Storylines Margaret Mahy Lecture 2019

Presented 31 March 2019 by Mandy Hager

Channelling our greater good

Tēnā koutou katoa,
Ko Waiopehu tōku maunga,
Ko Makahika tōku awa,
Nō Horowhenua ahau,
Ko Kurt tōku papa nō Vienna, Austria
Ko Barbara tōku whāea nō Zanzibar, East Africa
Ko Mandy Hager tōku ingoa,
Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā tatou katoa.

My humble thanks to Bridget Mahy for being here today, providing a tangible link to Margaret and for the important work you do supporting Storylines and bringing the world of writing and stories to your students. I'd like to salute and thank Margaret Mahy, as well, not only for her inspirational life's work, but for her great kindness in reading a stranger's manuscript and gifting me the most amazing cover quote for my book *The Crossing*.

Thank you so much to everyone associated with Storylines for this amazing and very unexpected honour and to the kind person or people who nominated me – you have given me an unforgettable gift. I'd like to thank Libby Limbrick for her kindness in talking me through my shock when she called to give me the news, and to her and Vicki Cunningham for helping me sort the logistics of being here today.

Thank you to *everyone* who has come today — I was asked to deliver a 45 minute lecture and, I'm sorry to tell you, I'm a girlie swot and have done as requested, so sit back and get comfortable!

I can't hand out thanks without acknowledging the amazing encouragement of my friends and family, and my real gratitude to those of you who have made the trip to be here today. I wouldn't be standing here if not for the unconditional love and support of my husband Brian Laird, my children Thom

and Rose and their partners and family, and my dear sisters and brother. Having you in my life is the greatest reward of all.

And, lastly, I want to acknowledge the terrible loss of lives in Christchurch, which I hope will bring about a huge surge of love from unimaginable hate. I wrote this lecture several weeks ago, but it now seems even more important to express what I'm about to say. I dedicate this lecture to those who have died and the families who now must endure their lives without them. As-Salaam-Alaikum.

I must admit that looking through the past recipients of this award I'm struggling with a huge case of imposter syndrome, tempered only by the absolute gratitude I feel at being part of writing's most supportive community – those who love the world of children's and YA literature and understand that without the very best of writing aimed at younger readers, there would be no passionate adult readers.

Like many of you, I owe my lov e of books and story to my parents, closely followed by inspiring teachers who recognised my love of the written word and encouraged me to take it further. I grew up in small-town New Zealand, a town with a narrow gaze and a judgemental eye, yet blessed that the world within the boundaries of my home was rich and vibrant, alive with music, art, drama, diverse visitors and books. Lots of books. So many books, most of my friends had never seen such quantities outside of the public library. My earliest memories are of being read to by my mother at night and of clambering onto my parent's bed with my brother and sisters as our father told us made up tales of dragons guarding treasure caves and children undertaking brave deeds, all of us spellbound, imaginations filling in the visuals and placing us firmly at the centre of each heroic story.

Those early books, so lovingly curated by my parents (who sent overseas for the best available children's literature), helped form my values — values I still live by. Thanks to Dr Seuss, I still believe 'a person's a person no matter how small', I still see how those with a greed for power climb on the backs of those with lesser power, with little care for those beneath, like Yertle the Turtle; still

deplore the waste and devastation of our natural environment, as did the Lorax, and the senseless bigotry as explored through his Star-bellied Sneetches.

I learned the playfulness and beauty of language from works such as those by A A Milne (*James James, Morrison Morrison, Weatherby George Dupree…)* and Oscar Wilde's tender stories in The Happy Prince And Other Tales: '*Swallow, Swallow, little Swallow . . . will you not stay with me one night longer?*'

I learnt about human vulnerability and evil too, from books such as Ann Franks' diary (which hit hard, having a half-Jewish Austrian father who had fled from Hitler), Erich Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front,* Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I found my courage in characters such as Edek, Bronia, Ruth and Jan from Ian Serraillier's *The Silver Sword,* and Maria Merryweather in Elizabeth Goudge's terrifying *The Little White Horse*. From Lucy Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables and Noel Streatfeild's boisterous Fossil siblings and her self-reliant *Children of Primrose Lane*, I found my adventurous core. I explored other worlds in C S Lewis's Narnia, Anne McCaffrey's dragon-filled Pern, Arthur C. Clarke, Frank Herbert and John Wyndam's scary alternative universes. From Graham Green, Kurt Vonnegut and George Orwell, I learnt to put the issues of power and control that drive politics into context. So many books. So many voices, thoughts and deeds stored away, now all cemented into the very building blocks of my DNA.

