

My Picture Books

Margaret Mahy Lecture - by Pamela Allen

13 March 2004

I felt very honoured to receive the Margaret Mahy Award Lecture for 2004. In response I decided to give a talk about myself and my books.

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I was born in 1934 in Devonport, Auckland and lived all my early life on the North Shore, going to primary school in Vauxhall Road and then St Cuthbert's College in the city, and then later to the Elam School of Art.

The focus there, at that time, was on learning to draw what you could see.

I learned to draw

I taught art briefly before marrying Jim Allen in 1964. We had two children and I became involved in the Birkenhead Playcentre – a preschool movement run by the parents for their children. For this to be successful it required a commitment from the parents. It was a learning environment not only for the children but for the parents as well. We shared parenting experiences and learned from observation.

This was a very significant time for me. I read many books to the children and gained an insight into what worked for them, and what didn't, and why.

I learned to know the preschool child

Jan Farr was also at playcentre with me. When our children went to school Jan wrote a number of books, which I illustrated. The most well known of these is *Mummy Do Monsters Clean Their Teeth?* published in paperback by William Heinemann NZ 1975.

By 1978 my family and I moved to Sydney and I decided to look for work illustrating children's picture books.

Anne Ingram, the editor of Harper Collins, welcomed me into her office and gave me an hour of her time. She was unable to offer me any texts to illustrate and suggested I write a book and map out the text and illustrations in the form of a dummy book. The book we discussed was *Rosie's Walk* by Pat Hutchins. There are two stories in *Rosie's Walk*, one the spoken text and one the silent pictures.

I knew I could draw, but could I tell my story in pictures?

I walked out of her office and across the Sydney Harbour Bridge and said to myself "Pamela, you are an author."

Once you make a life changing decision you are faced with the task 'doing' it

I knew how to draw. I knew preschool children well **but** ...

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My illustrations

My illustrations try to convey all the nuances of meaning, using body language, movement, and the glance of an eye. Because my illustrations are also my actors.



One moment he was standing there.

The next he was tossed into the air and dined.

But what he loved most of all was food. All day, every day in the castle kitchen the Kings cooks cooked.

Sipping and dipping, making and baking. Chopping and lopping, stewing and brewing.



Stirring and whirring, mixing and fixing, busting and tasting, snuffing and whiffing.



Until at last they had made the King's dinner.



of port pie, pease pudding and pavlova

[illustrations from *Mr McGee* and *The Blackberry Jam*, *Bertie and the Bear*, and *Brown Bread and Honey*]

When I draw I'm thinking of only what I want to say not how to do it. Much as, when people write, they're thinking of what they want to say not how to write.

My ideas

"Where do your ideas come from?" This is a question I am often asked by children. It is the kind of question which has no answer – or many answers. The kind of question only children ask.

I will tell you a little story. I was sitting in a lecture in Sydney listening to Nancy Chamberlain, editor of a UK journal which reviewed children's books. She was in Australia for the conference 'Views and Reviews', which had been held in Adelaide. She was talking about a counting book, a counting book from 1 to 10 – intended for children able, or almost able, to count to 10. It was called *No Dodos: The Endangered Species Counting Book*. Each page featured an endangered species in numbers 1 to 10. The tenth page had 0 - no Dodos. At the back of the book there was information outlining how the human race was destroying the habitats of these animals so that they were dying out – inferring that they would be soon like the Dodos - extinct. Nancy was telling how, when this book was read for a second time to a child of about 5 (The reviewer didn't have access to a child of 3), the child cried and sobbed. "I don't want that book! I won't have that book!" As Nancy was talking I became the child and felt what the child was feeling and shrank in my seat and wondered why the rest of the audience seemed unmoved.

I needed to explain this experience to myself.

Every book that is written has two parts. The contribution of the author and who he or she is - and the contribution of the reader and who he or she is. *No Dodos: The*

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Endangered Species Counting Book was clearly intended for a small child able to count to 10. The author had given the child pain. The pain of the probable extinction of particular creatures on earth and all this in the form of a brightly coloured present, a counting book – what could the child do about it? This child had no way out. This child could not read, could not write and was powerless to bring about change.

How dare the author unload her concerns on the child!

I see this book as abusive.

So where do my ideas come from? The idea must serve the child not the author – and for me this means that I use anything which enhances the child. My ideas always spring from my affection for the child. I pose problems which the child can answer.

We play. We laugh. I hope I encourage the child to grow in strength, imagination and in spirit.

The process

A picture book has 32 pages – sometimes 24, but mostly 32. This is an economic use of paper. So you have a finite space. I buy a ring-bound sketchbook from the newsagent. My story evolves by making choices. I keep some drawings and throw some out. I start in the middle then move to the front or the back, or start at the back and move to the front, whatever. All this is done on loose bits of paper which I stick in with magic tape enabling me to shift them back and forth within the given space.

I have a photocopier. I can enlarge or reduce drawings. I allocate space for the text. The fewer the words the larger the type. The child is learning to read. Words need to be visually non-threatening.

Unfortunately because picture books have fewer than 48 pages they receive from the 'Authors Fund' only 30% of the allocation of money given to books with 48 pages or more. I see this as discrimination. This fund has been created by the government to reimburse authors for royalties they do not receive because their books are held in public libraries. There is good evidence that children's picture books in this public situation have a greater turnover than other books.

We who care about children and children's books should be working to change this. In Australia there is no such discriminating qualification. Are authors of children's books less worthy of compensation than those writing for adults?

This is not a record of my Margaret Mahy lecture. You cannot hear me "Took" "Tooking" and "Blah" "Blahing." You cannot see my slides or the antics of the screen as it involuntarily retreats into the ceiling. But it is about me and my books.

I want to thank Julie Watts, my editor, and Deborah Brash, my designer, for their contribution to the success of my books.

I think of my books as fragments of theatre and I thank all of you for your wonderful performances in bringing them to life.

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