Learning to Swim in the Deep

by Tessa Duder

The text of the lecture delivered by Tessa Duder on being presented with The Margaret Mahy Award 1996 *by the New Zealand Children's Book Foundation.*

One night last November, I was sitting in a small, hot room at the Auckland College of Education. On the agenda of the Children's Book Foundation monthly meeting was the Margaret Mahy Award. I knew only that nominations had closed and a small sub-committee had been convened. Who had been nominated, how many and by whom had been kept under wraps. I didn't know that Joan Brockett had been authorised to tell the meeting the results of their deliberations. This year it was again a writer.

Well, the finest surprises are those that come totally out of the blue. As Joan talked in general terms about the achievements of 'the writer' I began to shift uncomfortably in my chair, my mind making close-to-home connections whilst simultaneously racing as to who else she might be talking about. Two others flashed through my mind; that fits, no, that doesn't, that doesn't either, oh God... Up to that point Joan, and all the CBF management committee had been absolute souls of discretion.

The moment of hearing I was indeed 'the writer' will remain one of the most precious of my career, and I must express my deep gratitude to my colleagues and to the children's literature community

I am proud to be part of. To be linked in any way with Margaret, a woman who is beyond question one of the great New Zealanders and the great writers of our time, would be enough in itself. Add to this the deep pleasure of being honoured by one's peers, and especially that group of exceptional people who comprise the CBF committee.

So, a formal lecture, subject of my choosing. What could I possibly say that you, especially here on my own patch in Auckland, haven't already heard me sound off about, more than once before? In previous years Elsie Locke and Joy Cowley have spoken so movingly about their childhoods - mine is comparatively bland. No real hardship, illness, poverty there, writers' raw material. Dorothy Butler and Betty Gilderdale have eloquently reminded us of the absolute necessity of books and stories in children's lives, more than ever in the information age. Compared to their lifetimes of hammering away at a truth which I believe to be now widely accepted, I'm a Johnny-come-lately.

Should I tell you? - yes, I think I will - that in 1994, at the NZ Reading Association's annual conference, I gave what was the first and last formal talk on the subject of Alex, where she came from and why the books have hit the mark. It trod a precarious line between genuinely objective inquiry and self-congratulation, but I was at least aware of the dangers and took the precaution of having three writer friends read it beforehand. I was comfortable with the paper I presented back then and, having read it again recently, still am. Yet it was reported back to me, perhaps injudiciously, that one participant at the conference - not even an Aucklander! - went back to

Palmerston North saying that she'd heard Tessa Duder speak about herself once too often.

I don't mind admitting, that hurt. Over-exposure is one of the occupational hazards of writers who rashly accept invitations to speak, or being judged to be less interesting than their work. Actually, on that occasion I was talking more about Alex than me, and the two are not the same. I spent my first five years in Palmerston North. I am normally well disposed towards Palmerstonians. I was also a touch baffled - I go along to hear writers for the express purpose of hearing them talk about themselves, and she had every right to vote with her feet, and sleep in that morning or go shopping. But then we know that sadly not all 'teachers of reading' actually read books, and therefore writers per se are presumably of no great interest, not even, or specially if, they hail from the same town. However, I've been growing a thicker skin in recent years. As a writer, a playwright, and involved in literary politics, I've had to. And what I want to talk about is the work and the people of the community I know best: writers.

And already there's a danger. Why should you, who do support children's literature in one way or another, be sympathetic to, or even interested in, notions of misunderstanding, or plagiarism, or cultural vandalism, or problems with publishers, or what a bloody hard way it is, even for versatile children's writers, to make a consistently adequate living in the 1990s?

Stop whingeing, you might already be crying, and talking about yourself, and get on with it! Writers say they practise the craft of writing, are professionals like anyone else. You can't have it both

ways. Write two stories before breakfast, send one to *Ears* and the other to the *School Journal,* two chapters of your novel before lunch, visit a school this afternoon, dream up a couple of 'school readers' on the drive home and catch up with your correspondence tonight. A normal day. What's so special about writers?

Well, nothing - and everything. In Russia my belief is they have always honoured writers as thinkers and visionaries. In Ireland the Government tops up, from the public purse, the royalty incomes of an academy of established writers. In Nigeria last year they took a dim view of some political writing and hung some of the perpetrators. In Iran they issued a call for the death of a writer. In Canada that mysterious force called 'public will' ensures that writers get something over 14% of the arts council vote (compared with ours, nearer 2%) and in Denmark they have a well-funded public lending right scheme that goes back to 1946. The Australia Council awards writers handsome two-year scholarships and the Government has recently agreed that the public lending right should be extended to school libraries.

And yes, in New Zealand, individual writers - think of Margaret Mahy, Janet Frame, Fiona Kidman, Maurice Gee, Joy Cowley, Sandra Coney, Witi Ihimaera - do enjoy considerable mana in the wider community.

There are a few who by sheer hard work and knowing their markets are making a good if unpredictable living - the Mills and Boon writers, writers under contract to business like Gordon McLauchlan, a loose cannon like Alan Duff, the sports journos who

publish glossy hagiographies of rugby or cricket players, the film writers who move from one project to another getting generous development money along the way, a handful of children's writers whose many books span a lifetime of writing and both the educational and trade markets.

