



Storylines Margaret Mahy lecture 2018 By Janice Marriott

Prime Minister and Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage, Jacinda Ardern, Margaret Mahy Awards committee and the Storylines team, tena koutou and thank you for having me.

Greetings and thanks also to Joy Cowley, our kuia, for her support of Storylines and congratulations on your ONZ and your shortlisting for IBBY 2018.

Of course we all think of Margaret at this time. I remember a riotous children's writers' gathering where Diana Noonan and I ended up late at night in an outdoor spa pool and Margaret suddenly loomed out of the steamy air quoting P G Wodehouse to us. The only way I can honour Margaret Mahy, who cloaked New Zealand with the gift of rich words, and addressed those rich words to children, is to use this opportunity to talk about words, the gift of words, to our tamariki.

I think it was Tessa [Duder] or Lorain Day who called Margaret the Word Witch:

The Word Witch's Gift

She stares and stirs the slurry of words,
Adding more and more and more words,
From dilution to even distribution to saturated solution,
A potion to crystallise around the children she loves best,
As protective as, as sparkling as, a mithril vest.

Every day, in the Word Witch's house,
Words drip into a child's mazy ear,
And on his silken eyelids when he closes them to smile.

Words slide slowly down his wide nose ridge
And nestle in grooves by his nostril hubs.
Words wander on his felted cheek
Then land on his perfect, puckered mouth.

And these, the last, luscious, lingering words,
Are the words that will fill his belly
And these are the words he will speak.

As he grows he throws off the words that blanket him at bedtime.
He dresses in words and walks in his world of words.
He uses word armour in the wild and at school.
He has under his bed a waka huia full of very special words.

And the Word Witch? There are many now
Who stare and stir the slurry of words,
Adding more and more and more words,

A potion for the children they love best,
As protective as, as sparkling as, a mithril vest.

I must apologize for the constant use of the male pronoun in this talk. My muse is male. I can do nothing about that.

I'm going to talk about giving the gift of words rung by rung, in order, on the literacy ladder. Listening. Language. Story. Reading. Writing.

Giving the gift of words to children starts with teaching them to listen. Lullabies. Nursery rhymes. Songs. Some of you will know just how important listening skills are to me. Having produced Kiwi Kidsongs for 15 years, and having recorded so many stories and poems and plays – in English, Māori, and most Pacific Island languages, for children in schools, through the Ministry of Education – my adult life has been fuelled by the desire to get children to listen – to sounds, to music, to meaning.

An aside: one of the achievements I am most proud of is my attribution of the words of "*Dance All Around the World*", the chart-topping Blerta song of 1972, to Margaret. It was her picture book, *The Procession*, published in 1969, from which the lyrics were taken. I knew this because my mother-in-law was a rampant librarian and serious collector of New Zealand children's books. Through her I owned all Margaret's earliest books. So, when we recorded our version of *Dance All Around the World* I wrote in the book notes to Kiwi Kidsongs that formal attribution to Margaret to set the record straight.

Kiwi Kidsongs production stopped, suddenly, when the Ministry of Education decided it was no longer needed. My grandson is probably the only child in the land who has his own complete set of them: 150 songs. We hope the Ministry of Education will soon need more songs for Kiwi classrooms.

So – after giving the gift of listening, we give the gift of language, words. We own the world when we have words to describe it just as we own the pets we name. We must give our children the ability to name their world, their feelings, their needs.

I help at the local school. I can unlock a child's sense of humour (their imagination) by asking them to come up with a made-up name for themselves. I give them one too. They love it, especially newly arrived non-English-speaking children. The naming of themselves, then the naming of things is one of the first steps they take to creating their own world with language. This is important, even for children who don't go on to read and write. With fluency in language there is rarely a need for violence.

When I was in hospital recently my six-year-old grandson brought me a card he'd made: "I hope your stay in hospital," he'd written, "is spectacular." I knew what he was doing. He was using the best word he could think of for such an important message. He has a bulging kete of words. It's all I can provide him with to survive in the uncertain future his generation faces.

I teach him how words are made. I give him at least one bright and shiny, or mysteriously dented and dirty, word every day.

I have bandages over my eyes and he asks: "Grandma: could you still be 'I' without eyes?"
We are at the checkout. "Grandma, I know a courtyard is called that because it's where we catch balls but why do we get a receipt at check out when we are always standing up?"
Hmm. I'm still processing the genius of courtyard for catching balls.... And 'receipt' with no seat at checkout...

"Grandma! Are you listening to me?"

"Tane, I am always listening."

He is playing with his cars. The radio news is on.

"Grandma, what is *incarceration*? Is it being locked in a car?"

"No."

"If people are *incarcerated* are they cut with a bread knife?"

"No."

"Is it like '*incinerated*'?"

"No. That means burnt."

"Are they burnt because they've been bad?"

It is pointless struggling to read words if we are not used to describing the world using words. Let's not expect children to want to learn to read if they haven't learnt that language is a tool they can use to explore, explain and change their world. We must help them build that world, one word block at a time.

Then, when their listening ears are buzzing with words, they step to the next rung. Story. Story is a gift not given lightly – to echo Chris Knox's song. Just words. Freely given. In the dark. From adult to child. For babies and tiny children, the transfer of the Word Witch's gift is physical; mouth to mouth, skin to skin, mouth to ear. A book or an iPad, at that stage, could get in the way.

I like to think storytelling was the reason language developed its sophistication in the first place, as hunters and gatherers returned to the cave 200,000 years ago with meat, fruit, seeds, and experiences to share. As our minds began to wonder and think we had to tell stories. "You should have seen..." "You'll never guess what happened ..."

We all do it, passing the Word Witch's gift, as story, to those who will outlive us.

Touch and Tell

There is always light in the bedroom.
Even when the child is sleeping
There is a moon-shaped night light.

But I remember the nights
The long, long ago nights,
When the fire had died down,

The cave mouth was filled with dogs,
And I was a child, at the back,
Feeling rock above me.

No matter what terrors woke me in the night,
I couldn't dissolve them with a beam of light.

Cuddle me, I cried, and they did.
Sing to me, I begged, and they did.
Tell me a story, I pleaded, and they did.

Each dawn that came we had survived.
So had our stories. So had our songs.
Now they vibrate in the sunlight like gongs.

Telling stories, expressing fear, recounting events, laughing, all work to unite the family, the tribe. Stories are always an act of sharing and caring.

Whether in caves long ago or in cities now, storytelling uses any medium it can to communicate, from arrow marks in blood on stone, to YouTube video. Stories define us, shape us, and make us. Not every culture in the world is literate, but every culture tells stories and sings songs.

Another poem, where I hoped to capture the work that story does:

Night Light

I lift his tense body, making sure
The special blanket is wrapped round him
And not caught in the ruck of bedding.

I stagger to the couch in the bay window
Half of which is bathed in street lamplight,
A soft white on the tired grey upholstery.

4 am. Quiet. No cars on the road.
I massage his plump feet and sing the cramp away.
4.15. Still no cars. Not one.

"Is that better now?" I ask my grandson.
"Tell me a story," he smiles, eyes shut.
And I do.

These stories are about the mystery of being safe in a dangerous world, about domesticity and adventure, love and hate. I hope they help to explain the child's own world to him. They are made up on the spot, rarely repeated.

Give a child a story and I hope she will take the story and mould it to suit her own understanding of the world. Story is a bag; it changes shape depending on what we put into it. 'Creative' has the same root as 'creature.' It implies alive, changeable. I am increasingly feeling that story should be interactive.

Here's an example of what I mean. In the pouring rain, we huddled undercover in the courtyard and I told the toddler about Noah's Ark. I went inside to make lunch, and he stayed there and built a raft out of wood, with a gangplank. He showed me this. "See? He loading the ark now, two by two. Two Toyotas, two diggers, two fire engines, two ambulances, two forklifts." "Right. What's that rescue helicopter doing on the deck?" "That go out to find the olive branch. *Tucka tucka tucka.*"

The concept of rescue, relief, is there, transformed from a dove to a chopper. Children instinctively update myth to find its meaning.

