

gathering images: the stories behind the pictures

Margaret Mahy Lecture by Robyn Belton

11 March 2006



Thank you! I am deeply honoured to accept this award. It is made even more significant by being Margaret Mahy's birthday. Today I want to thank you by giving you some stories!

In 1985 I was travelling to the NZLA Conference with Margaret Mahy, who was to be presented with the Esther Glen Medal. *The Duck in the Gun* had won the Russell Clark Award. I decided to take six-year-old Katie with me. Katie already knew Margaret's stories and that she had won quite a number of awards, and as we boarded the aeroplane, there was Margaret looking magnificent wearing her storytelling scarf with all the badges and buttons glistening. I introduced Katie to Margaret, and she looked admiringly at Margaret and at her scarf, then she said to Margaret 'are those all your medals?'

School Journal Part 1 Number Two 1980



Now, I'd like to give you an idea of the **stories behind the pictures**. Of course, the challenge in illustrating a story is always to build **around** the words; to **suggest** a feeling; to **evoke** an atmosphere – not to mirror the words exactly, but to **expand** on them and to add a richness – another kind of interpretation. I become an **accompanist** to the words; an **interpreter**, in a sense. Since I am illustrating and not writing the story, there is

necessarily a long 'gestation' time in which I am reading and re-reading the text to understand it fully. And so I begin by gathering images.

When my children were very young I had made a resolution to do a drawing every day, to keep my hand in. I drew what was around me – the children and the chaos of a busy household. And so it proved to be a valuable background for working for the *School Journal*. I began with the *School Journal* in 1977.

At this time, a group of us formed a puppet theatre. We wanted to give something back to the schools our children attended. We had professional musicians, who provided a wonderful atmosphere - once we were even

accompanied by the Recorder Consort from the Nelson School of Music. We performed *Rapunzel*, *Rumpelstiltskin*, *Three Billy Goats Gruff*, *The Fisherman and His Wife* and many other folk stories – using Leila Berg's wonderful retelling as our inspiration.

Our puppet theatre days were relatively short-lived and totally amateur, but they did provide me with a deeper insight into the power of gesture – a sense of slapstick - and the importance of setting the scene – telling a story. There was something magical about the small scale of a puppet theatre and especially having musicians perform with us.

Greedy Cat



After illustrating several *School Journal* stories I was asked to be a part of a team to help create the *Ready to Read* books for School Publications. (These were the years I overheard one of my children telling a friend 'My mum works for the School Pubs!')

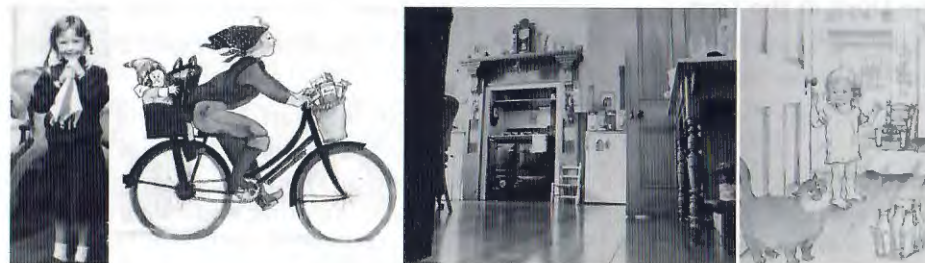
It was at this School Publications conference that Joy Cowley and I created *Greedy Cat*. Joy had just written it and I put some quick sketches to it, so that

it could be presented the next morning. I recall sitting together working, and loving the humour of it. It became one of the first stories to be used.

The 'secret messages' were included for fun, for of course the children would be busily reading the pictures! It was while working on the drawings for this book that I felt that something was needed to == form a tangible link with the five-year-old children who would be reading it. So I decided to put a new character into the pictures. A child – almost ready to start school. A child who would certainly have very real experiences of shopping with Mum, and more importantly, a child who could form a link with the child reader and help enhance the sequential build-up of this story. (A kind of sub-plot in pictures.)



The real Katie; Getting to Kindergarten; the kitchen - reality and image



And so I put my four-year-old daughter Katie into the pictures. And in the next *Greedy Cat* book, Joy included Katie's name in the text.

