

Storylines Betty Gilderdale Award 2017: Storylines Spring Lecture

delivered by **Maureen Crisp**



Tena koutou katoa,

It is an honour to address you tonight, having been chosen by my peers to receive this prestigious award. It is also daunting.

I would like to thank the Storylines Children's Literature Charitable Trust, represented here tonight by Dr Libby Limbrick and Frances Plumpton.

I also would like to thank my family and friends here tonight who have shaped me... put up with me... occasionally squashed me into a dryer, inspired me and challenged me to always think of others and be my best self.

Storytelling does not depend on the container

Once upon a time...

A long time ago....

In the beginning was the word...

Something happened to someone....

Hearing any of these phrases the audience knows a story is coming. The body relaxes and the mind opens wide to drink in the power of the words. It happens regardless of age. If you say the words, 'Once upon a time', the listener seems to relax and enter another time and space. Perhaps they remember being on the couch as a young child, perhaps in a movie theatre or in front of the television in their dressing gown with a mug of Milo. It seems to be an unconscious action: the eyes widen, the breathing slows and you are ready for... The Story.

How did these four words, 'Once upon a time', gain so much power in the human consciousness?

Perhaps it goes back through our genetic memory to a time when humans began to gather in groups for protection and survival. The group lived or died according to how well the storytellers imparted their wisdom:

Don't eat that leaf...

Don't poke the sleeping bear...

Robert McKee said, 'A good story means something *worth* telling that the world wants to hear. Your goal must be a good story well told.'

The groups that survived, recognised the power of the story to impart wisdom and rules to live by, to ensure survival. The storytellers gained prestige. They became Shamans, Priestesses, Oracles, Prophets, Druids, Tohunga...

They were revered, sometimes feared, always looked up to....

Their power to change attitudes, diffuse tension, educate and control through words became a source of pride to the group. The best stories were shared far and wide and handed down through generations, changed and adapted but never quite losing their central themes:

If it looks too good to be true – it's probably fake...

You will always get into trouble if you trade things of unequal value...

Beware if your enemy tries to be your friend: what's in it for them?

When the birds fly inland, seek good shelter.

In the beginning... storytelling was oral. The storyteller was also the actor, using the power of their voice to emphasise words or phrases: strong and soft, thundering denunciations or whispering exhortations, changing and expanding the language of the group:

Danger, Food, People, Enemy, Fire, Home...

Sinister, Monk, Cohort, Catapult, Forum...

Swagger, Arch-villain, Cold-blooded, Dishearten...

Storytelling became more elaborate. Plays were acted out. Props made. The audience was invited to pay. It drew the attention of kings, sometimes good... sometimes bad.... The storytellers lived from day to day accepting the adulation and the death threats along with the small coins flung into their caps. They gathered together to form companies of minstrels. They invented public relations and popular songs, satire, heroes and villains: Anansi, Freya, Beowulf, David, Ganesha, Athena, Hercules, Diana, Loki, Shiva, Robin Hood, Maui. Their words and deeds fired up the imaginations of their audience, lifting them up briefly from the poverty and misery of day-to-day survival, transporting the listener to another time and place where they too could be a hero and vanquish the villain, or get rich and have an easy life.

Storytellers travelled. They could speak of far-off distant lands, beyond the next village... Their words challenged and inspired, mocked and cautioned their listeners, who hung on every word. The storytellers became famous, known far and wide. They banded together calling themselves keepers of the word. They built churches and invented writing so that approved stories could be more easily transported. Wood block printing became fashionable, as did highly decorated parchments for the very, very rich. Just one hand-made book with golden clasps and gilt pages showed that you were rich in mind and pocket.

Meanwhile, itinerant storytellers still survived, more in touch with their audiences among the poor, who only wanted heroes and villains and daring deedsuntil something happened that turned the storytelling world upside down:

The Printing Press

In 1440 Joseph Gutenberg, goldsmith and tinkerer, came up with an ingenious adaptation of the screw press and a new type of ink which revolutionised the art of storytelling. Books became cheaper and more available – the only problem was how to read them. If you could read you had power and soon schools sprang up everywhere. Ideas were currency... No one wanted to be left behind in this rapidly changing world of science and exploration. The storytellers quickly realised that they had to adapt their stories for print but the pressing problem remained: how to get paid for them.