Our very nation is a gift from storytelling seafarers. Its name, Aotearoa, indicates how we are seen from the sea. The name tells other sailors what to look for, how to find us. Explorers, sailors, fishers, are necessarily storytellers. They passed stories down the generations, about icebergs, new islands, fish. I am sure this information was conveyed by story and waiata, just as much as by the stars. Two hundred and fifty years ago, two of the greatest seafaring peoples met on Kaiti Beach – Māori and the crew of the 'Endeavour'. We are still harvesting the sea wrack of stories from this meeting of two cultures separated from each other by half the globe, misunderstood often by each other, but united by their use of story and their understanding of its power.

Storytelling is not about ownership, authorship or copyright. It's initially about family and love. "What did you do today?" is an invitation to tell a story. It means, 'I'm interested in your life. You are important to me.' Stories are free, like sunshine, and as necessary. Being a story creator is not a special skill. All of us tell stories. We all gossip in cafés, on buses, in the women's loos on Saturday nights. The Greeks had a god of gossip, Ossa.

I'm concerned that in our professional world where everyone has something called a 'role', and is an expert at something and hires other experts in other things to do those other jobs for them, we regard storytellers as astonishing superhumans like surgeons and accountants and plumbers and prime ministers. Not so. Everyone has stories to tell. The important stories are personal. Joy Cowley said in a recent radio interview – oh that storehouse of treasure, that waka huia, that is Radio New Zealand – that her great grandchildren tell her stories over the phone and she writes them down. Marvellous, as John Campbell would say.

For a young child their own story creation and storytelling is more important than reading. It comes *before* reading. A teacher I work with emailed: "In our school, where over 70% of the children are English-language learners, the biggest factor in their progress to English has been their learning to *tell* their own stories."

And children have many ways of telling story, not necessarily verbal. Children can tell stories through theatre, drawing, dance, costume, lies, and song.

When he was three, I told my grandson about the three little pigs and their house-building. He went outside and made three piles – one of grass, one of bits of wood and one of bricks. But I nearly spoilt it when I tried to remove the teetering piece of brick from the top of the brick house. "No," said the angry child. "That important. That the chimney!" Of course. There would be no satisfactory ending without that chimney for the wolf to fall down, would there? I knew then that he knew what story was.

Storytelling involves interaction between teller and listener. For example, at home we re-version Grimm's fairy tales and Greek myths. He rarely accepts my ideas. I always accept his. Thus the gifts the baby Sleeping Beauty receives might be life-long diesel or a mining digger, rather than goodness and the power to dance. Snow White's coffin will be on a wide-load truck going down Mt Eden Road with flashing lights and a siren.

I always want to make up funny stories but Tane prefers them terrifying with a gloomy ending. Sometimes the stories end abruptly before they've begun. We are rushing through the garden, acting out the Giant chasing Jack. I have almost caught Jack, but he phones the police and my character is promptly arrested and that is the end of that.

This raises the issue of technology requiring us to develop new myths, new stories entirely, new adventures you can have in this over-protecting world where GPS can track your whereabouts, you can never get lost, never escape from parental supervision. It's a huge topic, not for today.

Tell your own stories to your children. Everyone can do it. You will be teaching your child to visualise, to empathise, to retain information, to listen. This is important now because with attention spans getting shorter, and words rarely existing separate from pictures, the visualising that is essential to a satisfying reading experience is an unassessed and unvalued skill that can't be taken for granted.

Tane and I are both grownups now. He goes to school. I struggle to create stories relevant to our era, using any available media. He chooses his own books now and reads them. He threw *George's Marvellous Medicine* into the rubbish bin to show his disgust at how Roald Dahl portrayed a grandmother. We have learnt that books can be dangerous.

(Of course, I actually love Roald Dahl's stories, which are written as though spoken. But that particular one was age-inappropriate. Tane has yet to reach the age of experience where grandparents can be less than perfect.)

Back to the rungs of the literacy ladder: Listening. Language. Story. Then comes Reading. I know that print is embedded in me like old metal type in a quoin. But I also know there are so many other ways of storytelling and that print can limit our imagination.

Here's a poem exploring my adult ambivalence towards print.

In and Out of Print

I don't want you, at two, to learn to read. Not yet.
But you love magnetic letters on the fridge.
Why did I put them there? Watch me write:

D for Daddy. Straight back. Sticky out puku. Like that.
M is Mummy: up down up down. Breasts.
G is Grandma, sitting, with a lap.