The rest of us get by on rather less than you might imagine. You have good years and bad years, and $300 for a weekend's teaching can boil down to a cash flow problem when it's the only income for three weeks and two months before your next royalty cheques arrive. A few writers each year do get help with grants from what we now call by its silly, babytalk title of *Creative New Zealand.* (Apparently one of the bosses thought the word 'arts' fusty and old-fashioned, to be got rid of.) Awards and competitions are sponsored, by AIM, Montana, the Listener, the ASB, the Sunday Times, Metro, Tearaway magazine. We do have a modest public lending right, (that is, authors' compensation for books held in public libraries) and we do get invited around the place to festivals and schools. We have, in the New Zealand Society of Authors, incorporating PEN, the strongest and most effective creative artists' trade union in the country.

So what's my problem? It's not actually mana or grants or festivals or even money I'm talking about. It's *attitude* to writers in these multi-media times, how they work and what happens to their ideas.

Ah, ideas! I like the Concise Oxford's first entry: *A conception or plan formed by mental effort.* To Plato ideas were more real, more perfect and more lasting than anything we can touch or see. Through modern philosophers like Joseph Campbell and Lloyd Geering we are

currently reaffirming, in the post-Christian age of information, that myth, religion and history are all inter-connected, based on powerful storytelling and open to constant change and revision. Lloyd Geering says, *'We still live by stories, for from ancient times right down to the present we humans have used stories or myths to structure the world in which we live. By stories we reach back to our roots in the past and by stories we try to look into the future ... in each day of our life we are weaving the story which constitutes our very identity.'*

How do stories begin? Where do they come from? Anyone who calls herself a writer and has stood in front of any group of people of whatever age, has at question time been asked the one, certain question. *'Where do you get your ideas from?'*

Borrowing from Ursula Le Guin, I might say yes, you can write to a mail order house for ideas in Kerikeri. Writers can subscribe for five or ten or (at bargain rates) twenty-five ideas a month. Yes, this can be done on e-mail or the receipt of a stamped addressed envelope.

Le Guin has written what I think is the definitive serious response. The question, she says, is unanswerable, because it involves two false notions as to how fiction is written.

First, that there is a 'secret' to being a writer, and this closely guarded secret just might be where ideas come from. Le Guin says firmly, the 'secret' is skill, a certain disposition combined with all the variables of any complex art, some teachable and some not and learned only '*by methodical, repeated, long-continued practice - in other words, by work.'*

The second false notion is that stories start from ideas. In a celebrated essay on science fiction as novels published in 1976, Le Guin enthusiastically quoted Virginia Woolf's assertion that *'it is to express character that the form of the novel, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved.'*

Le Guin went on:

> *A book does not come to me as an idea, or a plot, or an event, or a society, or a message; it comes to me as a person. A person seen, seen at a certain distance, usually in a landscape. The place is there, the person is there. I didn't invent him, I didn't make her up; he or she is there. And my business is to get there too.*

Exactly! The question should be, where do you get your characters from? That is the greater mystery. I saw Alex rushing round on a bike, untidy, disorganised, driven, driving everybody mad. I saw Jellybean, a docile, thinking child, sitting at the back of a shabby hall in Dominion Road, listening to an orchestra rehearse. I saw Sam sitting terrified in the darkness, in the middle of the Hauraki Gulf, steering the family yacht to imagined disaster. My short story called *Tuesdays* in my recent *Falling in Love* anthology began with a flower-seller trying to peddle me a rose in a Chinese take-away in Ponsonby Road; I thought, who is this young woman, and why is she doing this? I've recently written a story about a boy called Freddie Bone, a plump Maori kid of about 11 whom I saw standing on a block in his Speedos at the start of a swimming race, and conscious that the whole universe can see his boobs.

Margaret Mahy told you five years ago that *The Tricksters* began when she saw dark and sinister reflections in the shiny walls of New Zealand House in London. *Memory* began with the image of an old man pushing an empty trolley through a supermarket carpark at 2 a.m. Norven, in *The Great White Man-Eating Shark,* was herself in a swimming pool in New Mexico in 1987, conscious of two young lovers snogging at one end, feeling intrusive and resentful and turning herself into a shark in order to get the pool to herself.

In *Baby Floats,* Martin Baynton remembered the child of two or three, hospitalised for acute excema, hands gloved and tied to the bed-head, escaping every night by floating up and away, exhilarated but terrified. Along with every five-year-old whom Martin has ever read that story to, J.M. Barrie also knew of the seductive dangers of being able to fly, not only in the dark but broad daylight. My own flying dreams were always swimming ones – a gloriously weightless and speedy freestyle through the ether, often swooping around the ceilings of very large rooms or around the outside of compounds with curiously tall wire fences, always petrified of some snarling menace below. I must not lose height. I must stay suspended, free, powerful, up here. It's not a bad metaphor for a writer working on her first novel in five years, and still rather too vulnerable to reaction to every piece of work she hands over. I still dream of flying. Unlike Margaret, who claims she likes swimming in deep water while pondering the fear of having her leg bitten off, I've kept mostly to the shallows, safe up and down a swimming pool where the challenge is internal, dealing with your own pain and boredom. Part of my writer's journey of the last fifteen years and especially of the last five, has been learning to swim in the deep, my toes intact.

