

So you want to win the Storylines Tom Fitzgibbon Award?



There are very few awards that are open to writers of junior fiction in New Zealand – especially when you are a new writer. The Storylines Tom Fitzgibbon Award is awarded annually to a junior fiction writer. Winning it can launch an author's career. I know, because I won in 2014. For me, the biggest benefit wasn't the cash prize; it was something that money cannot buy – a publishing contract with the award sponsor, Scholastic New Zealand. It's a huge break in an industry where it can seem impossible to get a foothold.

If you have an idea for a junior fiction novel and would like a shot at the prize money and a publishing contract, there are a number of factors you might want to think about before you start filling out the entry form.

Before you start writing:

- Do you know the principles of good writing or how to structure a novel? If you are completely new to writing, a beginners' course in writing fiction, or a reputable 'how-to' writing book might be a good investment before you embark on your novel.
- Do you read junior fiction? A wide reading of junior fiction (including some past Storylines Tom Fitzgibbon award winners) will give you a good idea of the broad range of stories enjoyed by this age group, the quality of writing you should be aiming for, appropriate content matter, and the level of difficulty you can get away with.
- This award is judged by a panel including authors, librarians, and two representatives from Scholastic. Don't assume that only literary novels are chosen, as this is not the case. What is being sought is an original, well-written story with appeal – it may be literary or genre fiction.
- Who are you writing for? Within the age group (8-13 years) covered by the Tom Fitzgibbon award there is a wide variation of age and reading ability. A book aimed at the younger end of junior fiction is quite different in language, plot complexity, appropriate content and length, to one intended for pre-teens. Both are valid yet different propositions. Be clear and consistent about who your intended audience is.
- Consider your adult audience. Junior fiction needs to satisfy dual audiences – children and their caregivers. Adults heavily influence what literature children will access – whether as parents, caregivers, relatives, teachers, librarians, booksellers or award judges. The stories most likely to succeed will appeal to both adult and child audiences.
- Got a cause to push? Many people are motivated to write junior fiction because they have a message they are desperate to impart to our youth. While started with noble intent, these stories often fail because they become overly didactic in tone. If you have a cause to push, be subtle. Children don't like to be preached to any more than adults do. Your story should illustrate the

principle you are passionate about rather than spell it out. Oft-quoted advice is: “Show, don’t tell”.

- Trying to pick what might be popular? Attempting to write a novel based on what is already popular, or on someone’s guess about what might become popular, is seldom a good idea. By the time you finish writing it, that genre or hot topic may be yesterday’s news. Writing a story you feel excited about is always the best idea. Your passion for your story needs to sustain you through the long process of writing it, and infuse itself into your writing.

Getting going:

- There is no one correct way to write a junior fiction novel. Some plan, some do not. Some start at the end, others at the beginning or somewhere in between. The main trick to writing a novel is to keep going. Work on your novel every day if possible. Banish excuses. (Believe it or not, most of us also have to write our novels whilst bringing up children and/or holding down jobs.) Did anyone tell you it would be easy? ... I hope not!
- Watch out for outdated stereotypes – the world has changed since many writers grew up. Outdated stereotypes (for example, girls always preparing the picnic lunch while the boys always do the scouting) can pop out onto the page unconsciously and they *will* lose you fans.
- Is your dialogue real? If you don’t have much contact with children, check that your child characters are speaking authentically. Find a (non-creepy) way to listen to how kids interact.
- Be conscious in everything you do. Word choices, sentence structure, balance of dialogue, description and action, chapter lengths... the list is long. The choices you make become your style as well as impacting on the accessibility and readability of your story.
- Be original. There is a place in the world for fan fiction... this award is not it.
- Did I mention that you should keep going?!

Finished. But is it ready?

- It can be tempting to finish your story in a rush to meet the award deadline. Resist the temptation to fire off your entry nanoseconds after typing THE END. Often a story will benefit from being set aside (for six weeks or more). Only then can you return to it with a fresh eye, allowing you to see the changes it needs.
- Has your masterpiece been proofread? If you are fortunate enough to win the Storylines Tom Fitzgibbon award, your manuscript will be groomed to perfection by a professional editor from Scholastic. But don’t assume that this means it is okay to submit an unproofed entry. Like a diamond, your manuscript will shine many times brighter if it is flawless. Excessive errors will make the story difficult to read and detract from the judges’ enjoyment of it. But you needn’t shell out for a professional edit. Fastidious, grammar-loving friends make perfect proofreaders. They are usually obscenely delighted to help you weed out those pesky grammar errors and point out plot holes.

- Read your story aloud. Yup – the whole thing. This is an excellent tool for checking dialogue and highlighting where the language doesn't flow. Across the country, on beds and in classrooms (to name just a couple of places), junior fiction stories are being read out loud. Your story should be written with this in mind.

Ready to Apply?

- Have you read the guidelines on the Storylines website? These set out the eligibility criteria, the format that your manuscript should be presented in, acceptable word count, and the method of submission. Even if you have entered this award before, check the guidelines again as the requirements may have changed.
- Do not deviate from the guidelines because you feel your entry is 'different' and that deviating from the guidelines shows a use of artistic licence. Flaunting the guidelines is less likely to result in admiration than your entry being tossed onto the reject pile. Following the guidelines also demonstrates that you are willing to work with what is required and can take direction – qualities that publishers find practical and desirable.
- A synopsis is a full description of your story. It isn't the blurb for your book, or a teaser. A synopsis should outline the entire plot of your book, spoilers and all. It should be well written, accurately reflect the style of your manuscript, and adhere to the guideline length (usually 1 page).
- Don't supply a cover image or illustrations. If you win, these will be supplied by your new publisher.
- Take good note of the final submission date and allow plenty of time for your entry to arrive. If you don't get a confirmation of submission, follow it up before the final submission date. Entries can, and do, go missing en route.

If at first you don't succeed...

- Try again next year! Every attempt you make will improve your writing. At least one Storylines Tom Fitzgibbon winner I know of submitted unsuccessful entries before eventually winning. Being a successful writer requires superhuman amounts of perseverance and patience – if you are serious about writing, you might as well start cultivating these qualities now.

- Suzanne Main