Stop! Don't do it! Be in no hurry

To see the world through a locust storm of writing.
Let us share stories, told in the dark, from the heart.
Giants, trolls, wolves, and warriors fighting,

Else you may spend your childhood
Pulling wobbling words behind your finger.
Left to right, Cat. Sat. Mat.
And where is the magic in that?

When you are a student, studying a monarch butterfly –
How he taps his legs, waves his antennae,
Polka-dot thorax pulsing, ruffled wings hanging
And then smoothing out into a fully spread sail
And the flying away, a flame in the blue –

Please don't remember this in the exam room abyss
As printed facts on the screen inside your head,
And you worried by the spelling of 'chrysalis'.

Drown your book. Look around you.
Try to see a red wheelbarrow, or plums in the fridge
Without seeing them in print.
It is too late for me.

I'm musing in this poem, around the idea of being too literate. Some of us adults have this condition. We seek all our reassurance and knowledge from books instead of from other people or from inside ourselves. Print can take away our instinctive creativity, and children's too. Everything has to be in balance.

Please don't rate children's progress on their reading ability alone. I'm not saying don't teach your children to read. I'm just asking you to think of the possibility that storytelling comes first, for a child, before reading and writing. I want to put the horse, the high-stepping, neck-plunging horse that is the love of language and the power of story, back in front of the golden carriage that is picture books.

After storytelling comes the next rung: literacy. Learning-to-read books are useful and essential tools, and New Zealand pioneered them. I have written many. Joy [Cowley] is the world's expert in this genre. Hers always manage to tell a story, usually with humour. They are never insignificant. But she is a genius, who writes from inside a child's mind. As a child navigates the scaffold of literacy readers it is important that they don't lose sight of the prize, which is the enjoyment of reading.

So, to redress the balance after the previous poem here's a short one about the transformative power of reading. You have to see this poem, in your head.

Transformed by What He Digests

They are doing monarch butterflies at school.

The caterpillars rear, swivel and stretch,
Turning their leaf pages slowly.

After school, on the couch the boy lies long,
Black shorts and black and white top,
A big brightly-coloured book wide open in front of him.

He has emerged from the classroom cocoon
And morphed into a butterfly.

The child is reading a book that someone has written. Who? You? I've finally worked out how to mix my skills of listening, storytelling, reading, writing, and teaching together, and with that potion I now help others to perfect their writing skills through my Go Write Now business. I think that's a contribution I can make because I'm always thinking, not just of the toddler with the wide-open eyes, listening to a story, but also of the butterfly child flapping the wide-open wings of their book, reading. They need great books. We need the published stories our children read to be as compelling, as mysterious and moving, as the first stories they heard, told to them in the dark by their loved ones.

I'm confident we have those books in New Zealand now, books in which writers continue Margaret's work, gifting our land with a korowai of new words, new stories, to describe this diverse, beautiful, innovative and gutsy nation.

I'm aware thanks are due to dedicated publishers and booksellers of children's books, grants for writers from universities and from Creative New Zealand, the Society of Authors with its mentoring scheme, awards for authors – all run by volunteers. It is through these networks that writers can produce their books and still eat the odd crust of bread. Thanks are especially due to librarians and teachers who day in, day out, imbue our children with a love of reading and of luscious words, who know how to choose the local tales that bring smiles to the faces of our lucky tamariki.

And as I started with a tribute poem to Margaret, I'll end with another.

*

Strike Rate

It was simple, sowing the big seeds.
Not so simple weeding, and watching them grow.
'No, Tane. Don't pull that out!
We have to wait. Wait.'

What a word! That hard moaning 'A' sound:
Waiting to cross the road to the playground.
Waiting for dinner to cook. Waiting to grow.

When the vines were Tane's height coy white flowers
Turned them into bonneted people.
Then the pods, dangling like cocoons.

We took the first one inside. On the blue cloth
It looked like a pea green boat with a proud prow.
I unzipped it. The two wings of the pod
Lay there. Each held three peas.

Tane broke off each pea, one at a time,
And gobbled them up quickly,
“Because,” he said, “a yellow whiskery lion
Could come in from the garden and take them.”

I think I have sown my seeds well.

[Glossary of Maori words:

kete: kit, basket

korowai: cloak

tamariki: children

tena koutou: greetings

waiata: songs

waka huia: treasure box]