This of course is Greedy Cat's kitchen at home in Nelson – and Katie's chair – as it appears on the cover of the next *Greedy Cat* book.

And so began a long and richly rewarding collaboration with Joy Cowley.

Giant Soup



About this time, I illustrated *Giant Soup* for Margaret Mahy. I had already become enchanted with her delicious use of language (...Mrs Discombobulous! And Great Piratical Rumbustification!). So I was very pleased indeed to be illustrating this story. I love these lines ... *This soup must have a boy in it! He put on his giant sneakers and ran quietly out into the world.*

Crinkum-Crankum

Crinkum-Crankum was another of Margaret's stories I did at this time. Now, in the school grounds where Katie was at kindergarten, there was a marvellous, twisty tree. All the children climbed into it and in spring it was covered in flowers. It was the perfect crinkum-crankum tree. So, knowing that all these children would be starting school the following year, I drew them into the pictures.

One Saturday morning the school committee had a working bee to clean up the school playground. An enthusiastic father, chainsaw in hand, approached the tree saying This old tree has to go! Suddenly, one of the other fathers (whose child I had drawn into the pictures) raced over and shouted, 'You can't cut this tree down! It's the crinkum-crankum tree!'



And to this day, there it stands, at Nelson Central School. A testimony to Margaret's imagination – and to the quick thinking of one of the dads!

The Duck in the Gun

This is a story by Joy Cowley of how a war is fortuitously stopped by a duck who builds her nest in the barrel of a gun.

This was my first picture book and, right from the start, I loved the humour of this story. Joy's only brief was that it be set somewhere in Europe in the 19th century and to treat it as a send-up, a spoof. And so I had a field day, gathering images of battles, pompous generals, spectacular uniforms, and military fashion taken to extremes.



These early sketches show characterisation of the General – this first one I thought would be good until I re-read the story. I didn't think the Prime Minister's daughter would fall in love with this one! (Besides, he looked too much like a certain Prime Minister we had at the time!) So I thought of the other extreme – made the General tall and thin – admiring himself in a full-length mahogany dress mirror in a tent! – trying to look dashing and magnificent – but rather vain and foolish, nevertheless. In a book called *Military Fashion* I found that one soldier's job was to dress the General. This soldier carried a small tin of wax in a pouch on his belt – for waxing the General's moustache before he strode into battle! Military fashion indeed!

I loved the lines: *You could fire a shot at us... and then we could take the gun and fire a shot at you.*

I added a dog – to emphasise the gestures of the girl – they're wearing the same expression!



I had enthusiastic assistance from the Nelson Black Powder Club who even showed me how to fire a cannon! It is significant that this book was chosen for publication by the Hiroshima Peace Museum, especially as it was Joy's first anti-war book.

That same year, the 14th Annual International Reading Association Conference happened to be held in Nelson. And, best of all, the guest speaker was Edward Blishen of *BBC World of Books* fame. He gave a most compelling workshop on reading aloud, urging all teachers and parents to carry on this vital tradition. I recall that he said "Books aren't just an optional form of entertainment but are actually life-giving things."

Now, in those days, Nelson had as its emblem a large round apple with a stalk

and leaf on top. (You could see this as you drove into Nelson). And it was this same emblem that featured on everyone's name tags for the IRA Conference. Peter looked at mine and made the remark that it was rather a dubious honour being married to a member of the IRA.

Next morning I was to give a workshop about *The Duck in the Gun*. When I put on my name tag, I found that it had been curiously modified. The stalk now resembled a wick... complete with smoke... and underneath, a discreet inscription was written... BOMB THEM WITH BOOKS!

Donkey



This is a story by George Ciantar set in Egypt. Like all of George's stories it is autobiographical. The colour scheme was taken from children's tapestry weaving from a village near Cairo. George spent a lot of time with me, describing the detail and showing me photos of his childhood. (He was, at this time, a teacher at Richmond School in Nelson.) He asked me to portray him, dressed as a soldier; wearing his father's leather belt with clothes pegs clipped on! Although he was pleased with this, when it was sent to the publishers, they said they could not possibly use it, because they could not be seen to be condoning war toys. George was furious and said he would sue them, but good sense prevailed – and I redid the illustration as you see it in the first page of the book.