But what happens when you actually write? Le Guin talks of five kinds of patterning that seem to be operating: the patterns of sound, syntax, images, ideas and feelings. Central to them is the imagery which takes place in the imagination, *'the meeting place of the thinking mind with the sensing body. What is imagined isn't physically real, but it feels as if it were ... in the imagination we can share a capacity for experience and an understanding of truth far greater than our own. The great writers share their souls with us - 'literally.'*

Now that, I understand. In the last two years I've run a number of adult writers' workshops and more and more I find myself saying to students: writing fiction is not about style, a gift for description or being clever with words, it is about making choices for your characters, and finding, from your own experience of life, the essential truth of a story and the imagery that will clothe that truth and make it real. But when Le Guin talks about sharing souls I begin to hear a voice and the voice is saying, beware the perils of self-indulgence.

Self-indulgence is not currently a pleasant accusation to make about anybody's work or temperament, and it's one that I know has been whispered of mine. We currently respect notions of self-love and self-esteem but not self-indulgence or being self-obsessed. My dictionary defines self-indulgence as indulging or tending to indulge in pleasure, idleness etcetera. I grew up in a household where pleasure was something you took when all, and I mean all, the work had been done. Or that's how it felt. Only when the kitchen was swept, the clothes

ironed, garden weeded and tomorrow's breakfast table set, would my mother, typical of that generation, sit down to her particular life-giving pleasure, her burnished golden cello. Hairshirt and routine won over pleasure in the end, and, hearing the warning of her beloved instrument's song, I still fight vestiges of my early role-modelling. It's clearly worn off now, but I was trained early to guard against the dangers of skiteing, showing off, being the centre of attention and *enjoying it.* With my own daughters I was less flexible with their moments of pleasure, rather than the 'shoulds' of homework and bed-times, than I like to remember. I look at younger parents these days and marvel at their ability to drop everything and read a story or go to the beach. So I'm not at all convinced that self-indulgence, being intemperate, enjoying pleasure - is necessarily sinful.

But applied to writing, writers and other art forms, self-indulgence – or less politely, ego-tripping or wanking – is usually a serious and negative accusation. But passion! ah, that's something else. Or is it – it seems to me that there's always an element of self-indulgence in passion. New Zealanders are not, as a race, very comfortable with passion. When I tell young children that I, and all real writers, am passionate about writing, that the urge to write comes from somewhere deep inside, *down here*, I sometimes sense a slight discomfort among the teachers, some sense of surprise that I, who looks so normal, should be talking about passion, and to children too.

So just how much credibility do you give to that tedious and suffocating work ethic, still with us, that says that anything you adore doing, are passionate about, work yourself to the bones for, and that needs an audience to share it, approve it and appreciate it, is not only sinful but can't be *work?* Not Real Work.

I know plenty of actors who'll happily admit they can't wait to get on a stage, who write pieces as acting vehicles for themselves; singers who believe they were born to sing, musicians to whom the physical act of playing their instrument, not only to themselves but to an audience, is as vital to them as breathing; dancers whose every step is rehearsed in front of a mirror, and to whom living means dancing, sharing their souls.

I saw Michael Parmenter's one-man show *A Long Undressing* recently. He has survived surgery for cancer and lived with the HIV virus for some ten years now and by rights shouldn't still be alive, yet even at nearly 40 he has the muscled body of the Greek statue, and his story told in words and dance was noble, frequently funny, heart-breaking, beautiful. Although he was transparently taking pleasure in his performance, there had not been a trace of self-indulgence. In a presentation lasting nearly two hours, without an interval, there could so easily have been by its length alone. I left the theatre feeling, not depressed and wrung out, but greatly privileged. So why did I come away from a similar farewell one-man show of another dying performer four years ago, feeling wrung out, not so much privileged as uncomfortable? He was, I think, performing primarily for himself, and that vital element of dark humour, gently self-mocking, was not much in evidence. He had bared his soul to his audience, but somehow, not shared it.

But there's another element here, one which brings me back to writers and writing. Parmenter's script was exactly right: ironic, balanced, under-stated, unsparing in medical and sexual details, compassionate. It was simply and gracefully delivered. The whole evening had a natural flow, a rightness of timing to it: just enough dance, just enough words. Ursula Le Guin's statement applies as much to theatre as to literature:

> *It's a writer's business to develop an infallible sense for the proper size and length of a work; the beauty of the novella and novel is essentially architectural, the beauty of proportion.*

I find myself increasingly interested in proportion and timing these days, and particularly as they apply to the business of writing. Remember the ads for the last series about a future British Prime Minister Francis Urquhart? - Ian Richardson as EU, planning his next Machiavellian move, 'Timing is *everything'*.

Good – if accidental – timing helped me to get *Night Race to Kawau* accepted in 1980. Wendy Harrex was looking for manuscripts to begin her Oxford children's list and I stepped into the children's literature scene when it had been painstakingly primed through the seventies by people like Tom Fitzgibbon, Betty Gilderdale, Dorothy Butler, Margaret Mahy, Anne de Roo, Joan de Hamel and Elsie Locke. It was set to take off, and I, not realising my good luck, took off with it. By more good fortune, I got the Choysa bursary at exactly the right time in my career, between *Jellybean* and *Alex*, between apprenticeship and a growing surety that I was finding my own voice.