Broadsheets with the news, scandal, and the latest bawdy song became popular. A penny a copy, sold on street corners to those who wanted to show off their education. And theatre storytellers discovered that printed copies of the latest plays were a sure-fire winner.

Storytellers traded news and gathered information. They formed printing companies and created guilds that became powerful. After all, if you could control what the people thought you could be of immense help to those in power or those wanting power.

The golden age of print began: Cambridge University Press established in 1534 by Henry VIII was soon followed by the London, French and Italian gazettes and then a host of imitators.

If you were educated and male, there were stories just for you. It took another hundred years before anyone thought that women and children might like stories too.

Orbus Pictus by John Amos Comenius in 1658 is said to be the first picture book written and published for children in the English language.

The next was fourteen years later in 1672: *A Token For Children, Being the Exact Account Of The Conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives and Joyful Deaths of Several Young Children* by James Janeway.

This book shaped much of the content and attitude towards children's literature for the next several hundred years. Improving children's behaviour and moulding them into right thinking members of society were the only reasons to expend any storytelling thought, let alone costly printed books, on these members of society.

An enterprising printer, John Newbery, kick-started his successful London publishing house in 1744 with *A Pretty Pocket Book*. It was sold for six pence and if you paid an extra two pence you got a red and black ball or pin cushion. This was so the child could stick a pin in the red side if they were good or the black side if they were bad. John knew the power of related merchandising for children's books.

John Newbery seemed to have had a hand in publishing all the children's books for quite a while, including bestsellers *Little Goody Two Shoes* and *Lessons For Children*. His books were popular amongst the upwardly mobile. If you could afford to give your children a gilt-edged book from John Newbery you weren't counting pennies.

John Newbery introduced binding and Dutch-style floral papers for end papers in his books. Inside the book, including within the story itself, he advertised other books or products he was selling. The heroine's father could have been saved if only he had had Dr James Fever Powders... available from the publisher. John had an eye for merchandising and product placement opportunities. He sold more than 30 patent medicines from inside the covers of his books.

Newbery also helped other writers with loans and introductions. He built a thriving community of writers: after all, he needed them for his rapidly expanding publishing business. He gave the storyteller some status in society – if they were male. He died in 1767 and the Newbery medal was named after him in 1922, recognising him as the 'Father of Children's Publishing'.

In 1812 Johann Wyss published *The Swiss Family Robinson* and suddenly action was on the menu for children's storytellers. Walter Scott, The Brothers Grimm, Charles Dickens, Alexandre Dumas, Hans Christian Andersen, Jules Verne, Lewis Carroll, Louisa May Alcott, Susan Coolidge, Mark Twain, Johanna Spyri, Anna Sewell, Robert Louis Stevenson... all became the staple reading diet of children for the next hundred years.

The storytellers became content creators for publishing houses or for themselves through independently published books. It's hard to make a living just writing, so lecture tours and serial stories in magazines were very lucrative. There were falling outs with one another, laudanum parties, drunkenness, destitution and poverty. Also adulation, fame, sold-out lectures, riches, mistresses – and that was just Charles Dickens.

Children's books were marketed as family books, suitable for reading aloud by Father to his adoring family. They reflected social concerns at the time... giving subtle and not so subtle hints about the evils of drink, indigenous people, and the glory of the civilised world in thought, word and deed.

World War 1, the war to end all wars, changed society drastically. The storytellers, looking at the carnage across Europe, retreated to happier times and children's publishing became full of stories celebrating safe adventures, magical times and magical creatures. Beatrix Potter, AA Milne and Hugh Lofting became financial touchstones for the publishers. But their success pales in comparison to the publishing colossus of Enid Blyton. Beginning in 1922, 7,500 short stories, poems and plays; and more than 3000 books and magazines were published during and after her lifetime.

She was ahead of her time: understanding marketing, publicity and branding including insisting on her famous signature being embossed on every book and her being fully involved in all the merchandising surrounding her brand. This was power unrivalled by any other writer of the time.

Enid Blyton created an idyllic fictional fantasy life of the famous author. She could do no wrong and had the publicity and marketing to back it up. Her children were neglected when they weren't appearing in carefully staged photos. She had affairs and made her husband take the rap for them. Other children's writers were just jealous and she famously said that she 'was uninterested in anyone's opinion who was aged over 12'.

Before the Second World War, children's writers mostly met by chance at literature events promoted by libraries. Some of the big libraries had children's librarians and they were keen to have author visit days. If you were in Oxford, you could drop in at The Eagle and Child pub and find a few chatting in the back room. Many children's writers held down teaching jobs and wrote in their spare time. It was a more solitary life. You corresponded with your editor and the occasional writing colleague and replied to children's letters and that was it.

Many countries began their own venerable children's publishing institutions. There were even literary prizes for children's literature with The Newbery and the Carnegie medals. During the Second World War everything publishing took a back seat because of the shortage of paper. Poor Enid was reduced to half her average output: only 24 stories in 1943.

After the Second World War, societies began to be formed just for children's writers. The International Board on Books for Young People was founded in 1953 and introduced The Hans Christian Andersen Award, often referred to as the Little Nobel.

At the beginning of the 1970s writers could attend conferences and awards just for children's writing.

Everything was going well. It was sunny days, sumptuous picnics and lashings of gingerbeer all round, until...

Some researchers tinkering in university back rooms came up with the idea of computers that could talk to one another. Tim Berners Lee invented HTML code in 1991 and it was heralded as the biggest change in publishing since 1440.

The world got smaller and more connected. Our own first internet provider was Planet in 1997.

The internet gave writers the freedom to reach out to one another across the globe and find out that we were all essentially the same. We all worried about killing off a main character. We all suffered from insecurity. And everyone had problems spelling Mississippi, ...even Americans.

Internet chat groups became our water cooler. Finally we could feel we really were at proper writing work... wasting time on Myst and writing around our day jobs... and our family.

In 1998 I remember chatting on an author list serv in real time with some authors in the UK. (It was their morning, my night.) We were talking about great children's books and how word of mouth seemed to be the only way to promote books as there was no marketing budget. They told me about a debut author called J K Rowling who had a modest print run of 500 copies for her first book in 1997 (300 went to libraries), but word of mouth had secured another print run. It was the power of the story that got everyone talking.

The book went on to win the National Book Award and the Smarties prize for best book in the 9-11 year old category voted by children. The following year it won every book award voted by children and none voted by adults. There is a story in here about the importance of children being judges of their own books.

The internet made researching a book easy. I remember complaining to my mother-in-law about trying to research life on a Tahitian island... what I really wanted was a magic wand to whisk me away to a tropical paradise without the kids. Her one-word reply, internet, crushed my day dream but kicked my novel off.

So where John Newbery collected writers together and formed publishing houses at the beginning of the golden age of print, now we have Jeff Bezos and Amazon kicking off the digital reading revolution. Amazon allowed anybody anywhere to buy a story with one click of a button based on knowing what they liked to read.

This revolution in reading accessibility has changed the face of publishing.

The E-book revolution and the implications for storytelling

It was a dark and stormy night ten years ago when Amazon released the first Kindle on November 19th 2007. I know because I checked: you can find anything out on the internet.

At first, publishers ignored it as a gimmick from a smart tech company based in Seattle. Then it all looked like mysterious alchemy that was never going to catch on. Early experimenters formatted out-of-print books and loaded them up on Kindles and bragged about reading *War and Peace* in a device that weighed less than a pound of butter.

Publishers constantly reassured their writers: *the Kindle will never catch on*. Around this time, I started my blog and began watching and sharing what was happening overseas. There were rumblings of discontent as digital reading grew and grew, and then publishers and booksellers began disappearing, most swallowed up by their larger brethren or quietly closing their doors. By 2012, the rise in the number of books, both print and ebooks, being bought online started to alarm booksellers. We were entering the Age of Amazon.

Children's writers can pat themselves on the back. We have saved many publishers from disappearing completely under the digital book onslaught, as children and their parents, librarians and teachers still prefer to buy print books.

But if you have ever watched a toddler with an iPad you would have to be really, really optimistic that this will continue in the future.

We are in the midst of the change where storytelling is moving from print to digital: Publishing 1.0 to Publishing 2.0.

Books will still be around but they are becoming artifacts, valued treasures. There are fewer opportunities to be traditionally published. Publishers are pinning their expectations and money on fewer books each year. Those books get more attention to production detail with foils, cutouts and gilt pages and marketing dollars so that each publisher's flagship books stand out. The books are becoming treasured items of value just as they were before the printing press. Owning a hardback children's book is becoming a sign of richness in mind and pocket. Have you seen the latest illustrated editions of Harry Potter? If you can afford \$75 for a children's book you are not counting pennies.

So where are the masses getting their stories from? Storytelling has morphed into the digital world. It is in role-playing games and web series; Wattpad and fan fiction online communities, or Radish: serial stories delivered to mobile phones. There are book apps, virtual reality interactive storytelling experiences like Pokemon Go, films, television and commercials.

Storytelling is taking on a more fluid form. It is engaging readers in experiences first. One of my favourite adult authors is releasing graphic novels between instalments of his series books, which expand the story and are collectors' items. One of the biggest film franchises in the world, *Star Wars*, is adding books to fill in the story between movies.

As authors we can choose to tell our stories in a series of linked experiences. One story can be told across a storytelling spectrum from graphic novel to web series, to books to virtual reality game. Whatever serves the story best. We are not confined to a single print container.

Writers around the world are experimenting with soundtracks to books using Booktracks, a Kiwi invention. They encode music into your digital book. The reader gets an immersive experience with a soundtrack playing through their headphones all controlled by tracking the speed of readers' eyes on the digital screen. Kiwi children's writers were the early test partners. Booktracks uses artificial intelligence to encode a soundtrack in five minutes. The company is fully booked up by publishers wanting soundtracks to audiobooks... but they have plans to add video, artificial reality and virtual reality. The movie that plays in your head while you are writing could become the new reader reality.

Audio books are now the fastest selling sector of the traditional publishing industry. If you are stuck in traffic gridlock or on the treadmill, a good story can make the time go faster.

All the big gaming companies are producing stories based inside their popular games. *Minecraft* books topped the best-seller lists in children's publishing last year. *Assassin's Creed* in the adult lists. Consumers are looking to print for a tangible souvenir of the digital story that fired their imaginations.

Every storyteller sets out to do what Margaret Mahy beautifully described as a creative energy: “Reading is very creative – it’s not just a passive thing. I write a story; it goes out into the world; somebody reads it and, by reading it, completes it.”

But all these bells and whistles won’t help a story if it’s not great to start with. Storytellers may have access to a vastly different tool box than the quill pen but they will still need to craft a compelling story. This is where the importance of writer education cannot be overstated. Writers need to be challenging and teaching themselves to write compelling stories. Maintaining connections with each other in writing groups, conferences and social occasions all help to lift the art of the storyteller. It is important that writers find their tribe and have access to good education in changing markets and craft. I often think that *Narnia* and *The Hobbit* wouldn’t have been half so good if each writer wasn’t trying to impress the others back in The Eagle and Child pub.

Within this crowded digital marketplace, discoverability becomes the key to making a living as a writer. You can strike out on your own or you can band together and use the power of the collective to increase visibility.

I believe that New Zealand writers should be thinking about marketing to a global audience more collectively. We are in a unique position of being small enough that we know each other and being loud enough on the world stage that we can highlight the voices of the South Pacific.

Just before she died, Kāterina Mataira issued a challenge to children’s writers at the Auckland conference in 2011: Get out there and make your own books. Don’t wait for a publisher to do it for you. She was electrifying and prescient. She believed that every New Zealand writer had a unique story to tell the world. As I wrote this I was looking at pictures of John McIntyre and Barbara Murison, both former recipients of this award and champions of good New Zealand stories. New Zealand children’s writers are an amazingly supportive group.

What might happen if we group together and tackle the world?

I have been studying author collective models for a few years. When groups of writers get together amazing things can happen. They become a beacon of author power shining a light on important issues or causes or visibility in the marketplace.

There are many different styles of author collectives.

There is the Fabo collective that I’m proud to be a part of. After a conversation on Facebook, a group of children’s writers decided to host an online serial story-writing competition for kids.

It was hard work but heaps of fun. Every week a new writer wrote a chapter following on from last week’s cliff hanger. Beside us, kids were writing their own versions of what they thought would happen next. This had a two-fold consequence:

One: we were writing against other children’s writers so we had to up our writing game; two: we were writing against some talented and imaginative children so we had to up our writing game.

With time pressure and own book deadlines affecting different authors in the group we realised that if we did it again we needed to have the story written beforehand... and just release the chapters. Over the years Fabo has gathered other children’s writers into the fold and morphed into a story starter collection loosely based in the most anarchic school in New Zealand.

Other writer collectives include the US Class of 2K. Each year 20 young adult and middle grade debut writers for the following year are invited to join for a fixed fee. The money is pooled and used throughout the year for marketing and promotion of all the writers. This buys websites, marketing materials, a publicist, etc. The group also provides speakers at education conferences. Every member must commit to at least ten hours a month in marketing for the group. Over the nine years that model has been operating the members of the 2K classes have become highly visible to librarians and teachers in the US. When you have 19 other people actively promoting your book for a full year you get tremendous visibility in the marketplace.

Here in New Zealand I am watching with interest the Eunoia Publishing Group's early beginning. This umbrella organisation provides legal and rights management advice to eight small independent New Zealand imprints. They have links into China, a rapidly growing publishing market. Each imprint works on its different publishing projects but can then access the rights lawyers and collective marketing savvy of eight other publishers. This year, Steampress, a very small science fiction publisher of one person, and a Eunoia imprint, brought out Jessica Pawley's young adult book *Air Born*. The film rights were already sold before launch.

This week I read a report from the UK saying that Indie micro-presses have had improved sales of nearly 80 percent because they are targeting readers beyond the white middle class and into more diverse backgrounds.

The Indie movement of cutting edge, innovation and new voices gives power to Indie authors, publishers and bookstores, to appeal to a broader reading audience. Amazon has mastered giving you more of the same. If you want something different Indie offers you more choice.

At the moment we are 25 years into the Publishing version 2.0 revolution: digital. Publishing version 3.0 is on the horizon.

The global take-up of the internet is rapidly expanding. We are seeing the rise of leapfrog countries around the world. These are countries which didn't go through the phone to desktop computer to internet transition but have leapt straight from no electronic or technological communication to doing business and consuming entertainment on mobile phones. Half the world's population is under 30 and nearly 90 percent of them are in emerging and developing economies in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

What is the potential for the exchange of stories with this new audience? Limitless. We are seeing the rapid adoption of reading on mobile devices. We can read anything from anywhere at anytime paid for with a global currency.

With the internet rapidly evolving, the innovation of blockchain technology is set to disrupt publishing again along with the financial and legal sectors.

Blockchain is a continuous list of growing digital records called blocks which are linked and secured together. Each blockchain is encrypted between the creator and the consumer. For example, the copyright page in a book lists the holders of intellectual property in that book. The author, illustrator, cover designer, and publisher are blocks of information linked in a chain which is encrypted and stored in multiple sites around the world, immediately.

Blockchain allows one person to transfer a unique piece of digital property to another person in a way that is safe and secure, open, visible and agreed by all, and cannot be subsequently modified by an outside party.

Blocks of information could be contracts, payments, work for hire, designs, rights to use. Information stays secure until a modification agreed to by the originator changes it in some way: a contract could be changed or cancelled, payment received, or generated. The new data is then re-sent immediately to multiple servers around the world. Data pirates would have to remove the encrypted data from multiple sites around the world at the same time to steal intellectual property.

Imagine a world where you create a story in the morning. Inside that story is an encrypted algorithm unique to you and linked to a global smart wallet. You publish the story digitally into a global market place. Anybody reading the story automatically transfers a micropayment from their smart wallet into yours. Your story gets picked for an anthology with 15 other authors. The anthology gets published. Every reader of the anthology transmits a micropayment to each author and the editor.

Your story gets made into a film. The algorithm is transferred to the new medium. Every time the film is viewed the author receives a micropayment.

What this technology enables is the direct payment from the consumer to the creator. There is a clear record of ownership in any asset, intellectual or physical and the ability to shut down breaches of intellectual property. The Alliance of Independent Authors is already researching ways to help authors come to grips with this new technology.

The financial sector is already experimenting with blockchain digital cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin and Ethereum. Taxi drivers in London now have signs in their cabs saying they will accept Bitcoin.

The smart wallets are already around: think Paypal.

The global marketplace is already there. Micro payments to authors are already being used in Kindle Unlimited, Amazon's subscription reading programme. The monthly pot of money, \$19 million last month, is divided by all the pages of all the books in the programme. This sets a rate for each page. The more pages read the more micropayments accrue to the author.

The original creators will be the drivers of a new economy and they will get paid first. Storytellers need to be global in their focus and nimble in their future planning.

We are repeating history again. Today we are all John Newbery, on the cusp of a changing publishing landscape and trying to figure out how to make a living.

Children's writers can now choose a container that suits their story. It might be a book app or graphic novel. It could be delivered in bite-sized pieces in a mobile phone serial or scripted into a web series. It could be a picture book or role-playing game or a series of print novels.

While I was writing this, I was contacted through a Facebook group by an app developer in Oregon who wanted to pick my brains about using artificial intelligence in storytelling.

Storytellers will adapt to the changing containers of story because storytelling is part of the human condition. Phillip Pullman said, 'After nourishment, shelter, and companionship, stories are the thing we *need most* in the world.'

We need them to make sense of our lives and our experiences, to comfort and inspire. To remind us not to poke the sleeping bear. Unless we want a horror story.

Regardless of the medium, telling stories is an art. Every storyteller down through the ages knows that the story works if it can hold the audience, if it can expand horizons.

The best stories transcend the container they are presented in. They capture the imagination... keep you chewing over ideas which you discuss with your friends and expand your world view. They can be as simple as the picture book *Duck Stuck*, which enthalls its audience with its play on rhyme and an absurd situation, to the latest drink drive commercial with its creativity to imprint a sobering message.

How do we survive and thrive in this rapidly evolving publishing environment? We need to find more opportunities to collaborate with other storytellers, in other mediums. We need to think globally and keep up to date with what's happening overseas. We have the storytelling skills, we are used to innovation. If we support one another either at writing conferences or in more focused collectives to learn to take advantage of the new digital environment, we can only succeed.

Once upon a time... something happened to someone, and he decided that he would pursue a goal. So he devised a plan of action, and even though there were forces trying to stop him, he moved forward because there was a lot at stake. And just as things seemed as bad as they could get, he learned an important lesson, and when offered the prize he had sought so strenuously he had to decide whether or not to take it, and in making that decision he satisfied a need that had been created by something in his past.

This quote on storytelling structure comes from the first writing craft book I ever bought, *How to tell a story* by Gary Provost.

New containers will not replace story. The basis for good storytelling will always remain the same.

Kia ora koutou na whakarongo mai.

Maureen Crisp

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Maureen Crisp is a writer and blogger living in Wellington. She taught for many years in primary schools and then switched to learning and sharing information with other children's writers and publishers in New Zealand. She has programmed specialist conferences for children's writers and writes a popular weekly blog on news in publishing and writing craft for an international audience. She is the 2017 Storylines Betty Gilderdale Award recipient for outstanding services to children's literature in New Zealand.