This was around the time I was doing a lot of work for Shortland and one of my children said – “Mum, there's a message for you from Shortland Complications!”

I needed to soften the sad ending. When the foal returns to its mother the pictures give a reason to the child reader.

The Choosing Day



This was my first book with Jennifer Beck and it is based on a birthday tradition in her family. As the little girl is called Briar, I used Briar Rose colours. I loved the

tenderness of their shared secret... *People will know when they see us that this is a special day. I wonder what they will say?*

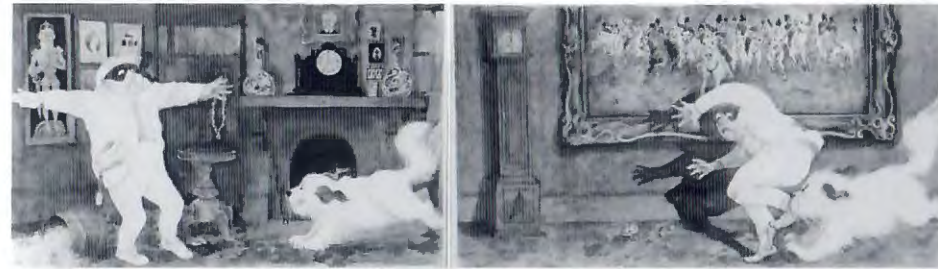
David's Dad



This is Jennifer's celebration of two of New Zealand's favourite traditions – the annual Christmas Parade and the Buzzy Bee. (When I was given a Choysa Award for these illustrations, I painted a packet of Choysa tea in the picture.) David has glasses. I included this detail for all the small children I knew who were struggling with wearing glasses.

(These illustrations were chosen for the Bologna Book Fair Exhibition.)

A Barrel of Gold



This is a school reader by Joy Cowley. I loved doing this book. I thought it would be amusing to have a battle painting charging out at the robber – I chose the *Charge of the Scot's Greys*



This dramatic recreation of the Charge of the Scot's Greys at Waterloo June 18, 1815 is the work of one of the best-known British military artists of the 19th century. Her sister was married to the Commanding Officer of

the Scot's Greys at the time and she was able to arrange for the regiment to charge her at her ease! She succeeded nonetheless in exaggerating the speed and density of the charge!

Keegan, John and Joseph Darracott. *The Nature of War*. Jonathan Cape, 1981.

Childhood



Our adult imagination owes a great deal to childhood experiences. Pure and simple moments leave lasting patterns of meaning. In my search for images I have looked back into my own childhood.

I feel lucky to have had a country childhood; an unhurried way of life which revolved around the seasons on the farm and, more importantly, around an extended family with

all our grandparents living close by. From haymaking to Harvest Festival, there were rich patterns to draw on.

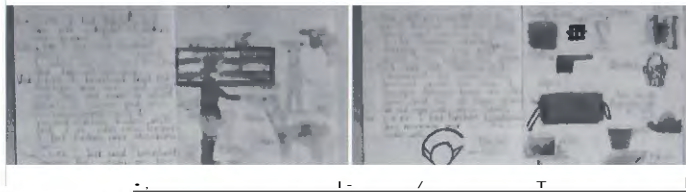
I loved this, my grandmother's sitting room; its rich dark wood, the smell of books. It was here I sat and listened, over afternoon tea, to the elderly relations. The great aunts, the distant cousins. Those grand and darkly dressed wonderful old people with bunions on their toes and fox furs on their shoulders! They had such stories to tell.

It was this very room I used as a background for *A Barrel of Gold*, so clearly had it remained in my memory.

Calf book



At my primary school we had an important annual event. This was Calf Day. The playing field was turned into a Judging Ring (just like the A & P Show) and judges came from the town, dressed in white coats and carrying arm loads of prize ribbons. We had to enter a calf or a pet lamb each year, and best of all, we had to keep a Record Book – a diary about the calf. So this was really my first book (aged about 11-12).



The paintings were all done with the watercolours my grandmother had given me. I came to know and love this medium. To this day

I use watercolours for every book. Watercolour is so expressive; it can represent the tenderest, softest feeling or become a powerful and foreboding sea storm.

More Greedy Cat

What fun when, all these years later, I have been able to draw on that experience in *Greedy Cat and the School Pet Show*.