The timing is right for me, in 1996 after four difficult, diverse, watershed years, for a new novel.

I've come to think a sense of timing, from which follows a natural rhythm, a sense of proportion, is about the one thing you can't teach aspiring writers. You can teach them to consider tense and voice and tone, talk about structure and imagery, work on dialogue, how to build up characters and to edit their own work, but in the end I don't think you can teach that sense of rhythm in narrative and language which is not quite the same as structure.

Every story you write, be it long novel or short story, poses this problem of narrative rhythm: shall I move the story forward, deal with this next key moment luxuriously in two pages or sparsely in twenty lines, in dialogue or in indirect speech? Shall I allow myself to be temporarily taken over by that character or seduced into describing that seascape?

Timing is everything. Is the reason that literally hundreds of people have told me that reading *Alex* they cried at Andy's death, mostly because of its placing in the novel; a bombshell timed, more by instinct than technique, to detonate with maximum emotional force? Personally, I think so. There are some self-indulgent passages in the four Alex books but that is not one of them. Is the death of Agnes the sheep in William Taylor's award-winning book so effectively comic because of Bill's own instinctive, sure sense of timing? For me, bursting into laughter when poor old Agnes rolled over on page 131 and died beside the display of Meats in the Food Giant supermarket, the answer is yes. Are the opening chapters of Maurice Gee's *The Fat*

Man so cruelly convincing because of the unhurried, deliberate, inexorable pace at which Herbert Muskie begins to torment his young victim? For me, yes. Did I start out impressed but then literally lose the plot of *Sophie's World*, that clever 1995 blockbuster novel about the history of philosophy, simply because for me the narrative and characters became overblown and tedious and about two-thirds of the way through I just wanted it to end.

Well, you can warn writers, and yourself, of the dangers of self-indulgence and you can suggest that they must develop 'an infallible awareness of the beauty of proportion: and that's all very fine. Self-indulgence is often levelled at someone or their work when this sense of proportion and timing is at odds with expectations: it's not the subject matter, as such, but they have simply gone on too long for the perceived weight of the material or for the intended audience.

Here I come hard up against a growing and dishonourable attitude towards writers and their works and it's coming from a disturbing number of sources. We live in a busy, confusing, changing world, the dawning Age of Information. People want data and quickly, they haven't got time for all those words, children and teens are far too busy for long books or any books at all. Their attention spans are getting shorter. They want images, not words - they don't understand all those hard words. They want short sentences, short books. Relevance. No history, that's boring. Here, now, today, short, sharp, relevant, don't waste my time, their time. They won't ...

Excuse me? They won't ... ? Who won't? The whole class, or just the ratbags, more likely to be male? Who *won't?*

My evidence is entirely anecdotal. In the course of the year, I get around to many schools, primary, intermediate and secondary. I listen to teachers, I read everything about education and children I see in the Herald and other papers. I read Gordon McLachlan and others regularly complaining about the 'dumbing down' of language, in new versions of the Bible, in student essays, in the scripts of what are supposed to be serious television dramas and documentaries, self-evidently in television itself. I talk to publishers, booksellers and other writers, actors and playwrights. And so much I hear leads me to believe that it's the system, *therefore us* who are copping out here. We can't point the finger at the generation of under 25s we are purporting, through the language arts of literature and drama, to teach and entertain.

So, what do we get? Some examples.

I hear there's a tendency at 5th form to teach only books that come with accompanying video. In the 1995 School Cert English paper, according to the marker of 350 papers, himself a published writer, who told me this, the answers were very much more about the video than the literature. John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* was overwhelmingly the preferred choice of book and film. What does that, fine book 'tho it is, tell them about their own country in the nineties? What it tells me is that English teachers are, for whatever reason, teaching this film (and the book that goes with it) effectively. *Alex* was the only New Zealand video (and book) that showed up. There have been no such things as national set texts for three decades, except for a Shakespeare in seventh form. Some are teaching

New Zealand literature enthusiastically, and theirs are the classrooms I and my colleagues get invited to, but if a school has a climate of ignorance and indifference or even hostility to New Zealand literature, so too will its students be ignorant, indifferent or hostile. They may come out of primary schools and later, English classes, having seen a lot of videos, hit a lot of keyboards, and read a Goosebump or two, if you're lucky.

I read recently that the New Zealand Water Safety Council has prodded the Ministry of Education into reintroducing, by 1998, swimming as a compulsory activity in all schools. Well, well! Pity for that generation of this sea-girt land whom we neglected to teach to swim; pity for the families whose kids drown; no pity for bureaucrats locked away behind plate glass whose deregulatory ideologies five years ago bound up in Tomorrow's Schools outweighed common sense and any notion of what is *real* in ordinary people's lives. Perhaps today's bureaucrats and politicians are increasingly thirtysomething and childless. Children are real, and most of us live near water and our children's safety is very real. Of course every child should be taught to swim, just as they should all be lovingly taught their own country's myths, legends and literature. How else will they know what makes them different from Australians, or Canadians? They're not getting much sense of their cultural heritage from our ratings and sports obsessed television, that's for sure, unless you count the Auckland Warriors as culture in its broadest sense.

