

A Tour of my Bookshelves

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Tēnā koutou katoa. E te whānau, nau mai, haere mai ki tēnei whakanuitanga (Family, thank you and welcome to this celebration).



Welcome to you all. Thank you for coming today. Thank you to my Storylines family who have been kind enough to choose me as recipient for this award, and to Betty Gilderdale. It is indeed an honour to receive this award in your name, and to have you here today. Thanks also to my amazing family who are here today, especially my mum who has travelled up from Taupo for the occasion, my son Angus, and daughter Lizzie whose lives have been filled with the books I'll talk about today, and my ever-supportive husband Neil, who puts up with our home being held up by books in ever-increasing piles.

Today I want to take a tour of my bookshelves, and the stories connected to the books that live there. I know I was a reader as a child, but I don't remember a lot of the detail of exactly what I read – pretty much whatever I could get my hands on I think!

When I was six, I got the best-ever Christmas present – a big stack of books, and I think I still have them all. There was a book of *Uncle Remus Stories*, *Winnie the Pooh* and a big book called *Caroline and her Friends* – a little girl and her dressed-up animal friends who took the reader to different places around the world, which gave me my first idea of what other places in the world might be like.

I was very surprised some years ago, at a children's book event, to hear Ray Richards' daughter, Nicky, telling someone that her favourite children's book was *Caroline and her Friends*. I'd never seen it anywhere else apart from my own bookshelves, or heard anyone ever mention it until then. Don't we all love to find someone else who enjoys the same books as we do?

The reading I most recall from my childhood years were the popular series. We could buy a book each school holidays and mine were predominantly of the Enid Blyton boarding school variety like *Malory Towers* (while my one-year-younger sister chose the pony books), along with the likes of the *Bobbsey Twins* and *Nancy Drew*, and some classics – *Heidi*, *Pollyanna*, *The Borrowers*, and my most-loved *Little House on the Prairie* books. However, most of my favourite children's books don't come from my childhood, but rather from the many recommendations Dorothy Butler gave me in my mid-twenties. The shelves of her library became my go-to place to find my next book, following her recommendations, reading widely, and loving everything.

One thing is certain – one of the main reasons I do what I do now, am the person I am now, is because of my connection to Dorothy, who educated me in the world of children’s books. She was many things to me – mother-in-law, Granny to the children, expert and academic in the field of children’s literature, encourager and friend.

I met Dorothy in 1985, as she was the mother of my then partner, Tony. Meeting Dorothy had an immediate impact on me. It took no time at all to start talking books, and we were still doing so in the last days of her life. I remember the first time I visited Dorothy’s private library in her house at Karekare. I was to spend many hours in this library, and borrow dozens and dozens, perhaps into the hundreds, of books from the shelves.

One of her first suggestions remains my favourite young adult series – Cynthia Voight’s *Tillerman* series. I’m not much of a re-reader but I’ve enjoyed these several times.

Dorothy also introduced me to novels by authors well-known to others, but whom I had somehow missed in my youth, like Rosemary Sutcliffe, Joan Aitken, Beverley Cleary, Katherine Patterson, and Susan Cooper. I consumed them all and searched the shelves for more.

I didn’t venture into the picture book collection until I had my son, Angus. When he was still six months away from being born Dorothy and Roy gave us the first baby books of our collection for Christmas – including the essential *Beatrix Potter Nursery Rhyme Book*, *An ABC of Children’s Names*, an accordion book illustrated by Walter Crane, and Dick Bruna’s *The Christmas Book* which is still in print – I saw a stack of them in the Dorothy Butler Children’s Bookshop just last week, all ready for a new generation’s Christmas.

Of course, Dorothy’s *Babies Need Books* was essential reading in those early baby days, and I’ve gone back to it many times, and still loan it to new parents even now that the book lists are far out of date (originally published in 1980 and updated in 1988). Somehow, she captures each age and stage perfectly and the book lists were great starting points for getting to know the repertoire of books my babies would respond to.