Recently I illustrated *Greedy Cat and the Sneeze*.

My granddaughter, Pepa, had made this doll hospital at my house and it was the perfect background for Katie to be Greedy Cat's nurse!



The Christmas Caravan



A Christmas story with Jennifer Beck.

The magical Kiwi icon of the homebuilt caravan of the 1950s took on a new meaning when I actually came across this one in the Portobello Museum. It was owned by 97-year-old Mrs Alma Murray, who told me she towed it all around New Zealand behind a 6-cylinder Vauxhall Velux! (For this more mayoral occasion, I replaced it with a Rolls Royce.)

I loved this story because a small boy's initiative made a dream come true.

The Bantam and the Soldier

Jennifer writes from a deep compassion, and never more so than in *The Bantam and the Soldier* - a book close to my heart. This book arose from our discussions about family losses during both World Wars.

She told me about the postcard that her family took out every Anzac Day. I told her how every year we were

The Bantam and the Soldier



asked to lay the Anzac wreath, because as the Head Master said, 'You are the children who lost all your uncles.'

Jennifer said she had always wanted to write a story to help children understand Anzac Day better. It struck me that almost every single family in New Zealand would have been affected by the events of those wars – and I began my research; surrounding myself with photos and literature about the First World War, talking to old soldiers, visiting war museums, and delving into family history. *The Bantam* took a long time – I had to live it – and I lived and researched it for three years.



The Christmas tin was given to every soldier, every nurse, ambulance driver, everyone serving in that first year of the First World War. It was given as a gift on Christmas day and the initiative for this came from Princess Mary, the 17-year-old daughter of the King and Queen of England. Jennifer's story, *A Present from the Past* (2006), commemorates this gift.

It was while at the Hocken Archives, where I spent days looking and making drawings of the troopship's return page, that I thought of my own grandfathers serving in the First World War.

I remembered, as a child, finding a tiny coin on my grandmother's dressing table. A threepence cut in half. She told me that it was a very special coin. And she told me that they had only been married for a week before he left to be a soldier in the First World War. In those days a threepence was often regarded as good luck. So my grandfather took a small coin, cut it in half and wore it under his uniform. The other half he gave to my grandmother to keep. Exactly two years later, he returned on a troopship to New Zealand.



Many months later, the soldiers left Europe on a troopship for home. When they finally sailed into the harbour, the wharf was crowded with people waiting to welcome them. Arthur's family hardly recognised the tall young soldier being farewelled by his friends.



My grandmother was looking for him amongst the crowd of soldiers when suddenly she saw him waving to her! He had something in his hand. He threw it down to her. It was his handkerchief tied in a knot. And, when she untied it there was the other half of the threepence! I liked that story so much that I painted it into the picture.

This troopship return page presents an extraordinary moment in the lives of so many people affected by war and separation. We see in their faces a mixture of apprehension and joyous anticipation. We see a boy who hardly knows his father, and a young woman holding the baby her husband has never known.

I wanted to honour the place of women in war. In the Waiouru Museum I found a photo of two nurses who were ambulance drivers, Miss Marie Chisholm and Baroness de Terclaes, and I featured them in one of the illustrations. From the Otago Settlers Museum I also found that Mrs Janet Bowie had been awarded the MBE for knitting 1472 socks for the war effort!

When the soldiers had begun to recover their strength and it was time to leave, they pleaded to be allowed to take Bertha home with them.
"Sorry," replied the officer, "we've a long way to go. You must leave her here."



I loved the 'swords into ploughshares' sentiment in this book. Jennifer and I wanted to make history accessible. Stories like this must be told ... **'Lest we forget!'**



At last the battle front moved north and the fighting began to draw to an end.

Marta and the Manger Straw



In 2005 I was fortunate to have the opportunity to illustrate *Marta and the Manger Straw* for an American publisher. This story celebrates a Christmas tradition from Poland. It is a very special story. I love old traditions, especially Christmas ones. The eight-year-old girl in the story reminded me of my own granddaughter, Pepa, and so she became my artist's model for this book. I made her a red cloak for the role.

Since the story was set in pre-war rural Poland, a place I wasn't familiar with, there was much research needed.