As Lloyd Geering puts it, *'the cultural heritage of a people is most clearly to be found in the cycle of stories it transmits from generation to generation.'* I wonder how long it will be before the clever ideologues in the Ministry of Education realise that many kids are coming through the system unschooled in their own literary culture, their own country's stories untransmitted to them, and thus no pride in their country. Many are drowning in a sea of soaps, computer games and imported noise.

Let's put on a play! I've had some experience in recent years with drama in schools, both as performer and writer. And, 'tho I accept that I'm a writer in love with language, I can't accept the notion that the young of today are so totally in love with moving images that they have completely lost the ability to be moved by words alone. I've been told that these kids (kids, mind you, who will sit at a computer screen for days on end), won't sit through a play running more than two hours.

So let's cut out all the poetic stuff, whether from Shakespeare or Arthur Miller or a new play, no matter, and get it down to an hour and a half because what they want is not talking heads mouthing monologues and worse, *ideas*, but a great storyline with simple dialogue, plenty of action, flashy lights and music. 'Wordy; levelled at a new script, is not a compliment these days. Physical theatre, multi-media theatre is where it's at; everything else but words.

Probably the most satisfying audience we had for a performance of *The Warrior Virgin*, the full-length play about Joan of Arc that Martin Baynton and I wrote last year, was a group of Form 2 and 3 students from Clover Park School in Mangere. Most had never been to live theatre before. From start to finish they sat like mice. Their teachers

were agreeably astonished. These kids had never sat for an hour and 40 minutes for anything. But they sat, and they were rapt and at the end they came onto the stage with their eyes alight. I vividly remember my first stage show – a pantomime in Edinburgh, age 6, and two little green men getting swords stuck right through them! – I remember that experience as I'm sure those kids from Clover Park will remember *The Warrior Virgin.* Some of them may get into drama classes later on, who knows, or develop an interest in women's studies or European history, or be provoked by the issues raised in the play to pursue a career in environmental science or genetics, as a result: who can possibly know? Who can deny it is possible?

But, let's put on a play, say a group of stage-struck twentysomethings who have been raised in this growing climate of indifference to language and total lack of respect for writers. We've done lots of improv. and Theatresports, fan-tastic, who needs writers, but what about something really meaty. There's this great play, *A Streetcar Named Desire,* great parts, let's put a spin on it, get it down to an hour and a bit, hey, let's cut out all the characters except Blanche, Stanley and Stella, hey let's have Blanche played by a man, Stanley by a woman, wow, yeah. This happened recently in Wellington. It was previewed and reviewed seriously in the national press. I've heard from at least three sources that by any standards of professional or even fringe theatre it was not a good night. From all accounts, it was a travesty of a great play and one of the best female parts in American drama. The young audience loved it, but it was

not Tennessee Williams' play they were seeing, and, here's the rub, they *didn't know it* and very probably *didn't care.*

I say, with some feeling, that if people feel they want to perform a proven play about an alcoholic, repressed woman on her beams ends coming to live with her younger married sister, and her inevitable seduction and destruction by the macho husband, then let them do Tennessee Williams' play with respect for the text. Raymond Hawthorne, that most punctilious and respected of acting teachers, requires his students to consider not only every word but also that every comma, exclamation and question mark means something, is a coded signal from a writer to an actor.

Alternatively, if the young want to play around with the *idea* that the Blanche, Stella and Stanley triangle presents, let *them* sit down at their laptops and go through the months of agony of writing it, and workshopping it, and re-writing it and having bad actors ruin and change their words and directors misunderstand their intentions, and someone deciding let's do it cross-dressed, and then everyone turning round and saying, well, it was in the writing.

Where do you draw the line? By cultural vandalism I do not mean re-interpretations, a certain amount of audacity and playfulness with famous pieces. All the performing arts are currently being re-vitalised, fused together in unlikely and exciting combinations, finding new audiences. I just loved the recent combination of dance and pop music in the Sydney Dance Company's *Berlin,* or the Reduced Shakespeare company's *Hamlet* in two minutes or the idea of the Dance of the Little Swans in *Swan Lake* being performed by a

quartet of lithe young men in tights. In recent years I've seen productions of *Romeo and Juliet* set in Samoa and modern Italy, a *Twelfth Night* set on a cruise ship, another in Edwardian England, a *Hedda Gabler* set in 1950s Godzone, a *Don Giovanni* in 1940s black and white, a *Cyrano de Bergerac* with drums and puppets. My daughter Georgia is currently in a whacky Australian production of *The Mikado* which improbably combines Gilbert and Sullivan with pantomime, Broadway and Elvis Presley. All these were fresh, exciting readings of the classics for modern audiences, and only thus, with all the technological possibilities now open to directors of integrity, will the classics and live theatre survive. More traditional readings, such as are done by the great repertory companies and talented amateur groups, still have their place.

There is still room for integrity, and respect for both writer and audience in all this.

But when you get three cross-dressed actors pretending they are doing that *Streetcar* by Tenneesee Williams, when you get Anne Fine rarely acknowledged anywhere as the creator of Mrs Doubtfire, when you get a *Much Ado About Nothing* mounted as *Cabaret* without the songs and Benedict and Beatrice virtually relegated to bit parts, and when you get actors and directors, young and older, hacking round dialogue or imposing inappropriate physical movement on the text of both classics and new untested plays in the spurious belief that audiences are now bored by mere words, because '*kids won't* ... ' - then that is, for me, unacceptable, self-indulgent vandalism,

gimmickry based on intellectual dishonesty and lack of respect for your audience, and my writer's hackles start to rise.

Actually, my hackles have been uprising for some time now, because this malady - this lack of integrity and respect for the *writer's* choices, this idea that you know better than the writer - is not confined to drama, or even more notoriously film, where a famous quote from a Hollywood director says that the first thing you do with a book you're about to adapt is throw it *out* the window, in every sense of the phrase. Musicians are generally trained to have considerable reverence for the composers' scores, and opera companies employ repetiteurs whose job it is to ensure absolute accuracy. Without accuracy and respect for the notation in an opera performance you stand to have a shambles. I enjoyed the cannons, lasers and fireworks which accompanied the 1812 *Overture*, Tchaikowsky's 1812 *Overture*, at the recent Symphony in the park, as much as anyone.

But I couldn't stomach the Hallelujah chorus with green lasers punctuating the Domain skyline. Please! I can't stomach the notion that a concert hall for Holst's *Planets Suite* now has to be set up with strobe lights and galaxies floating by on giant videos, or that young violinists have to present themselves as funky sex objects while playing Mozart, as if Mozart wasn't enough any more. If you want all the art forms at once, you go to opera or musical theatre or rock concerts, which is what the composer, librettist, designer, choreographer, director, producer and performers come together to provide. *But* great music was written primarily to be listened to, not

watched, and great writing was written to be read or performed as it was published, or adapted for the modern climate with respect and integrity. We are doing the young a disservice if we assume that the generation which listens to *Smashing Pumpkins* will not, can not listen to words, will not cannot appreciate the classics without hyping up the music-writers' intentions in laser lights or adapting book-writers' stories as 3-part mini-series. We are getting perilously close, again, to bread and circuses - the only two things, according to satirist Iuvenal, the people of Rome in 100 AD eagerly longed for. Perilously close.

There have been disturbing trends in recent years in the literary world, too, amongst some teachers, and reviewers and alarmingly, publishers, the people we need most and who equally need us. I'm not talking about the hype and greed that, fuelled by a celebrity-obsessed media, surrounds overseas best-sellers, or the monstrous advances paid to their writers, but about those of us who work at a much more modest level.

Writers are usually reasonable and sensitive people, and most of us do understand the benefits of good and wise editing, costings, print runs and market forces. But some comments flying round the international literary grapevine in the last few years sound alarmingly familiar. Sometimes they come from editors, sometimes from sales managers, educators, booksellers, parents. I don't think they come from writers. *Short books, because kids won't... Simple stories, because kids won't ... Cut out the hard words, because kids won't. .. Write science fiction, because boys won't ...*

And don't worry if the author has to wait ten months for acceptance or rejection; dont spend the time of in-house editors or money on freelance editors for close, painstaking editorial scrutiny, (the sort that Katherine Paterson has described was lavished on *Bridge to Terabithia);* or take the time and effort to get the cover right no matter what (as Geoff Walker at Penguin thankfully did with the first paperback of *Alex);* or market the book even adequately (a frequent and bitter allegation by authors at their publishers) because the costings of the book have screwed everyone down to a tight publishing schedule.

So a text on which an author has slaved for a year and a $600 advance comes out cut down to size, inadequately edited with an unappealing cover. The book looks and reads ho-hum, doesn't excite sales reps or booksellers or teachers much, and does less well on sales than it could have done. Then we hear that kids are reading less, playing Doom more. Should we be surprised? Everybody loses.

I think the effect of all this has been that some of our most promising writers, even established writers, feel compromised, downgraded, even in a creative straight-jacket being zipped up by the very people who need them. There's been a quality of earnestness, an eagerness to please, a timidity close to political correctness about some of our recent fiction, both for adults and for the young.

With a few honourable exceptions, (well-known among the literary community), emerging or even established writers are not being encouraged by adequate advances or editorial cherishing or aggressive marketing to spread their creative wings, take real career

risks, to be self-indulgent for once and write longer and braver books if they feel in their bones that it is right for the story. Because of the need of both parties to make a crust in difficult and changing times, our writers are being encouraged to do fast-turn-around literature. That's fine as far as it goes, and brings in enough dollars to live on, but they are capable of so much more.

Down the track the readers of the future are being short -changed. With computers becoming increasingly the preferred way of storing data and providing entertainment, surely such books as are published are going to have to be *more* finely crafted in every respect?

I personally do see a future place for the novel, that 'clumsy, verbose, rich, elastic and alive' long story about memorable characters and profound ideas, and I think the future novel made of paper will be longer rather than shorter. Computers and film will deal with fast-turnaround stories, the junk food. Novels will remain the banquet, sensual and enticing, sharing two souls, and will continue to portray the memorable characters and stories about the human condition attractive to producers as the beginnings of successful films and television drama.