I also read Dorothy’s first book – *Cushla and her Books*, a study of her granddaughter Cushla, born with multiple disabilities, but who thrived on the deluge of books which were read to her as a small child. Cushla lived next door to us at that time and it was a pleasure to interact with her and enjoy the rich language she had acquired because of this.

These books had taken Dorothy around the world, talking about books and children and the combining thereof. They were followed by the equally useful *Five to Eight* which provided resources for children of those ages. I would love to see an update, particularly of *Babies Need Books*, with current booklists, so it can continue to encourage young parents to share books with their babies from the very start.

When I became a reviewer, firstly for *Magpies* magazine, then the NZ Book Council and Family Times, the tables were turned and it was my turn to be the recommender of books to Dorothy. Every visit involved a bag of books for her to peruse and later discuss the pros and cons of each one. We didn't always agree, I can assure you, and there were some "energetic discussions" as she would have said, as Dorothy lamented the demise of picture books with bountiful text and wasn't keen on some of the topics now seen as suitable for children's books.

Storylines came into my life with the first Storylines Festival Family Day in 1993. I think I attended all but one of the Family Days until they ceased in 2016, superseded by the extended Story Tours that now take authors and illustrators to many parts of the country that were not reached by the festival previously.

Storylines Family Day was the beginning of connecting with authors and illustrators and seeing the effect they had on the young readers. I remember seeing Australian author/illustrator Alison Lester one year, who had all her working drawings and finished art from her book *Imagine*. I'd never seen anything like this before and had no idea how a book was put together, but this intrigued me very much.

I'm amazed by the way life leads you in the right direction, even when you haven't planned it that way. I've never been very good at planning a career path, but somehow the things I've done have linked together to get me here. When Lizzie was four I took a temp job at Jasons Travel Media where I revealed my eagle-eye for spotting spelling and grammatical errors, and landed a permanent spot in the proof-reading team. I learned so much on that job – working with databases, the printing process, how great systems ensure the best quality outcome, and how to use design software.

It was around this time (2000) that I first went to an adult Storylines event – Margaret Mahy Day where Gavin Bishop was the recipient of the Margaret Mahy Medal. I signed on as a member that day and when my first newsletter arrived there was a request for someone to help as membership secretary, so I jumped right in and volunteered. This meant I could attend Management Committee meetings, so along I went.

There were also sub-committees to join! Storylines Notable Books was a favourite and I'm pleased to be getting back to that this year, now that my New Zealand Book Awards judging is finished. Now we mainly vote by spreadsheet, but in those earlier days, there were big gatherings to look at all the books and choose what was going to go on the list. I remember many meetings for various sub-committees around Carole Ardern's dining table, perfectly set up for large groups. Later, we met at Jabberwocky Children's Bookshop, then operated by Julie Harper, her parents David and Doreen, and partner Colleen. The bonus of being at the bookshop was that they usually had copies of all the books that were in contention.

Sadly, we have since lost both Carole and Colleen and they are missed by all of us who worked with them.

Around this time, I decided to do a bit of study and started the Christchurch College of Education's Children's Literature Diploma. The first paper was 'Image and Narrative' but I always refer to it as 'the picture book paper'. This was a revelation. Even with all the mountains of picture books I'd read in Dorothy's library, the public library, and our own growing collection at home, there were whole areas I had missed and knew nothing about.

I didn't know there were amazing books about difficult subjects, and complicated stories not meant for little kids. Picture books for everyone! It wasn't just the stories that worked on so many different levels, but all the hidden meanings in the illustrations – characters looking or moving to the left when it was about something in the past, but to the right when moving on with the story, the additional meaning colours might add, even the size and shape of the book. There isn't a single thing about a great picture book that can't be deliberately chosen to add meaning to the story in your hands. I couldn't believe that I hadn't been conscious of these things in all the reading I'd done until this time. I would never take any of this for granted again.

The second paper was 'Patterns in Language' or 'the poetry paper' and again, so many secrets and skills were revealed to me, and fed my ever-growing love of poetry, both for adults and children. It also added to my skills when it comes to writing about the text in books; all those hidden rhymes and rhythms that I now had words for, and could use myself when I wanted my writing to sound more vibrant.

Even though I didn't finish the diploma I felt that I had gained immeasurably from the study and I felt a strong push to move in a new direction – I needed to jump out of my proof-reader position and get into the real book world. I did some freelance work and then the opportunity came up to take over *New Zealand Children's Books in Print* from Jo Noble. Initially begun as a sales tool for Jabberwocky bookshop, it had become an independent publication but Jo had been unwell and didn't feel able to continue with it, so we came to an agreement for me to take it over.

I did everything. From sending out the current database records to be checked and updated by the publishers, to writing listings, seeking advertising and sometimes making the ads, typesetting and laying it all out and preparing for the printer, then sales and distribution, before beginning all over again for the next edition. For my second edition, I commissioned a new cover design from Fraser Williamson (the cover had previously held advertising) which I still use as my business logo. It was a big learning curve, particularly in the design department, but my Jasons' experience paid off and I continued to publish it until 2013 when I started a full-time job and it seemed that *Books in Print* was not sustainable. There

weren't sufficient subscriptions to be worth the huge amount of time and energy it took to do, and the publishing scene was in the midst of huge changes.

I'd been working for myself for about a year when the Storylines Festival Manager position became available. I didn't think I had a hope, but had to take a chance and apply. I could hardly believe it when, after a circuitous chain of events, I had a phone call to tell me I had the job, to work alongside the new position of Executive Officer, Christine Young, who was also new on the job. It was quite a year as we both worked out what we were doing and framed up a revamped format. There were so many details to decide – what to call things, where to have them, how they would operate and who would take part, craft materials and instructions and enough volunteers to make it all happen – not to mention Christine's incredible task of ensuring we had enough money to pay for it all. The dedicated Festival Committee provided endless support, ensuring everything came together, in particular Carole Ardern became my 'festival mum', always there to help when I needed it.

I was lucky to have an amazing international guest for my first year – English illustrator Anthony Browne, launching his latest picture book *Silly Billy*. He was the nicest man who had no problems doing whatever he was asked. The public loved him and lined up in droves to attend his events, and those of the other wonderful authors and illustrators who took part. The next year we had Shaun Tan, launching his iconic graphic novel *The Arrival*. Again, we had huge numbers attend the family days. I think this was the record year when we had 22,000 people through the Aotea Centre on Auckland Family Day.

Our international guests were not always as easy to work with as Shaun and Anthony. When one of my heroes, Babette Cole, came from the UK she proved to be more than a little bit nutty, but very cheerful and enthusiastic with it. Of course, her personality was one of the things that enabled her to create kooky characters like *Princess Smartypants*. My lasting memory of her visit was of her curled up under her red coat, fast asleep in the green room at Wellington Family Day. She was contrasted with the very sensible and research-focused Carole Wilkinson from Australia, with her *Dragonkeeper* series.

Colin Thompson was another unforgettable visitor whose mind runs at 100 miles an hour. He was fascinating, if a bit exhausting, to talk to and to experience the mind behind the incredible detail of *How to Live Forever* and *The Paradise Garden*, which I'd studied in a diploma paper, along with some of Anthony Browne's picture books which have so many hidden depths to them. Look at *Voices in the Park*, and *Into the Forest*. These are stories with multiple layers that need to be studied and read over and over, examining the illustrations for hints and complex details as you unravel the story he is telling.

The stars of the festival were exciting, but the main body of participants were our brilliant New Zealand authors and illustrators. They were the reason why the festival was started,

and the reason why it continues in the form it does today. We have so many talented writers and artists and connecting them with the children they create for has an enormous impact on both children and adults. These days it's not enough just to create the books, you need to be able to get out there and connect with your audience in some way, and I think our authors and illustrators are getting better at doing this, and understanding that it's an integral part of the job.

Unfortunately, the time came when I had to give up my dream job with the festival, having become ill. After a recovery period, I realised I needed to find a new path, but my interests were still the same – children's books. I decided to study graphic design and look to working in book design, but I'd chosen a particularly bad time to try to do that, with publishers closing down or moving offshore.

Throughout my degree, I focused almost entirely on picture books and libraries, making three of my own books and a bunch of resources to use in the library, and one favourite character – Buniboy. I loved being in a class with such a diverse range of people, some straight out of school, and quite a few international and mature students, though I was the most 'mature' of them all. We made animations, posters, books, promotional materials and anything else we could think of. It was also at an academic level with art and design history and serious research papers to write, though it wasn't always easy to track down academic level reading to support my picture book investigations. It made my knowledge of illustration in picture books broader and deeper and opened up my own creative streak. I've made long-term friends of classmates and lecturers and the whole experience quite transformed me.

Another link with Storylines also grew my illustration knowledge: being a judge for the Storylines Gavin Bishop Award. Gavin's expertise and experience are gold and I've learned so much from talking about the entries with him, this year with Vasanti Unka's knowledge added to the team. Gavin has also been supportive of another cause I'm passionate about – the need for New Zealand to have a Children's Laureate, like so many other countries who are proud of their children's literature – the UK, Ireland, USA, and Australia are some of those who support their authors, illustrators and young readers in this way, and it's well past time for us to join the parade. We certainly have a number of people who would be perfect to take up this role.

Adding together my book experience and my academic study made a librarian position a good option and I was lucky to land on my feet in the junior school library at St Cuthbert's College. It suited me well. I had my own library space in the junior school, but still had the support of a team in the senior school library, and the best of bosses in Ros Ali. I loved the job, connecting the students with the right books, opening up the lending rules so everyone

could take lots of books out, buying new books to update the collection and seeing all those smiling faces of students and staff who came to spend time in the library.

The only problem was that it was an hour away from home and not enough hours to pay the bills. This is an ongoing problem for so many librarians, particularly in the primary school sector. Their hours are limited, and the majority are not employed for holiday time. That's not a very sustainable way to earn a living and yet so many are working under such conditions. So, much as I loved my three years at St Cuthbert's, when I discovered a job in my local West Auckland area for 32 hours a week I decided to apply, and so found myself at Rangeview Intermediate, where I am still four years later.

I have a big space – what was two large classrooms, and my own (very messy) office. It's a busy, buzzy place. All our English classes come to the library once in their ten-day timetable for a 70-minute class which always includes me reading a picture book and talking about new and recommended books.

When I took over a school library myself, I remembered my own teenage experience as a library monitor, privileged to be able to eat lunch in the library and hang out in the office. I ensured those were privileges I immediately put into place for my own library monitors and it might be a reason why I have always had at least 40 in the team. It's seen as a leadership role and a privilege that can be taken away if students are unreliable or poorly behaved. They learn the basics of issuing and returning, and shelving the books correctly, but they also learn to cover books, come up with competitions and activities for the library, organise special events like the library concerts and our annual book week. They're also first in line to borrow new books and claim withdrawn ones, and then there's the end of year Library Party!

As well as the library monitors, we have two students each term for every class who do the issuing and returning for their class. These are sometimes but not always the best kids in the class – I've had a lot of success appointing students who were often disruptive in class, but when given the honour of the library monitor job they respond by really taking pride in doing it, and it keeps them behind the desk, not roaming around. They also get exposed to a lot of books as they see everything others have chosen. Before they can issue to others, they must choose their own books which is another achievement for them. Non-readers don't get to do this job; if they don't read they can't stay behind the desk. Not many quit. The side-effect of students being involved in this way is that their sense of ownership of the library, which ensures they treat it well, and make sure others do too.

As we all know, it's often those students who are a bit lost at school who find somewhere to belong in the library. (Yes, that was me.) We see them thrive and slowly open up. If we can

get them to join the library team they really blossom as they make friends with the others and find their corner of the world to be an expert in.

I've been ranting a little bit lately, about school libraries and that they need to be rowdy places full of enthusiasm for books and reading and stories. The silent library isn't a friendly place for children to come in to. A library where the visitors are told off for being noisy, and not encouraged to explore the shelves, just isn't sustainable in the long run.

I want librarians who read the books they are recommending; librarians who are joyful about finding just the right book for someone; librarians who allow students sufficient time, and assistance if required, to find their books. Their libraries might not be perfectly organised, but they will be full of readers.

We hear too often of the school library being taken over for classroom space in an overcrowded school, or seen as being out of date so librarian hours (if they have any) are cut. We must claim our space and make it vibrant and alive, make it essential, make it the heart of the school so no-one can possibly think it is dispensable. If you have a library with few resources then use this treasure trove we are in today – National Library will loan you so many gorgeous books, your library will look like you have terrific stock so you can lure in your customers, which will enable you to campaign for your own new books to feed those young minds.

I think my most important role is to match kids with books. I tell them that I've been reviewing kids' books for their whole lives so I know a lot of books and pride myself on being able to find something for pretty much everyone. Of course, some students are harder than others, like the boys who will only read non-fiction about hunting, but I do my best, and keep edging novels with hunting themes onto the table next to their non-fiction; they will usually try something out eventually.

During a library session, students might also be doing research, or signing books off on their Hell Pizza Reading Challenge cards. This programme, which is part of the New Zealand Book Awards for Children & Young Adults, has been amazing for getting some of our reluctant readers to discover books that they like. Some teachers are more enthusiastic about it than others but those who have used it as a tool in their literacy programme have achieved incredible results. The top student completed 29 wheels (7 books for each one). It's true that those books were probably a mixture of picture books and easy non-fiction, rather than novels, but previously they would have had trouble focusing on a single whole picture book in a class session. Instead have made their way through seven and talked about them with their teacher or peers. I loved the sight of this teacher surrounded by students with the table covered in books as they recommended books to each other, swapping titles and

exclaiming over what they were reading. These students have all improved by at least one or two levels in their reading during the 'pizza season'.

I've run the Pizza Challenge every year at Rangeview, but the interaction with the book awards went up a notch or two when I became a judge in 2018, and then convenor in 2019. I had to make the most of having this huge range of books to share with the students. In the absence of a Children's Choice award these days, the 2018 judges felt very strongly that we needed to ensure we took the student voice into account when we were judging, so four of us each took a category into a school and gathered student opinion. I had the junior fiction and put the call out for keen readers who could read a book in a week, and get through at least four in the month we had available. I also took every single picture book submitted into the library and over a ten-day timetable cycle had every class of students choose at least one book each to read and write a little review about, with some guidelines provided about what to look for.

To be honest I was amazed at how little the students knew about how to review a book, or even how to identify what might be good and bad about a book. We had to start with the basics like 'What age is it for?' so they didn't write that a book designed for a three-year-old was 'really boring'. When asking for detail about what they liked about characters etc there would inevitably be a description rather than specific characteristics. The same applied to the junior fiction. It was terribly difficult to get anyone to write something useful. They weren't all like that; there are occasional star reviewers, like the girl who wrote about *Things in the Sea are Touching Me* that "It just made me so hecker-doodle happy!".

This experience has made me a little dubious about the concept of having child judges involved in the awards, as I'm now a bit sceptical about the ability of younger students to apply the required level of criticism to their reading, but there were other less tangible results that I did find very useful. Simply observing the students choosing and sharing the books – which ones did they go for? