A Strange Way for an Adult Male to be Making a Living!

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I would not be standing here today if Mr Hamilton had not been knocked over by a hansom cab, killed stone dead in Piccadilly Circus on the first day of his honeymoon sometime in the late eighteen-sixties, leaving a very young widow.

That widow was my greatgrandmother and Mr Hamilton had not been given the time, or maybe the opportunity, to become my greatgrandfather. Family history records nothing but the bare facts of the young man's tragic death.

I like to think that, maybe, fully euphoric, he burst through the front doors of their hotel, calling at the top of his young lungs, "Eureka! I found it!" or words to that effect, startled the horses, and paid the ultimate penalty. I hope that the first night of the honeymoon had been a night of unbridled mid-Victorian passion.

Family histories are plants of strange growth. Word-of-mouth recounting tends to twist the branches of the plant more than a little.

Were Mr and Mrs Hamilton actually on their honeymoon? What were they doing in Piccadilly Circus? The offspring of solid merchant families, their homes were just around the corner. Young persons of substance might surely have been expected to venture further afield for their first nights of connubial bliss. Who knows? Maybe they decided upon a sort oflocal first-night and were, on the day of the tragedy, about to board a train to Dover, then across to Calais and on to more exotic and erotic climes. This was not to be. After one of the shorter marriages on record the young widow had to face life alone.

Victorian widowhood was no laughing matter but there were consolations. In order to put the tragedy behind her, the young widow was packed off on a long sea voyage to, of all places, Australia! A few months at sea, a few more

months frisking among the aboriginals and former convicts was just what the doctor ordered and life would be better faced afterwards. There never has been any accounting for taste! The young Mrs Hamilton was little more than a slip of a girl and simply could not go by herself on such a weird trip. Victorian minds would have boggled. A chaperone was found.

You may now breathe a sigh of relief: at last I make it to the literary. Yes, a chaperone, in the person of none other than Lady Collins, wife of the then current Sir William who ruled the family firm, cementing the family fortune by publishing the classics, improving tracts and various editions of the Holy Bible. Family history does not record whether Lady Collins was simply doing a good deed or if she felt like a trip herself. I like to think that in part it was a business trip and that Lady Collins was going to Sydney to check out the Aussie branch of the firm (or even perhaps set it up) and to ensure that the local bookshops were giving suitable prominence, promotion and position to the William Collins product. It also suits me to think of Lady Collins as a formidable Victorian of ample stature, well corseted and dressed in bombazines of subdued tone with perhaps a riotous purple or mauve for dinners at the captain's table. I know the voyage would have been first class. You don't put a Lady Collins in steerage!

I hope the sea voyage helped the young widow. Can't have been all fun and games dressed, as she would have been, in widows' weeds. Those nights in the tropics must have been hell. Still, all good things must come to an end and Sydney loomed.

Just what happened to Mrs Hamilton in Sydney is veiled in the mists of time. I imagine the two women took up residence at a respectable, George Street hotel. I imagine there was dinner, and maybe a weekend, with the Governor.

Undoubtedly, as was the custom, the first-class passc:_nger manifest of the steamer would have been published in the social pages of the Sydney dailies. Can't you just picture the daily commotion in the foyer and public rooms of that hotel? Every would-be, could-be Sydney-side novelist, poet and writer of improving tracts would have been paying court to the good lady, waving dog-eared manuscripts under her nose and generally importuning the poor

woman. Good God, it wasn't as if she had come to Sydney with the express purpose of unearthing the great Australian novel!

Escaping the ravening literary hordes by touring the bookshops was likely little better. There is a limit to how many Bibles you want to inscribe 'To Bazza, Kylie and the kids, best wishes, God. pp Lady Collins.'! My sympathies, naturally enough, lie with my great-grandmother. There are only just so many times you want to go and gawk at the sites where the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House will eventually stand. And when the eat's away, sadly, the mouse will play! And this is just what happened. I have a feeling that Mrs Hamilton would have faced anything other than a return sea-voyage to the old country with the redoubtable Lady C.

Mrs Hamilton found husband number two; my greatgrandfather, Francis Reeves.

Little is known of Francis. Understandable, he was a nineteenth century Australian. I like to think that he may have been a convict or, at least, the offspring of convicts. I imagine he was inordinately handsome and sexy because he did not have a great deal else to recommend him. For a long time among our family treasures was a small document signed by Mr Reeves: 'X,' it says with admirable simplicity, and in brackets, (Francis Reeves, his mark). Less than charitable souls present here today may now be muttering under their breaths, 'Aha! Must be from his greatgrandfather he inherited his literary ability!'

Mrs Hamilton must have presented as heaven-sent to Francis, widowed himself and left with four young sons. Love at first sight and someone to rear the boys. They married (history doesn't record whether Lady Collins was matron-of-honour) and the new Mrs Reeves was whisked off up to the New South Wales and Queensland border to get on with married life on Mr Reeves's property. I think it must have been a station and it must have been big. I have my Great-Aunt Emma's word for it. It was a tough life for the young Mrs Reeves but she had time to produce four daughters to complement her husband's four sons. They were poor - according to Great-Aunt Emma - so poor that the kids went without shoes, trudging miles and miles, barefoot to school through the snow. Barefoot in the snow was bad enough but there were other perils, wild emus! The wild emus used to chase

the little girls, chase them to and from school every day - I think the boys had graduated by this time. They must have. After all, boys being boys they would have shot the bloody things! The only chance you had of escape from a wild emu as you trudged barefoot and dressed in flour-bag clothing was to hide behind a cactus bush. Great-Aunt Emma, my authority in this matter, informed me that wild emus find it difficult to see around corners and, having only very little brain, tend to just give up and go away. They also dislike cactus bushes because they catch their feathers on the prickles. A hard life indeed. A strange climate, too!

I must tie up a few loose ends in my story. Greatgrandmother never went home to England and I bet Lady Collins had a bit of fast talking to do when she got home!

'What have you done with our girl, Lady William?' Mum and Dad would have asked.

'Oh, goodness. I knew I'd left something behind. How silly of me,' Lady C.

'Silly, be damned!' the furious father. 'It was downright careless! Australia! A fate worse than death!'

However, greatgrandmama was in no way deserted by her family. She became a remittance woman. Year in and year out for the rest of her life money from the old country was deposited to an account in her name at a Sydney bank. She touched not a penny of it. I like to think she and Francis were happily married. The four boys took off over the border into Queensland and, God help us, ran the Qneensland police force for a generation! Of the four girls, Emma, the eldest, became a nurse and fought in the Boer War. Fought? Yes. I use the word advisedly. Great-Aunt Emma was a tough customer! Annie, my grandmother, trained as a Salvation Army officer and was a missionary in other emu-infested bits of Australia and then in New Zealand. Mrs Hamilton-Reeves lived to a ripe old age. I have one photo of her taken in her mid-eighties; slightly stooped, gaunt of face, hair pulled back and with a very prominent nose! I feel a peculiar affinity with this woman! In the fullness of time the fortune that had piled up in the Sydney bank got shared among her daughters. I know where our share went. Ah, yes, those Salvationists have much to answer for!

I must move on. If you want the story of Great Aunt Emma trekking off to London to retrieve the family fortune - the source of the Sydney bank money - you'll have to wait for another day, or give me this award again next year. And, why have I told you all this? I will tell you why.

Story fascinates me. As simple as that. The power of story to attract, to enthrall and to ultimately enrich us all is at the heart, the core of the human condition. It is most certainly integral to the way I choose to make a living. I am not a multi-skilled human being. I do few things well. I am, however, confident enough to say that one of the things I do satisfactorily is tell a story and shape it well enough to hold an audience. I would have given much to have had the ability to tell a good story orally - think of the hard labour it would have saved! Had I possessed this facility I doubt that I would ever have written a book! But my stories come to life in written form. I am a writer for young people. A strange way for an adult male in late middle-age to be making a living!

We exist in an age where instant sensory gratification, aural and visual, is abundantly available. Writers of books for the young and publishers of their work battle against forces of such strength and appeal that it seems at times inevitable that the demise of the book as a medium of entertainment or instruction is just around the corner. In this day and age of spectacular technological wizardry, well, what price the book? There is little enough room at the best of times for books - and we do not live in the best of times, book-wise.

I suspect that in the end the battle will not be entirely lost and that present less-than-satisfactory times may be simply a temporary reversal of fortunes. I realise this is an optimistic view but it is a view that is in my best interests to hold. The body of my work is considerable; I have been around a while and I have laboured diligently. I know I am described as 'prolific' and, in all truth, I am. The 'prolific' soubriquet can be a bit of a worry but I will not digress into that. What I do note is that it is increasingly difficult to sell books. The current sales figures for my own books are reasonable. However, they do not match what I was able to achieve a few years ago. I suspect there is a range of reasons for this. One obvious reason is that, pleasingly, there

are now more writers around working in my field; wider choice is available to those who buy books.

One of our prime markets as children's writers is schools. It disturbs me as I travel around the country to hear of less and less money being budgeted for buying books. It disturbs me to observe the vast sums of money being poured into the computerisation of schools often, I suspect, at the expense of books and libraries and, I suspect, at the expense of basic literacy.

As I prepared what I am saying today it was at this stage that I intended to move directly into an erudite paper on children's literature. In fact I had advanced some short way along this path when it struck me just how little I knew. Naturally I had a glimmer of understanding on the subject - thirty-something books down the track it's a bit hard not to have cottoned on to a few essentials - but I could tell that what I was saying had been said before by people of far greater authority in this area and that anything I said would be, at best, second-rate. I made a decision. My time this morning would be more productively spent in sharing with you some of the elements in my own life and background that have resulted in my standing here today. What is it that has made me a writer for kids?

I was born almost sixty years ago. I guess 1938 was an adequate enough year to be born although possibly the best thing that could be said for it was that the Depression was over. I have, however, always felt a bit deprived when it comes to when I was born. It was a bit too soon to be part of the baby-boom generation and, consequently, I was going to be a little too old to be a satisfactory hippie. A bit too old for the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, I was going to have to make do with Elvis and Pat Boone.

On a more serious level, I was born shortly before World War II. This, I guess is the event that has coloured my life - not that I have many clear memories of the logistics of the horror and, of course, those of my age growing up at the bottom of the world would really only be relatively lightly touched by the horror and the carnage. What has served to shape me is that I grew as an infant, to all intents and purposes, fatherless. A good kiwi, my father volunteered and was off for a five-year stint overseas before my sister or I had any memory of him. We would be at school by the time he got back.

My very formative first years were spent in the company of three very strong women - my mother and my aunt, English gentlewomen both, and my baby sister - anything but an English gentlewoman! I was putty in their hands. There must have been an occasional male role model over those years, but I don't remember one. Papa came home from the wars to find he had sired something resembling little Lord Fauntleroy! It must have been a helluva shock for the poor guy.

"I'm home from the war, dear. Where's my boy. Gawdelpus! What's that? Isn't that the girl?" Certainly it was shock for me - having to adjust to a somewhat battle-scarred and war-weary man's man and having to call him Daddy. It was likely a shock for Daddy as well. Daddy and Mummy wasted no time and nine months later they produced my younger brother - who was to become everything that I wasn't!

My father. I grew to love him. It took many years. I strove hard to be good enough for him and always felt that I fell short. I remember when *Possum Perkins* was published - I was in my late forties. I gave him a copy. 'Hmrn,' he said, handling it and looking at it. 'Not very big, is it? When are you going to do something like a Wilbur Smith?' Well, I let him down on that score, too. Poor man. No one, incidentally, could have been of greater help and encouragement to me when I gave up teaching to write fulltime than my father. But back to childhood.

Times were relatively hard; we were one of the few New Zealand families in the prosperous late 1940s and early 50s who grew progressively poorer and, thankfully, the little Lord Fauntleroy clobber became a distant memory - although, still in my possession are the mother-of-pearl buttons that once adorned my gear.

Now, I feel in no way sorry for myself. My tale is little different from what must have been the experience of many New Zealand boys growing through early infancy in those times; although I do hope that most of them experienced a little more rough-and-tumble than I ever did! We were blessed with loving, if somewhat erratic and feckless parents, both of whom I miss to this day. I was not a lonely child but I was somewhat solitary. I was for many years unsure when it came to relationships with other kids; I did not make friends easily although I was never friendless. Most certainly,

from an early age, I lost myself in books; a love affair encouraged by both of my parents.

For a handful of years I enjoyed a stable childhood with a sufficient period of time to allow for most of my primary schooling at one school. We lived on the outskirts of Levin, a smallholding that had been a poultry farm and which our parents developed as a market garden, supplying the Wellington markets with cut flowers. It was a pleasant and comfortable rural existence.

Sadly the good times ended and we embarked as a family on a four-year period of instability that has marked me to this day and has, I am sure, indelibly affected what I have done with the rest of my life. My sister and I were to attend four or five different secondary schools between our third and fifth forms in various towns around the North Island. I have searing, nightmare memories of starting each new one. Some reflection of this experience is found in the opening chapters of my first novel for older children, *Pack Up Pick Up and Off-often* I feel that the title of that novel is in part the story of much of my own life, definitely of all my adolescent years.

The uncertainties within me have their roots in this period. I was a small, slightly-built boy. A boy soprano of some note, I did not enter puberty until nearly fifteen. My interests were artistic, I couldn't tell one end of a rugby ball from the other - and this in the early 1950s! I still wonder at my ability to have survived the experience. I was seldom the butt of any bullying. I think, thankfully, I was so insignificant I was ignored! Or was I? I was never completely friendless at any of those ghastly ports of call and I have clear memories of three or four occasions when other boys, highly unlikely applicants, actually sought my friendship. Unlikely? Yes; captain of the rugby team-type applicants. I wonder if I reflect a little of this in my book, *The Blue Lawn?*

My formal education finished after three years when I left Paeroa District High School, ill-schooled indeed, and started work as a bank clerk in that town. Given the choice I would have stayed at school but, sadly, family finances were at the lowest ebb possible and I had no option. All of a sudden, at age sixteen, life changed! Not quite ugly duckling into swan - but along those lines! I could hold my own socially in ways that could only

astonish a boy who, a bare year earlier, could sing *Sheep May Safely Graze* with the best of them. I became an accomplished drinker and smoker, bought my first rifle and joined the other local hoons shooting anything that moved. Sheep no longer safely grazed! You may check on elements of this period in my life in my story, *The Supper Waltz* that appears in a little known collection entitled *The First Time.* Bits of the story are slightly autobiographical!

There was only one problem; a problem you will often find reflected in my fiction. I was incredibly naive! I was taken to task by a reviewer of my book, *I Hate My Brother, Maxwell Potter* about the bit where poor old Freddo, on spotting his first hairs of puberty, seeks advice from Maxwell. The reviewer considered that no pre-pubescent boy would ever believe he was turning into a monkey or werewolf. Oh, no? My slightly younger sister had me fully convinced of the self-same thing and I clearly remember checking daily for some long time if hairs were growing on the palms of my hands! It is fine being left to find things out for yourself providing you have some clue as to what it is you want to find out. I never knew. Father was no help; he had long since abdicated all responsibility for life education to our mother. Her singular effort in this department was to leave copies of the *English Woman's Weekly* lying around the house. I think we were expected to absorb information from the agony-aunt letters. Add to this the fact that I was not into rugby or team games and had no opportunity to share in locker or changing room debate, I was at a distinct disadvantage. Not entirely ignorant as to the bare mechanics I had no idea whatsoever as to more subtle niceties.

In our mid-teens my sister and I became champion table tennis players, the only sport at which I ever excelled. The local club met at our house, at that time a decaying mansion. The drawing room held two or three table tennis tables. Our parents and younger siblings were away somewhere on one club night and, by chance, Les, the village paedophile turned up to play (ostensibly table tennis). "Don't you forget," my sister hissed, as she took off into the night with a boyfriend. "Always go round the other side of the table from Les when you change ends. Don't you dare let him go round the same side as you!" Les and I were left alone. Well, nothing untoward

happened - not that I knew what an untoward happening might include. I will never forget playing something like 50 games in a row with poor Les before being rescued and on every second one I waited to see what side of the table he came around and I followed my instructions to the letter. Our paths never crossed. For years I was puzzled as to why it might have been necessary to follow those instructions and equally puzzled as to what old Les might have got up to had he cornered me. I quite liked Les. I certainly liked his nephew who lived with him. Well, I think it was his nephew. He was very good-looking.

In this respect, at least, I have clearly bumbled, often bewildered and bemused, through almost three-score years. When my own boys were about twelve I sat them down one Sunday for a man-to-men chat. "Robin, Julian," I said. "I think I need to have a talk to you guys about sex;' and I would have smiled nicely and sensitively. "Well, Dad;' said Robin. "We don't know it all yet, but if there's anything we can help you with, you just ask."

Our family moved back to the Hutt Valley in 1956 and, charcoal grey-suited, I helped run the mail-room at the head office of the ANZ Bank in Lambton Quay. But opportunity knocked; I read a poster advertising for teacher trainees. Desperate they must have been because within days I had been accepted and a handful of weeks later I was dispatched south to Christchurch. I left home to embark on an academic career; well, slightly higher learning than I had thus far enjoyed. In those far-off bad old days it wasn't hard to be a teacher. I soon discovered that. After two years of partying, drinking, playing poker and studying pottery, collecting health poems - I was a winner at this - and doing an assignment on Evelyn Waugh, I was a teacher. Easy as that.

Back to the Hutt Valley and a class of thirty-five Standard three and four kids. Thirty-five for the first month; then they popped in another ten! Two kindly old women, one in her thirties and one in her forties, taught me the essentials of the job - how to mark an attendance register and how to stick pictures up on the wall. "Now, Bill, there is more to maths than giving them adding on Mondays, take-aways on Tuesdays, times tables on Wednesdays and gizzintas on Thursdays;' said one. "Well, I do mix them up on Fridays;' I said. I learnt on the job.

There was little to recommend Trentham School in those days. Twelve hundred pupils and not enough teachers and the whole place run by an ex-army officer from World War I. It was more difficult to find caretakers than teachers and I can well remember being ordered back to school some weekends to help Headmaster Quigley clean the school.

I never complained. Indeed, I loved every minute of it. I was at the beginning of a twenty-five year career that was much more a love-affair than a job. I found that I loved working with kids. I guess I was idiosyncratic in what I did, often wilful in getting my own way with authority and, all in all, quite good at the job. It is, in all truth, the wonderful, if very ordinary kids that I taught, enthusiastic, full of frailties, that are reflected, fully reflected, in the books I write. I guess I write for them, for their children, for their grandchildren. It is not my intention to talk today of the ins and outs of my teaching; I have done so before. It is sufficient to say that the work that I did with children, the joys, the sadnesses of the job, and, above all, the great regard and love I have for young people is all reflected in the work I do today.

Looking back now, almost exactly thirty years further on, it is difficult for me to say with any degree of certainty why I began to write. I think, quite simply, opportunity presented itself. A matter of luck, as much as anything. I think all I wanted to do in the first instance was see if I could write a book! A catalyst may have been that whenever we went to town from our remote Hawkes Bay schoolhouse, we passed Fernhill (these days Omahu) School where Sylvia Ashton-Warner had recently taught. If Sylvia could come up with something as marvellous as *Spinster* from anything but salubrious surroundings, why shouldn't I have a go.

Well, I did. My first five novels were written while my former wife and I and our two baby boys lived at Waiwhare on the Napier- Taihape road. I wrote quickly! Indeed I set, back then, the pattern that I continue to follow today. A clear thinking out of what it is I want to write. A brisk and no-nonsense, quite untemperamental period of writing a first draft - by hand. A more leisurely period of shaping the work, fining it down, I guess, until I get to say what I want it to say to the best of my ability - and then off to a publisher. It was hard to be artistically temperamental back

then with two small boys crawling around the house. Even today distraction and disturbance doesn't worry me very much at all. I never fail to answer the telephone!

I was fortunate. The books I wrote were not remarkably good. Luckily for me, they were not remarkably bad, either. They all, six in total, got published, made little ripple in the then literary pond, but did achieve one thing for me personally. Again, I learnt on the job.

In 1973 I took the first very tentative step in what has become my career. In response to the pestering of a difficult class of Form Two pupils at a Manawatu intermediate school - this followed some publicity I received when my sixth novel was published: the kids could see no reason why I should not write something for them, too - I sat down and wrote the first three or four chapters of what would become *Pack Up Pick Up and Off.* The class loved it. The school year ended and I had no burning desire to finish the book. I got back to it five years later.

My brother, Hugh, and his wife Alison, were killed in an air disaster. It was a ghastly time. I helped my father through the horror of it all as much as I could. It fell to me to do most of the practical things that arise at such times. It took its toll. By this time my marriage had finished and I was bringing up the two boys. We were living back in Wellington for a couple of years - the period between my principalships of National Park and Ohakune schools. It would hardly be true to say that I needed something to do - but, in a sense, I guess I did. I got out those first three or four chapters of *Pack Up Pick Up and Off* and finished the book.

This act of writing was a sort of therapy. The story is not autobiographical but there are elements in the life of that fragile little family that are patterned on my own childhood. Most certainly the character of the little fellow, George, is very much my brother - right down to the cups of tea he loved drinking. The setting for the book, rural Hawkes Bay, is very much Waiwhare, the rich sheepfarming area where I taught. The treatment of the hapless rabbiter family is patterned very much on how I observed people being treated around where we lived. Price Milburn published the original edition of the book in 1981. I had made a start.

And now, like Tessa (Duder), I started applying every year for the Choysa Bursary. There was no way other than by getting the start that this award would provide that I would be able to write much more. I was running a large school, my boys were adolescent - and expensive to keep! Well, I didn't get the damn thing for three years and, indeed, my final fling for it was as rough as guts and fired off in desperation - I think by now from habit rather than in any hope of getting it. I must have been the only applicant that year because they gave it to me.

"Don't open the envelope," hissed the Minister's secretary as the Hon Peter Tapsell handed over the loot. "We've lost the bloody cheque. We'll put it in the mail for you." Heard that one before. It hadn't been that easy persuading the Minister to give it to me in the first place. He seemed to find difficulty in grasping the fact that the Mayor of Ohakune - with whom he had had dealings - also wrote for kids. He wanted to give the empty envelope to my father. It is a sad commentary on human nature that my father would have been perfectly happy to grasp it with both hands.

Took a long time for that cheque to come in the mail - two months! Not that it really mattered. I had finished the first of the three novels I was to write during the two terms I took off from school: *Possum Perkins.* Still being written about even to this day. I read an article on it last month. Still selling, as far as I know, in some form or other. While it never won an award it did make it to a list, in the United States, of course, of notable novels for children that have not won literary awards! The story of Rosie and Michael; the two sides of my own character - the introspective loner, Rosie, and the outgoing and gregarious, cheerful and loud, Michael. Rosa Dorothea Perkins. I named her for my mother. I have memories of her growing the old Dorothy Perkins rose. 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, old time is still a-flying .. .'

My Summer of the Lions and *Shooting Through* were written during this time away from teaching. All were accepted, although it took a little longer for *Possum Perkins* to find a home due to the slightly contentious underlying theme of possible child-abuse. This was the mid-eighties.

Three novels in eight or nine months. And then back to school. I think, however, I had already decided it was time for a change. I had taught for

twenty-five years. I still enjoyed the job but the prospect of running a large school for another twenty years did not greatly appeal. Why not try to make my living as a writer? Well, there were very good reasons. I had no idea whether writing two or three books a year would be sufficiently income-producing to enable me to live. I think, finally, I did consider that if I fell flat on my face in a bankruptcy court, well, what the hell, I could always go back teaching - tail between my legs and all.

It was not a decision taken lightly. I was frightened of the likely consequences. Few people are able to make any sort of living in any of the art forms but I genuinely felt that I did not wish to reach age 60, look back and wish that I had had the guts to make a change. Also, for an inherently lazy person, the constant goad of having to work to make a living rather than to rely on superannuation as a primary source of income was the sort of spur I needed. Twenty-eight books for young people down the track and I am beginning to think I may have made the right decision.

So, out on my own at age forty-eight. Fine. In 1986 my writing career, almost of its own volition, took a different path. I wrote *The Worst Soccer Team Ever.* My first foray into humour.

Most of my fiction since *The Worst Soccer Team* has been humorous. I am pretty sure that I have become this country's leading literary humorist - in quantity if not in quality! To be able to bring a smile or grin, a laugh or a lightness into the life of any child is an ability that I treasure. That I appear, in some measure, to have this ability is something of which I am quite proud. We are such a serious little society. Lugubrious, possibly sums us up. We frequently have an inability to laugh at ourselves or to see ourselves in any form of realistic perspective, bound up as we are in a morass of Treaty and race relations, human rights and gender equity issues. We are, without doubt, the most politically correct nation on the face of the earth. That such political correctness often achieves ludicrous proportions is documented daily in the columns of our newspapers and in news broadcasts. I guess it is all part of our struggle for identity and a place in a world that really couldn't give a stuff if we slipped away off the bottom of the planet and were never heard of again. All in all, it is a fairly fertile sort of mine for anybody who writes funny things. As I write this I think of the recent opening of Te Papa - the Museum of New Zealand. I am told, on fine authority, that on one of Wellington's windier days of the year, they organised two outdoor queues for admission: one smoking and one non-smoking! Such absurdities are all grist to my mill.

Writing humour is a serious business. I don't know what it is that I possess that enables me to do it. I am not a funny person. I cannot remember a joke much less tell one. Probably at a fundamental level all I do is attempt to see the world through the eyes of others - particularly, but not always, through the eyes of children. It seems to me that kids are often able to spot the inherent absurdities in existence; I think I am trying to say in a polite way that they can detect bullshit!

This is not wholly the case. It would be stupid to say that Charlie Kenny in my *Knitwits* series is busy spotting and then reacting to bullshit. He's not. Not at all. Poor old Charlie is very obviously everyman struggling against almost insuperable odds, forever trying to keep one step ahead of his nemesis, Alice Pepper. He has a brave heart, a rather hapless faith that everything will turn out all right and he is a good and decent person. He is frequently bemused at the world around him - in a manner not dissimilar to his creator. In the same mould too, are Tom Colman in the *Worst Soccer Team* series, Freddo, Mr McSausage, in *I Hate My Brother Maxwell Potter* and, of course, U-Gene and L-Roy, the Fatz Twins. The comedy comes, I guess, from these poor klutzes trying to come to grips with the world around them. They are able to detect the humbug but can't quite put their fingers on it. But let it not be said I deal solely with the innocent and inept. Most certainly my Porter brothers and William Bramwell Booth, Joe and Belinda (and old Mrs Carpenter and the blessed Agnes) and most particularly the lustrous Gloria de Chardonnay, love child of the late Marilyn Monroe, have not only come to grips with the world, they've got it by the throat and they're throttling the hell out of it!

All of this second group evoke the Lord of Misrule, as Kirsty Cochrane put it when commenting on the *Porter Brothers.* My Porters had been so savagely clobbered by the children's literature establishment that I had grown very defensive about this series. Cochrane arrived to interview me for a programme she was doing. We debated the ins and outs of Rosie Perkins

and Jessie Parker and then she mentioned the Porters. I can remember saying something along the lines of we wouldn't waste time on what was just a bit of light-hearted fun. She took me to task and proceeded to point out in somewhat academic terms why these books were possibly the best I had written. Deep down inside me I may have harboured this suspicion myself. While I must, as their creator, inhabit all of my books and be emotionally involved in all my stories there has only ever been one bit of one of my books that can move me to tears - and that little bit is to be found in *Supermum and Spike the Dog.*

What price comedy? Well, there is the positive pay-off. It delights me to be asked to talk in schools and libraries where I can spot just how battered, bruised and well-used are so many copies of my funny books - while so many of the lugubrious (my own included) languish, pristine and largely unread on the shelves. This is the good part of it. Should I want more? In the end it doesn't bother me greatly but it would be pleasing to be living and working in a society that was mature enough and sure enough of itself to be be able to consider my comic work on its literary merits.

I cannot say much more here without getting into comparison with books by other people - some of whom are my friends and whom I wish to keep as friends - but I do have something to say in all of my comedies. I don't think that anything else that I have written has better depicted small-town New Zealand and the struggle to maintain services to those of us who live in little communities than has my book *Annie & Co & Marilyn Monroe.* Certainly few novels for young New Zealanders show the difficulties of solo parenthood better than my Porter brothers books. However, because I have chosen to use humour to get my story across (I hesitate to say 'message') I suspect that my work is considered automatically less than worthy. Of course there is a further add-on here. It is no longer all that easy for me to get my lugubrious stuff considered seriously. It is suspect, a little tainted, sort of 'Are we meant to laugh at this one or not?'. Not that everyone has always laughed at my funny ones. Let me share with you a letter I received from Sylvia R Freedland of Elkins Park, Pennsylvania. Clearly an elderly retired lady she was good enough to take time to write to me after reading *Knitwits.*

"Dear Mr *Taylor: Shame on you and shame on Scholastic, your publisher. Your book* Knitwits *(which unfortunately I bought) is not worth the paper it's written on! What a waste of trees! What a waste of eyesight! What a waste of money! How dare you perpetrate such a FRAUD on children! There is not one single redeeming quality: it is ridiculous; it is pointless; it is contrived; it is ugly; it is stupid; utterly stupid. I buy lots of books. I am a former librarian. I am a mother and a grandmother. And your book just went into the garbage, where it belongs.* My *only regret is the* $13.95 *I spent. I repeat: SHAME* ON *YOU! SHAME* ON *YOUR PUBLISHER! Very truly yours, Sylvia R Freedland (Mrs.)"*

A letter to be cherished. I did have it pinned to the wall beside an article from the Manawatu Evening Standard by Sally Patrick which bore the glorious headline, 'Taylor is a Living Treasure'!

It is my great good fortune to be working in a field that is dominated by women. I feel it can only have done me good as a man to be able to experience how women must have felt in many professions a generation or so ago; the ethos of knowing that not only do you have to be 'as good as' but you must, in all truth, be 'better than'! I am unsure whether this also holds true in the children's literature establishments in Australia, Canada, the States or Britain but it is certainly true here in Aotearoa New Zealand. To be frank, I have a feeling that had *Possum Perkins, Beth & Bruno* and all the rest been written, word-for-word, by Priscilla Taylor, she would have stood in front of a similar audience a few years ahead of me!

Well, she may not have, not unless she had been wise enough to dispense with that other feature of my work that gives every indication of being an irritant under the skins of the pundits of New Zealand children's literature - my depiction of the young New Zealand male. All would be okay if I made the guys less than robustly red-blooded and masculine. From Michael Geraghty in *Possum Perkins* to Tom Costello in *Circles* and with Maxwell Potter and the Porter brothers and others in between I know I have offended sensitive souls and, to an extent, paid a price for so doing. So be it. I know that my young male characters seldom think pure thoughts, infrequently

play Chopin etudes on the pianoforte and are often less than sensitive to the needs of other living creatures, but I do know the beast well. I have taught him, reared him, lived amongst him and, to a slight degree, lived him! I do get him right. I know that Tom Costello is not what many of the doyennes of my particular field want to see in a book for older kids. A seventeen year-old male who smokes, drinks, swears, plays rugby and falls out of the dormitory window of a girls school as well as shooting a feral cat on page three must represent absolute anathema to many.

I make no apology. The boy exists. He lives. He lives not only in areas outside of the nicer suburbs of our main urban areas; he may be found within them as well. He is fully documented in police statistics, ALAC statistics, ASH statistics and so forth. Few weeks pass when we don't see him on our TV screens or hear about him on the news. I know his behaviour and life-style are thoroughly reprehensible. But it is not my fault if I 'get him right' in my fiction. I will deal here only with Tom Costello, hero, and he is a hero, of what I consider to be my finest piece of writing. As a person, as a human being, this boy grows inordinately throughout my story. I do not apologise for him or for his actions. He is thoroughly believable. I knew as I finished the book that it would be likely to offend delicate sensibilities but more important, I knew that I had told a story both of significance and of some relevance to the society we inhabit. This book had something to say and I fully believe that it said it well. *Circles* was widely and well reviewed although one reviewer took me to task for 'my' treatment of animals; I think it was the stray cat on page three! However, I also knew that Circles had not a hope in hell of achieving more than marginal recognition in either of our children's book awards - and here I touch on the last issue I intend to address today.

What hope indeed did poor old Tom Costello have, regardless of the quality of the vehicle within which he travelled, when stacked up against yet another fractured female 'heroine' of an albeit nicely written soap opera? Well, as it transpired, none at all. Tom didn't even make it to the final cut of one of the awards.

I think it no accident that my two most honoured titles in the award sense are the story of two boys who are gay, and the story of an old woman and

her old female sheep. I am probably fortunate in both those instances given the smalltown-rural ambience of both tales. I am doubly fortunate with number two. I think it remains the only funny novel to win an award in this country. I could not resist a smile this year as I read the wonderful review by Claudia Marquis afforded my *Knitwits* sequel *Hark, the Herald Angel* in the *New Zealand Herald.* The poor old Herald got it wrong again - wasting such space on a novel that was demonstrably second-rate - it failed to make the shortlist for the New Zealand Post awards published on the same page.

I am no longer overly worried about my personal success or failure award-wise but I am increasingly disturbed at what I see children's book awards in this country doing to our very small writing community. Practitioners, promoters of books for kids and pontificators, we are all known to each other. I hear the devastation in the voices of my writing friends and see the hurt in their eyes when they hear that their work has been discarded, failed to measure up for yet another short-list. These people are artists, often uncertain, frequently fragile and always, always looking for approbation. Just think of what we do to them! We turn them into winners and losers - with a sort of compensatory limbo of a shortlist in between. I think the situation is getting worse.

The hoopla that surrounds our main kids' book awards is becoming increasingly gross - and to what end? I suspect that the hype about increased sales of kids' books is something of a myth. Sure, shortlisted titles sell well - for a while. But then two things appear to happen. One of my publishers tells me that the day following the awards the books start flying home to their roost. And, maybe worse, anything that fails to make a shortlist tends to languish sales-wise with the result that, all-in-all, total sales of books probably remain about the same. I am sensible enough to know that we are not going to be able to do away with the damn things but could we not, as a children's literature community, work to make the system slightly more tolerable.

We are a small nation with a minuscule community of those who write books for children. If we must have 'books of the year', I guess I can tolerate that. But why not shortlist all submissions or, at the very least, maybe we should all be campaigning for much longer shortlists. And then? Well, from

the sum total of submissions or longer lists of finalists select two or three standout titles, make this lot 'books of the year' and do away with the nonsense of an overall winner. Of course these fetes are designed to reward excellence but I am often left wondering excellence in what terms?

If I have not already outstayed my welcome here today, I will if I go on much longer. I have indulged in a very personal accounting of myself. I am nearing the end of my career and there are few books left in me. I am not quite ready to quit but the flow is certainly diminishing. As always I am able to say I have two new books due out and that I am working on another novel. This time it is a young adult novel for an American publisher and to my astonishment I was told that under no circumstances should I reduce the New Zealand flavour of my work and that young Americans were far more interested in coming to grips with other parts of the world than their teachers, librarians and many US publishers gave them credit for. Some things do change!

I am abundantly grateful for the presence here today of members of my family, friends who are teachers, friends who are writers and friends from the world of publishing. All of you have helped me and encouraged me and for that - thank you.

My sincere thanks are extended to the New Zealand Children's Book Foundation for honouring me with the Margaret Mahy Lecture Award. I am deeply appreciative of the honour.

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