Hollywood script doctor Linda Segar, who worked on the script of *Alex* in 1992, has written that a significant majority of notable films begin as novels, so shouldn't novelists and novels become more important, not less, and be more properly honoured as the originators of the story, and rather more than the writers who are hired to turn them into film scripts? When I find authors whose work excites me, I want more not less, I want to overdose on them, take their books into the bath with me, share the soul that has been offered.

I've been telling William Taylor for years that I'd love to see him do a longer book, relax his admirable self-discipline for a bit, and yes, allow himself some self-indulgence in his writing. *Circles,* to be published in July, is a full 60,000 words and his most ambitious novel to date. I think it will surprise his admirers, and win many more. I hope that Paula Boock will allow herself more indulgences in her next books, likewise the talented Fleur Beale and Janice Marriott and the prolific Ken Catran, and Martin Baynton, in the first teenage novel he intends to write soon. Kate de Goldi, otherwise known as the poet Kate Flannery, is about to burst on the scene with *Sanctuary,* an exciting debut novel I had the privilege of reading in manuscript. Bill Payne, he of those tough short stories *Poor Behaviour,* is working on a young adult novel. I'm not saying that I hope all these books clock in at 75,000 words and hey presto they'll be marvellous, or downplaying the crucial role of editors. We know they have their constraints, that the M.D. is an accountant breathing profit margins and hellfire down their necks. No-one has more reason than me to be grateful to Wendy Harrex for the good yarn she found inside the fat beginner's manuscript that was *Night Race to Kawau,* or the work that she did on *Alex.* I'm not sympathetic to the notion, held to by Keri Hulme and some lesser talents during the ’80s, that writers are so beyond reproach that not a single comma of this work shall be touched. But I want writers to be able to give themselves permission

to indulge themselves a bit more, to find the passion that I think is currently not greatly in evidence.

What I think needs to be forcefully re-stated is that writing is a lonely, isolated and difficult art, daily involving a multitude of choices. And choice is stressful. Another occupational hazard of writers may be that our ability to keep answering the question, *what happens next?* spills over into the way we deal with real life. Given a situation, our over-active minds race ahead to dream up pleasant or unpleasant solutions, endlessly analyzing people's motivations and what they might do, or not do, next. I remember discussing this once with Gaelyn Gordon, and finding that we shared this tendency. As another late starter in the writing game, she said ruefully, 'It took me a while to realise that other people were not like this.'

When you're doing it professionally it takes time. Or rather, it takes me time. Okay, so I feel the urge to write a story about someone I've seen in my head, a fat Maori boy with boobs. Ah, I know - his only joy in life is water, swimming. He trains with a squad but he's a plodder.

Before I could go any further with the story I needed to create a world for him. I stared at a page of refill for three hours and at the end of it I knew his family, where he lived, why he so loved to swim, and the one circumstance under which his plumpness could actually be an advantage. From the idea of that one circumstance, which took me about two hours concentrated mental effort to reach, arose the story, and only then could I start to write. Then I had to decide the narrative voice, the tense, and establish a tone, which all required experiment, writing and rewriting. A great many possibilities, drawn

from my whole life experience, had been considered, accepted or discarded before I made my final deceptively simple choices.

If my story has the ring of truthfulness about it, a narrative flow, a fresh association of ideas (and I believe it has), it's not because I'm a 'born storyteller' but because I have learned, with passion and playfulness and concentrated mental effort, how to construct stories. Only one short story, to be published in Canada later this year, have I ever sat down and written virtually straight off in three hours, because of the personal nature of the subject matter. Otherwise, it's hard going. Other writers may go through the rigorous creative process more speedily than I do, but, except for the truly and inexhaustibly prolific, I suspect not.

Multiply that by about twenty to the scale of a novel and you might have some idea of what writers actually go through, sitting at their refill pads and their computers day after day after day, thinking, choosing, rejecting, choosing again, to produce a finished manuscript.

And, you never get a holiday. According to the French philosopher Roland Barthes, the wonderful singularity of the writer is that unlike the factory worker or the shop assistant, you never stop. *'The writer is the prey of an inner god who speaks at all times, without bothering, tyrant that he is, with the holidays of his medium. Writers are on holiday, but their Muse is awake and gives birth non-stop ... By having holidays, he displays the sign of his being human; but the god remains, one is a writer as Louis* Xl *V was king, even on the commode.'*

William Taylor, perhaps invoking *Knitwits*, has said that writing is like knitting a jumper, stitch after stitch. You place word after word,

idea after idea, paragraph after paragraph, chapter after chapter; at the end you have a headache, sore eyes, a sore back and an overdraft. I know four children's writers who've given themselves RSI.

But there, sitting on your desk is a manuscript, a pile of paper and (these days) a disc, something tangible you can post off with a sigh of relief. Your passion is spent, the characters exist, the story 'that feels as though it is real' is told and your part of the journey is nearly over; soon others can help carry the torch. Privacy and secretiveness have to make way to exposure, sharing, being judged, bringing a whole new set of stresses. Some authors say they can't give a damn how their work is judged; they know when it is good. Others, I suspect most, and I'm one of them, go through hell. Fiona Kidman has said that you have to be physically fit to write fiction and how true that is .. When I'm into a novel or even a short story, I don't sleep well; the characters, or what I've just written, are in the forefront of my mind most of the time, even as I drift off to sleep or drive a car. I can spend two hours on a single A4 page, playing around with the words on the screen.