In 1979, I applied to Wellington Teacher's College and found myself being interviewed by a group of three, one of whom asked me, 'Do you like reading?' To this I replied: 'I love it so much that sometimes I spend the whole day in bed because I'm so engrossed in what I read.' The older man on the interviewing panel humphed and responded, 'If a daughter of mine did that, I'd call her lazy.' My heart sank. I thought I'd really blown it. Little did I know then that the kindly woman on the panel was Dorothy Carmody, who tutored on children's literature — and this unimpressed man would turn out to be the first principal I was to teach under!

Dorothy was an inspiration, reintroducing me to the world of children's fiction. It was the early 1980s, a time when the first real wave of brave and challenging

YA novels had appeared on the writing scene since S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, books written by wonderful writers such as Paul Zindel, Robert Cormier, Colin Theile, Alan Garner, Mollie Hunter, John Christopher, Betsy Byars, Catherine Patterson, Joan Aitken and many more. I spent a year working on a special research paper looking at depictions of sex and violence in current YA fiction, which cemented my love of the genre and my excitement that books could speak to the issues most pressing in young people's minds. And I spent most of my meagre allowance buying books — books I still own to this day.

As well as Dorothy, I was honoured to be taught by the great Jack Lasenby, who told us stories in his marvellous voice, and challenged us to write our own. I still remember my first attempt, Jack handing it back to me and saying 'Well, you know how to tell a good story.' I was elated! He imprinted on me the importance of mythology and read to us from Leon Garfield and Edward Blishen's *The God Beneath the Sea* and *The Golden Shadow,* dark retellings of ancient myths with Charles Keeping's incredibly eerie illustrations. Between these two inspiring teachers, they unknowingly unleased the YA writer in me! I'm forever in their debt.

But the attitudes I bring to my writing and the life-path I was to choose came most especially from parents who modelled their social justice values; values formed from childhoods where they saw the very best and absolute worst of human nature, and made conscious decisions to stand up against racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, prejudice, homophobia and human rights abuses. They operated from a place of generosity and love, welcoming the hurt, the damaged, the lost, shunned and lonely into our home for respite and repair. They encouraged pursuit of our creative talents, unconditionally loving and supportive of our life decisions, and talked *with* us, not *at* us, encouraging lively debate and probing questions about every topic introduced. Nothing was off limits. No rule was set without explanation and negotiation. In short, they treated us as thinking, intelligent beings with our own agency, who understood and appreciated the freedoms we were privileged to experience under a social democracy — beings who knew, thanks to my parents' own life-stories, that such freedoms and rights were not dealt out equally to all, nor could be taken

for granted, and that it was only through good people prepared to speak up in the face of wrongs, and to work proactively to right imbalances, that we would maintain our own and our society's wellbeing. They worked to make us good citizens. Good friends. Good people.

It's no surprise, then, that the words I am driven to write express the values that were so nurtured in my childhood. And, as I wrote in *Heloise*, referring to her love of literature and language (while also mirroring my most deeply held belief): *Never since her childhood has she changed in her belief that words hold the greatest power: they can harangue men into war, seduce another's wife or landlord's daughter, break open a heart or have capacity to mend one.* It is this idea that sits at the centre of this talk today and of everything I write.

One of the other great gifts I've been given since I started writing comes from my role as a writing tutor. Not only does it give me great joy to help those who have secretly gestated a book inside them for years to give it birth, but, as a consequence of trying to articulate the process, it has forced me to think incredibly hard about what constitutes good writing and how to give writing the kind of power I aspire to write. This exploration, of course, is driven by my own preoccupations, and another writer would no doubt come up with a whole different set of answers and ways to describe it. But in trying to give *my* process voice, it has deepened my practice and more firmly focused me.

Every year I ask my students to name a book that has not only stayed with them, but which has changed them at a fundamental level in some way. They always can, as I'm sure you can too. *This,* to me, is the definition of a great book: words that implant themselves in the heart of the recipient and become part of them. Stories with power, be that the power to move, to challenge, to console, to excite, to anger, to motivate, to laugh, to cry. To really truly *think.* Barbara Kingsolver (one of my literary heroes) put it beautifully in her recent interview with Kim Hill: *a book can rearrange the furniture of your heart.*

There is a magic to the writing process — a serendipitous delivery of ideas and connections that is hard to voice without coming across all new-agey! There is a sense of channelling the character; of being 'given' words and thoughts beyond usual consciousness. And there is a bigger magic at play: a psychic

exchange, if you like, where I download the technicolour, sensory surround-sound movie in my imagination into words on a page, which in turn are decoded by the reader to re-form into a technicolour, sensory surround-sound movie in *their* imagination, further enhanced by everything they know and have experienced in their unique past. It's not solely an exchange of information, then, but a shared spark, one that fires each reader differently. And if it is a powerful experience, the underlying meaning and emotion stays seared on the reader's heart, changing its structure forever. Note that I say heart, not mind. As script-writing guru Robert McKee advises: encase an idea in an emotion. Only through the experience of *feeling* something does the abstract become tangible; thought embodied.

This powerful stimulation of the imagination is perhaps the biggest gift (besides modelling lived values) we can give to any young person. An imagination enables us to picture alternative worlds and ways of being, to empathise, to postulate, to question, to dream. To escape. Margaret Mahy was the consummate mistress of imagination; subversive and joyful in equal measures. Her love of language bursts from the page. Her fierce intellect underpins every story. She understood that a book is a sacred object, with a life-changing capacity and an invisible controlling intelligence able to create the kind of mind-melding emotional experience I've just described. Elizabeth Knox is another, I believe, who shares these exceptional qualities.

One of the other questions I ask my students on Day One, is why they write. What are the drivers that push someone to spend hours locked inside their own head, possibly writing for an audience of one, probably spending years before they see any sort of reward or gain? Everyone has a different answer, though most can be covered by the general label 'I can't help it! I just have to!' My motivation falls under this label too. For me, writing is the way I best express myself — and always has been. As someone who is socially shy to the point of great anxiety, the ability to put my thoughts out into the world without the need to physically face people is hugely freeing! (In fact, there's a rumour that may or may not be true that I once spent a whole angsty teenage year only communicating to my parents via notes!)

But it's more than that: my thoughts can't cohere until I've had a chance to play with them and refine them on the page. I'm too emotional to express myself verbally. I cry when I'm happy, sad, angry, excited, scared, moved, outraged . . . and inside my head is a crazed spin-drier of worried thoughts, from the profound, to the paranoid, to the furious and the ridiculous. At night I watch TV to try to turn it off by distracting myself and end up analysing everything – from the subtext of blockbuster movies (are they promoting US military propaganda?), to what is and isn't reported on the news (who's controlling the agenda?), to advertisements, like what does it say about us that advertising creatives think we're more likely to eat something if it's presented with human arms, legs, faces and emotions? And I brood over whether there is a conspiracy to dumb down the general population to such an extent that we're happy being served up TV programmes of people watching TV programmes while those in control are ripping off our futures.

Only by taking a deep breath and turning that unending monkey chatter into written form can I offload the chaos and find some temporary peace. And, even then, that peace is only attained when I've expressed whatever I feel most strongly about, both personally and in terms of how it impacts others.

George Orwell said, in his essay 'Why I write':

> *All writers are vain, selfish, and lazy, and at the very bottom of their motives there lies a mystery. Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand. For all one knows that demon is simply the same instinct that makes a baby squall for attention. And yet it is also true that one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's own personality. Good prose is like a windowpane. I cannot say with certainty which of my motives are the strongest, but I know which of them deserve to be followed. And looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a political purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was*

betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally.

The more I've written, the more I see that the politics of any given situation — fictional or real — drive and/or impact each character's world, just as our own lives are intrinsically linked to it. We may choose to ignore it, but that in itself is a political decision, conscious or not.

Once I realised that *every* facet of our lives is controlled by the political decisions of those who lead us, my brain can't stop churning over all the consequences and permeations. You may think this statement extreme, but consider this: from where we can go to school (and *if* we can go to school), to what we're taught, what we're allowed to eat, who we can marry, whether we can afford a roof over our heads, who gets to live here, who profits and who loses, which members of our community we choose to support, who gets to tell the dominant story, what we're free to do and say, how much control we have over our own bodies, who is allowed to vote, and even whether we live in a true democracy or not, every aspect of our lives is touched by the predominant politics of the day. Politics are how we organise and structure nearly all our systems and groups. It's how we choose collective ways to behave and engage.

Therefore, if we can take as a given that those of us who write for young people feel some sense of responsibility for our readers, some duty of care, which I think, overall, we can, then shouldn't one of the fundamental services we provide be to help them navigate these structures they must live within? I personally feel it behoves us all to consider the values that guide our stories' way.

James Baldwin, in a 1979 interview in the New York Times, said:

'It is part of the business of the writer — as I see it — to examine attitudes, to go beneath the surface, to tap the source. . . If there is no moral question, there is no reason to write. I am an old fashioned writer and, despite the odds, I want to change

the world. What do I hope to convey? Well, joy, love, the passion to feel how our choices affect the world.'

He goes on to say:

'The bottom line is this: You write in order to change the world, knowing perfectly well that you probably can't, but also knowing that literature is indispensable to the world. In some way, your aspirations and concern for a single man in fact do begin to change the world. The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you alter, even by a millimetre, the way a person looks or people look at reality, then you change it.'

I'm well aware there is resistance within some groups of the writing and reading community to the idea that book should *be about something* — have some underlying moral imperative that the writer feels is important to explore. Such people bandy around words like 'issues-driven' and 'didacticism', rolling them off the tongue as if they taste of earwax. Of course it's true that, if delivered heavy-handedly, such writing *is* tone-deaf and often bludgeons the reader to death — and I'm sure some people feel my books fit into this category.

In fact, books can honour both creative imagination and big ideas; these things are not mutually exclusive. Or they can do one or the other; there's no law or lore that dictates how a writer tackles their chosen project. We each write the book we want to write, to our own specific audience, and that's okay. No book is universally liked, nor do all readers, as one homogenous group, have a single universal criteria for what they deem as good.

However, if we list off all the greatest writers and most enduring classics, we quickly see that it is, in fact, the author's power to reflect on some aspect of our humanness, in order to shine a light on it, good or bad, that makes these works endure. What would Dickens' books be without his very personal preoccupation with the inequities of class and wealth? Or Jane Austin's subversive 'take' on women's place and lack of power within society? Or Orwell's terrifying warnings about the evils of totalitarianism? Or Margaret

Mahy's subversive declaration that a mother can also be a bare-footed, pipe-smoking pirate!

Anne Lamott, in her book on writing, *Bird by Bird,* commits an entire chapter to *The Moral Point of View.* In it she says that:

> *'As we live, we begin to discover what helps in life and what hurts, and our characters act this out dramatically. This is moral material. The word moral has such bad associations: with fundamentalism, stiff-necked preachers, priggishness. We have to get past that. If your deepest beliefs drive your writing, they will not only keep your work from being contrived but will help you discover what drives your characters. . . We like certain characters because they are good or decent — they internalize some decency in the world that makes them able to risk or make a sacrifice for someone else. They let us see that there is in fact some sort of moral compass still at work here, and that we, too, could travel by this compass if we so choose. In good fiction, we have one eye on the hero or the good guys and a fascinated eye on the bad guys, who may be a lot more interesting. The plot leads all of those people (and us) into the dark woods where we find, against all odds, a woman or a man with the compass, and it still points true north. . . This shaft of light, sometimes only a glimmer, both defines and thwarts the darkness.'*

Lamott defines a moral position as 'a passionate caring inside you'. It's not a slogan or wishful thinking, and doesn't come from outside or above, but begins inside the heart of the character and grows from there. Yet, let's not pretend that a character springs from some whirling pool of creativity outside of our control, despite my talk of magic. While the spark may be magical, characters are built inside the writer's head, and the heart of the character, and how that character grows, is directed by the writer. And it's my belief, after years of helping others shape and express their stories, that this controlling intelligence must be led by some central understanding of what

each story is trying to say and how it will end — as the ending place of the story underlines the writer's particular 'passionate caring'.

This doesn't mean that magic can't still happen in the writing process, and some deep surprising truth can't rise to surface as the writing unfolds, but, to my mind at least, to make a work that resonates on many levels, every decision the writer makes should be directed by the story's internal values-compass — a compass each writer calibrates and then relies on for guidance throughout each writing journey.

The reason I so love YA fiction is that, almost universally, our protagonists are young people in the process of some kind of growing up moment — a 'coming of age'. It is the time in every human's life when they discard the inward-facing focus of childhood and start to look out into the world and question the status quo, trying to find their unique place in it; their unique identity. It is a time of vivid realisations, of the shift from believing everything an adult says, to discovering that adults are flawed and often hypocritical, working to their own agenda. It's also a time when young people feel peak moral certainty, without the edges rubbed off from years more real life. A time when some of the values we, as parents and teachers, have shoe-horned into them (like the concept of 'fairness') are suddenly revealed as mythical in the adult world.

The literary editor and poet Charles Brasch said of this age group that by '*Coming fresh from homes and schools into the world they can see clearly what older eyes have grown half-blind to. They see injustice, hatred and violence everywhere: the stark contrast of riches and poverty; the lies told so blandly in high places; the gulf between what men profess and what they do.'*

It throws everything up in the air, destabilising and challenging each young person to recalibrate every single thing they hold as true. It's an intellectual and emotional rollercoaster, a cast-into-the desert initiation moment, and it allows the world to be viewed with fresh and youthfully passionate eyes. I love placing myself inside the head of someone going through this, refreshing my own vision of the world and all its workings. It's a wonderful antidote to weary cynicism and lack of hope.

I don't just believe that stories can be powerful life-changing moments from my own reading experiences; through my writing I have been privileged to see how that writing affects some readers first-hand. Every one of my published books has prompted correspondence or face-to-face confessions about the impact of each book on real lives. From stories of loss, depression, self harm, sexual assault, racism, suicidal thoughts, violence, concern for conservation, for other animals, for climate change, for political corruption, have come uplifting revelations of how a book has changed a life – in other words, has made the reader feel 'seen', comforted, challenged, or activated. I feel incredibly blessed to have been given the opportunity to connect with other people on this level. That's a win for me – far more than any monetary benefit (which is just as well, as that's been lean!). If I can open eyes, or push mental boundaries, or comfort just one reader significantly from each book, this makes all the hard work worthwhile. To date, reader responses have gifted me untold treasures, and I feel honoured they have trusted me with their hearts.

I'd like to share just a few concrete examples of this. In 2015 I received an email via my website from an 18-year-old girl who lives in Melbourne. She had just read *Dear Vincent.* She said:

> *I have a little sister, who is five years younger than me. When I was in my suicidal state she was the reason that I didn't go through with it, or that I stopped halfway through my attempt. . . Your book means a lot to me, I am awful at art, but I turned to maths in the way that Tara goes to art . . . My 'friends' thought that it was hilarious that I cut myself when they found out and would draw blood on their arms even though they knew it made me uncomfortable. My art teacher had a book of Vincent's work in the back room, so I would look through that and eventually I started associating his work with a feeling of calm and safety. I did more research on him and found his letters of immense comfort as well. He just seemed to understand and be able to phrase things far better than I ever could.*

'Dear Vincent' took me back to when I was really mentally unhealthy but without triggering me, it helped me to understand more where people from the outside were coming from and more of why I felt/reacted in the ways that I did.

And your author's note was beautiful. I have copied it into my book which I look through when I begin to feel like self harming, speaking of which on Wednesday I will have made it seven months with out self harming which is the longest I have ever gone since I started six years ago. 'Dear Vincent' has already helped me with it and I am sure it will continue to do so . . .

I just needed to let you know how much of a positive impact your book has had on me, because I have other favourite books, but none of them get me, none of them I can easily relate to and feel so connected to. I wish I could say that I will be sharing it with others, but it feels like a betrayal, it feels like it would be sharing my soul . . .

Another response that stays with me is from a young woman who was taking part in a life skills programme I wrote for the Dare Foundation, which used my novel *Smashed* as a discussion starter. She read the book and took it to her foster mother, saying: *You have to read this. This is my life.*

It has been gratifying that several of my books are used as school texts. After one class had been studying *The Crossing*, I received this email from their teacher:

I've just started using the book with a Year 10 class and as with last year, it's going off. One girl has polished off all three in three nights.

*However, the real breakthrough came with a beautiful girl called G****. Her reading level is well below but she is making progress and seems happy enough, albeit quiet. Listens intently and does the work but basically never contributes verbally in class discussion. She looks Maori so I was completely taken*

aback when she told me yesterday she was born in Kiribati. She is so excited – she knows what all the words mean, she can picture the setting, she recognises the traditions. All period she was bursting to contribute and share her expertise, not just about Kiribati but all of the ideas and concepts that we ended up debating and arguing.

My novel *Heloise* brought an unexpected letter from an ex-nun that I'll treasure always. In it she wrote:

You could never know its impact on me – for healing. All your work has been worthwhile even if I was the only one who ever read it! I will treasure your book for the rest of my life as it has touched my soul deeply. . . Heloise has helped me find my voice. It has unleashed the pent-up emotions I didn't want to face since I was a novice. . .

Finally, a little story that still amuses me. My brother, the investigative journalist Nicky Hager, sent me this email last year:

I was out at a talk last night and in the question time a young woman (it turned out 17 years old when I talked to her afterwards) put up her hand to ask a question. She said that she hoped I didn't mind her talking about my sister instead of me, but that it was fiction that had opened her eyes to politics. Her interest in politics started when she read The Nature of Ash.

This especially thrills me, not only the idea that I have motivated this young woman to look harder at the world around her but, as he's the famous Hager, I frequently get called 'Nicky' – so this felt like divine justice! While I have this opportunity, I'd also like to acknowledge how much I support and admire Nicky's work on behalf of all New Zealanders, and my sister Debbie's tireless work supporting the disability, public health and domestic violence sectors. And my younger sister Belinda, a wonderful jeweller, whose adventurous spirit inspired me to apply for the Katherine Mansfield Menton Fellowship.

There are numerous stories of readers responses like those I've just shared. During my time in France as the Fellow, I gave a talk to a group of translation students who had been given the task of translating *Dear Vincent* into French before my visit. One young woman was so touched she cried when she met me, and showed me her copy of the book with dozens of bookmarks, all relating to questions she wanted to ask. To see the book move someone over the other side of the world was deeply rewarding.

As writer's for younger readers, we're under a lot of pressure to write 'appropriately' for our audience. There are many adults who feel the need to 'police' what young people read and either promote or exclude material based on their own values. Those of you who have published in the United States will have experienced the often bizarre rules that accompany the publishing of anything for school-age readers. With debates hotting up about freedom of speech versus censorship, I'd like to commend New Zealand publishers for taking a more broadminded approach. It's my personal belief that all of us, young people included, should have the right to read whatever they like, so long as its intent isn't predatory, gratuitous, corrupt, inciting or harmful. With these exceptions in mind, I personally believe swearing, sexual content, contextualised violence, and self-harm should not be excluded: our young people are exposed to these things in the real world; a good book can help to give them the context and tools to assess and judge each issue for themselves.

The ability to read widely, from a diverse range of points of view and voices, can only nourish us as human beings and help to create empathy and understanding. Writer Tatty Hennessy puts it well, in her recent post *Why should we care about stories?:*

> *It's easy to look at the structural, systemic, global nature of the issues we face and feel tired or baffled or even apathetic. It's not that we don't know what's going on – we're more informed than we've ever been. The problem is that it can be hard to care about things that feel so much bigger than ourselves. It's hard to care about a concept, but it's easy to care about a person. We're wired to do it, and stories run on people. A story can put*

a unique, individual, human face to nebulous ideas, bypassing our intellect and getting right to the heart of the matter. It can make us care, and caring is the root of action.

To shelter young people today is doing them a grave disservice. At no other time in human history has our species been under such immediate global threat – from the lethal trident prongs of climate change, greed and extremism. While it can be argued that young people's fiction should allow them respite from these issues – to 'protect' them – and, that fiction's main job is to feed imaginations, I would argue that *not* to engage in such huge issues is failing in our duty of care as guides and fellow human beings. What our young people need are safe models of resilience, first and foremost. And stories of hope.

In my work with youth at risk, the question is often asked: when two people endure the same damaging factors and difficulties in their lives, what enables one to rise above it and the other to sink? The answer is simply this: those who rise above it have had at least one healthy and positive role model – and been on the receiving end of one significant act of kindness and respect that lets them know they count for something; that they have agency in their world.

As writers we can provide this. An inspiring fictional character, who speaks to the heart of the reader and fully engages them in the story world, can be just as empowering as any 'real' human act. In this time of impending global catastrophe and factionalised hate, I believe it should be incumbent on us all to step up and use our writing as channels for the greater good. For our reader's wellbeing. For their futures. Anything less is a dereliction of our duty. As my character Ash says in *Ash Arising: It's our democracy. We all have to own it. . . It's about making decisions based on caring for each other, and for those who are different, and for the most in need, and for the planet.*

Thank you.