I began gathering images at the library – 1930s *National Geographic* were a valuable source – then asked Ludmila Sakowski, art conservator, if she would be my Polish advisor. Not only was she delighted to do so, but she also introduced me to the entire Dunedin Polish Heritage Group. I watched their dance workshops, and looked through all the books they lent me about their homeland. The more I searched, the more rich material I found. I was moved by the beauty of the Polish traditions. I learned about a way of life in Poland that was tragically changed by the ravages of war. It was a world that was almost lost. But nothing touched me more deeply than learning about the 732 Polish refugee children who came to New Zealand during the Second World War. They came to the safety of New Zealand, but when they wanted to return home, it was no longer possible and most of them made New Zealand their home. Quite a few of the Polish group I met were those refugee children. Despite all that had been lost, they kept their traditions alive.



Dancers from the Otago Polish Heritage Dance Group



The things that matter never die
And these are the truths we keep in our hearts.

Above all, this book is about kindness and its story is a Polish tradition which has remained alive to this day.



And - just in case it all gets too serious - I am reminded by my visits to schools, just **exactly** who I am really working for.

Where those wonderful teachers, in my opinion, Unsung Heroes of Childhood, are conjuring up magic spells in their classrooms for the children.

It's wonderful to go into a classroom and see all the children buzzing with excitement about books – and of course they ask the funniest questions.

On a recent visit to a small country school, the teacher said to the children... 'Now ask sensible, thoughtful questions'... and one boy, full of enthusiasm asked, 'Are you an artist for your hobby?' I replied, 'Well, yes!' To which he said, 'My Dad's a pig hunter!'

And on another visit, I was drawing for the children when their teacher asked me to show them how to do shading. I looked at the group of very young children – some of them from the Kohanga Reo – and asked 'Does anyone know what shading is?' Straight away a small boy said, 'That's what my Dad does before he goes to work!'

One of the aspects of my work that I enjoy most is finding that the children have identified so strongly with a character, like Greedy Cat, he no longer belongs to Joy Cowley, or to me, but that he has become theirs.



And so I want to acknowledge just some of those who have helped me ...

- My parents and grandparents who sowed the seeds of confidence and gave me a childhood rich in memories
- My writers and publishers, especially Joy Cowley, Jennifer Beck and Margaret Mahy
- Ray Richards, long-time supporter and friend
- My own children and my husband Peter, who has supported me in **every** way (chief art critic, collaborator; I couldn't have done it without him)
- And my colleagues; all the writers and illustrators; all the children's literature people.

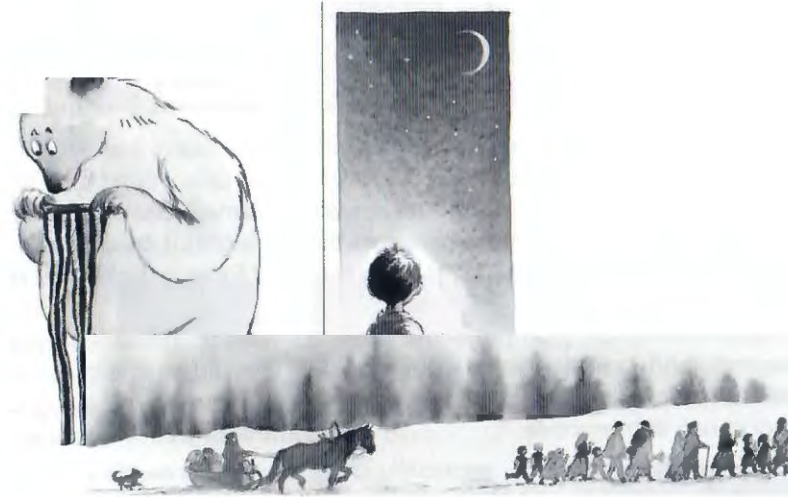
And that was the end of that!

I feel so lucky to be part of a fraternity of this quality.

It is hard surviving as an illustrator or writer in New Zealand but what keeps us going is the wonderful fraternity that exists. It's one of support, endearment and encouragement.

For me, this award celebrates all of you who have inspired and encouraged me throughout all these years.

Thank you!



These represent just a selection of the 115 images shown during Robyn's illustrated talk. They provide a taste of her art and her dedication.