Of course I get shitty when someone wants to alter or cut it for reasons I don't agree with, especially for condescending and, to my mind, phony reasons of relevance, and accessibility and cultural safety. '*You begin to feel,'* playwright Michaelanne Forster said to me recently, *'as thought you're being made to eat your own flesh.'*

Writers of music, because of the esoteric notation they use, are less prey to people saying *Don't like that bassoon at bar* 21, *hate the recapitulation, cut out the first 260 bars let's go straight in, the bridge passage doesn't work, let's give this theme to the timpani and that one to the cellos, finish here, cut the rest, bo-ring.* But everybody believes they can be a writer of words or can be quickly learn to be a writer if only they put their mind to it, and many think they know better than writers.

Each of us is open to negotiation from editors, publishers, film producers, directors, even actors, drama teachers, classroom teachers and anyone else with whom we collaborate to produce a book, a play, a film, an opera, but in the end one of the tasks of being a writer in the multi-media nineties is to decide at what point our most fundamental integrity is being unacceptably threatened and at what point we cry 'Enough'.

Here I stand, unbudging.

Because language is increasingly under threat, and being used by those in political and bureaucratic power with ever-more sophisticated methods of manipulation by PR consultants and the like. In schools of recent years I've made it my business to suggest to children and their teachers that in the multi-media third millennium we are approaching, clear, honest and elegant writing will become more and more precious and necessary. So, therefore, will boring old writers.

Children urgently need new tools to be able to sift out, from all the information that is now available to them, what rings true and what doesn't. They need to be able to assess what is being left out and why, what is being emphasised or downplayed and why. Just what are the carefully hidden secret agendas here? Who is trying to sell me something, and why? Who is the person who actually wrote that unattributed booklet on AIDS or sexuality for teenagers, or that controversial tribunal report, or those ever more impenetrable

documents I see occasionally from the Ministry of Education? Someone did.

Who are the individuals accountable for School Cert science exam papers which experts in the field later criticise bitterly as being misleading, badly worded and unanswerable? If it's not the NZQA, then why not and who is it? Who writes the leaders in the *New Zealand Herald,* and whose views are they, really? The writer's, the editor's, the local M.D.'s or the offshore owner's? Forgive me if it sounds trite, but behind every word on a computer screen is still a writer, making choices. It's a cliché of modern-day living that computer manuals were written by nerds for nerds, but when writers, whose business is words, along with the rest of the artistic community, simply cannot understand the booklet on funding schemes put out by the new streamlined, accessible and accountable *Creative New Zealand,* with its tautologies of people goals and arts goals, as though the two were different things, then it really is time to worry.

For what has happened, I think, is an ideological attempt to impose a business model, with all its accompanying jargon of strategic objectives, on the arts in the same way as Tomorrow's Schools is still trying hard to do with education and Jenny Shipley on health. Artists, sick people and children are similarly unpredictable, disputatious and bothersome -we just cannot be measured, manipulated, ticked off in boxes, put tidily into columns and assessed for inputs and outcomes. How does a writer draw up a budget for a novel? In business terms our hourly rate would be laughable if it wasn't so pathetic. The number of copies sold does not indicate how many people read a book, over what period of time, and how much influence that book might have on the community. How can I say how many people are going to read my book, or what its short or long-term value might be? All I have is my faith that in small unmeasurable ways, my writing and those of my colleagues, is worth doing.

Alex has inspired any number of girls to take control of their lives, I know that. Boys, too. Her story has helped a number to come to terms to grief, because, again, they've written and told me so. *Jellybean* did help one young female cellist decide that a professional career in music was possible for her. *Night Race to Kawau* did unlock the door to reading for one 14-year-old boy given the book by a canny teacher who knew he loved sailing.

Every time I visit a school I know that if I cannot engage ninety restless fourth formers on a Friday afternoon by depicting the fascination of the writer's life, all I have to do is start telling the story of that night race to Kawau, or read the story of Freddie Bone or an extract from *Alex.* All shuffling ceases, all ninety pairs of eyes are focussed. Through language which makes a story *feel as though it is real,* minds are engaged, theirs to mine. All performers know the hushed magic of that engagement. That is what we work for.

Good story-telling needs nothing more than ideas formed by mental effort, dear, elegant language, passion in the telling and the strong, clear ring of truthfulness. I passionately believe that if children are not introduced to these stories, *on the page,* or *by word of mouth undistracted by images,* they will have no tools to deal with the dishonesty of political correctness, no answer to bureaucratic jargon

or language so 'dumbed down' that it is divested of all poetry, all colour, all energy and all life.

I like to think a generation is growing up which, guided by the work of visionaries like Lloyd Geering, is being made increasingly *aware* of language, not less, and that this generation will oversee, or perhaps even demand, new standards of clarity in the language of public and business life as they heard all their young lives in stories.

It is for that responsibility, along with the pleasure storytelling gives me, that I am a writer.