for some new children's writers. He read the just-finished manuscript called *Fires on the Shore* and said he would take it on. "But it definitely needs a new title," he added. Neither Tessa, nor Ray, nor I could come up with a title we agreed upon. Finally after two failed submissions to publishers, Ray submitted it to Longacre Press – who took it on and came up with the perfect title – *Cross Tides*. It was published in 2004.

I sometimes read and review New Zealand children's books that have been self-published, and I worry that they are not as well-constructed and polished as they should be. It's as if the writer hasn't worked a proper apprenticeship and learned the many skills of good writing; hasn't really understood the basics of characterisation or

plotting or voice; doesn't see what a crucial difference just one unsuitable word can make to a sentence.

I am torn in two directions. I know why so many writers are going down the path of self-publishing. I want to support New Zealand writers. But ... many of today's writers seem to rush into print too soon, and many of their books need more editing and revision.

Just a word about professional manuscript assessing. I sent my early YA novels to Barbara Else for assessment. Her comments were tough. It was like taking medicine. It tasted terrible but I knew it was for my own good. My most important piece of advice to authors who are self-publishing – get a professional assessment done. It's the **only** way you'll get feedback on your work which reaches the same high editorial standards as a commercial publisher.

My writing apprenticeship took me over 25 years. Okay, I admit that's a **little** extreme. When I tell that to children who ask how long it took for me to get a book published, they just about fall over.

Once I had that first book out and it won the New Zealand Post Best First Book Award, my personal story-go-round started spinning. It was a surge of serendipity that lasted for several years. Another YA novel, *Hideout*, was taken by Longacre. Four junior novels were published in the popular *Kiwi Bites* and *Aussie Bites* series. Another was published by Walker Books Australia as *Haunted*. Two historical titles came out in Scholastic's *My Story* series. Tessa and I worked as joint editors on an anthology called *Out of the Deep and Other Stories from New Zealand and the Pacific*, published by Reed and Storylines.

And that's not overlooking the bunch of short stories that were published in Barbara Else's marvellous '30 New Zealand Stories' series. That was a great way to use up the odd, sometimes very weird ideas that are always wandering around inside every writer's head. I love writing short stories – but they are so hard to get published...

A favourite question from children is: how do you think up the stories? Well, *Kev and Borax* (Aussie Bites) was the result of a deliberate attempt to write an upside-down-fairy tale. What could be more up-side-down than a punk fairy godfather? And what could be more relevant than a theme of being bullied?

Here Come the Marines (originally *A Long Way From Home*) was the direct result of Ray Richards asking me if I knew that thousands of United States troops had camped in the Warkworth area during WWII. "Someone should write a book about it!" he said, looking meaningfully at me. This is probably the book that is closest to my heart because I involved so many local people in the writing of the book, people who were children when the Marines came and camped on their farms. They wanted to preserve their memories of the time. They handed me dozens of marvellous stories and anecdotes to use.

Hideout was the result of spending a lot of time at a friend's bach in Pukerua Bay, north of Wellington. It's a wild West Coast beach, stony and sharp and littered with

driftwood and old rope. The bach was a real Kiwi bach (crib to the South Islanders) with a long-drop in the hydrangea patch and fairy lights strung along the porch roof. Kapiti Island lurks on the horizon, seemingly moving in and out with the tide. What would it be like to run away from the world and hide out there? The story was a direct response to the setting.

I stopped working at the ACE Library after five inspiring years. I couldn't ignore the ticking of the writer's clock any more. It was only after I left full-time work and spent nearly all day, every day at my computer that I was able to think like an author and write a succession of novels. Much-needed moral support at this time came from colleagues at the School Library Service in Newmarket, particularly Lois Webb and Pauline McGowan.

This wave of serendipity lasted from 2004 to 2009. *Haunted* was my last commercially published book, another story based on childhood memories of playing in a derelict homestead on a farm near Athenree. Somehow it seems fitting that both my first and last printed books were ghost stories!

Publisher upheavals meant that Longacre Press was absorbed into Random House. They didn't want to publish my third YA novel, *Touchstone*, which was a part-historical and part-present day story set in the coal-mining settlements on the West Coast of the South Island. The inspiration for this story came from my husband's family: Jim's grandfather was a coal miner at Millerton.

I couldn't get *Touchstone* published, despite spending close to two years on the research and the writing of it. My supply of serendipity had finally run out. But I thought I'd have one more try and just regard it as a learning experience. I published the book myself in 2013, as an e-book. I followed the expert online advice of Melinda Szymanik, paid a cover designer and a copy editor, and did battle with the Smashwords and Kindle uploading systems. It was a hair-raising experience.

The e-book of *Touchstone* only sold about 30 copies, despite three full months of promotion from me. The Smashwords edition is still available for free download, and the Kindle edition costs about three dollars on the Kindle Store. These versions will outlive me, which is rather a spooky thought.

I couldn't face the thought of spending years on manuscripts that were unlikely to be published, so I officially stopped writing novels. Both fully retired now, Jim and I moved to Omaha Beach and then to Warkworth.

But I wasn't able to abandon writing quite as easily as I thought, because I joined a local writing group including three keen authors – Maria Gill, Heather Arnold and Chris Gurney. I stuck to reviewing books and writing short stories, but found that I seemed to be most useful to my colleagues as an unofficial mentor/editor.

The long years of reading, writing and reviewing seem to have left me with a sensitive radar for what's working and what's not. This radar is possibly also a result of the manuscript judging I've done over the last couple of decades, mainly for the Storylines awards.

Judging is both tedious and inspiring. You get tired of reading through boxes of unsuccessful manuscripts, but when you hit on a potential winner, something fresh and exciting, it's like finding treasure. Those in-depth judging discussions of the final titles in the shortlist are thrilling.

I also tried to keep my own writing skills honed by running courses on writing for children. I did a couple of four-day courses for the Continuing Education Centre of the University of Auckland. They were so hard. The participants seemed to have a good time, but I was exhausted by the end of four days of teaching.

All teachers are heroes!

I still miss my cosy Warkworth writing group. I am in awe of Maria's body of creative non-fiction titles. She's created a new niche in the market and filled it almost single-handedly, at the same time running the review blog *KidsBooksNZ*. She thoroughly deserves this year's Storylines Margaret Mahy Medal. Heather Arnold's skill at "seeing" what a story is doing has always been invaluable to me, and Chris Gurney's picture books are a joy to share. Congratulations to her on her latest title, *The Hug Blanket*. I remember when we first worked on the structure of that story in our group.

My writing support network in Christchurch so far consists of one – but I'm working on it. I discovered Bill Nagelkerke living just up the road, so we meet often for coffee and Bill gives me a gentle nudge towards doing more writing. We belong to a group of children's book enthusiasts (mainly teachers and school librarians) which includes Trevor Agnew, also a recipient of the Betty Gilderdale Award.

In his acceptance speech Trevor talked about connections. Yes, everything is connected. I renewed connections with Joanna Orwin and Tania Roxborough at the WORD Christchurch Festival a few weeks ago – both are authors I first met at Storylines events. I was able to congratulate Heather McQuillan on recently receiving the Dunedin children's writer's residency. I have yet to track down Gavin Bishop. (I once took him on a wild car ride through the back streets of Parnell hunting for a restaurant – and getting thoroughly lost, but that's another story.)

There's always more writing to do and more reviews to get sorted – and more children's book people to connect with. Maybe the serendipity will start flowing again and I won't have to retire from my writer's world quite as soon as I thought... We'll see.

Thank you for your patience while listening to my blast from the past.

Lorraine Orman, Storylines Betty Gilderdale Award, 2020