

Storylines Joy Cowley Award Guidelines

Entries to be received by 31 October each year

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Guidelines

The Storylines Joy Cowley Award is for a text of not more than 1000 words with the potential to become an outstanding picture book for children aged 2-7 years.

Entries will be judged under the following criteria:

- The quality of the idea first
- Illustrative possibilities
- Consideration for the restrictions of the 32-page picture book format
- Commercial viability of the resulting book.

On the whole we are looking for that certain indefinable something that lifts a story out of the usual. We hope that the following observations from both the judging panel and children's literature experts will assist you in assessing your own work prior to submitting to this award. The judges will be looking for freshness of idea and language, a good sense of narrative structure, clever use of dialogue, strong characterisation, and appropriateness to the age group.

A picture is worth a thousand words

A picture book is not a short story with pictures. Picture books must have the story and the imagery working together, each complementing the other. Although you won't be supplying the images, what will be happening in the illustrations and how much of the 'story' could be captured in the images, should be considered. Some authors include briefing notes for the artist. These can help the editor/judge to visualise elements of the story that have been left to the pictures to tell.

Write what you know

You are advised to spend some time studying a wide range of successful picture books, analysing their strengths and how the illustrations complement the written words. Remember, every picture book starts with the story.

Rhyme and rhythm

This is an extremely difficult genre to handle well. Bad verse can spoil what would otherwise be a good story idea simply because the action is forced to fit the rhyme of the verse. Stay with the good idea. Work in rhyme only if it can capture that idea well and if you can ensure that the rhythm maintains its regularity. Check your work by asking someone to read it aloud. If they stumble or lose the rhythm, then the text needs more work.

The idea

Picture book writing, especially for the preschool age group, is usually based on one simple idea. Don't make the story too complex, even if your intention is to produce a sophisticated picture book. If you wish to model your submission on a proven story formula, you must have a novel twist, one that is as good, if not better than, the original.

Style / Structure

- Avoid anthropomorphism. This can work but requires special care.
- Always ensure the theme is empowering to the child reader, even if humorous.
- Keep in mind that your story will need to fit within 32 pages.

CHECK YOUR WORK BY READING IT OUT ALOUD

Judges' comments from previous Storylines Joy Cowley Awards

The following points taken from judges' reports of previous Storylines Joy Cowley Awards may be helpful to intending entrants.

- Previous entries for this award have indicated that many writers assume that picture books should be, or need to be, in rhyming verse. By writing in verse, you have actually doubled the challenge; the judges discard many good stories simply because the authors had written in less-than-perfect verse form, rather than straightforward prose. Any verse for children which is going to be sight-read by parents needs to be rhythmically flawless. AA Milne, Dr Seuss or Lynley Dodd are good examples of the standard required.
- Cat and dog stories – pet stories generally – make up a large proportion of submitted stories, and usually cover well-worn ground. Even to get as far as the judges' shortlist, any cat or dog story must have a freshness of approach and characterisation. The same applies to stories about such New Zealand icons as tūi, piwakawaka (fantails) or kiwi.
- Stories generally need to be within a young child's worldview and understanding, and ultimately to empower the young child in some way. Stories about singing vegetables or talking volcanoes are unlikely to get far.
- We often see strong adult characters but few strong child characters for the reader to connect with.
- Do not try to retell remembered stories.
- 'Artists' briefs' are written suggestions to the artist, particularly included where the author wishes significant elements of the story be represented visually, not in the text. These are not obligatory, but if entrants decide to include them, the judges recommend that the artist's brief is kept simple and straightforward, to one page if possible, and laid out in clearly understandable format.
- Entrants are advised to spend time in a library or bookshop studying successful books for their ideas, structure and language.
- If a manuscript has been submitted twice and not been shortlisted, the judges recommend seeking the advice of a manuscript assessor.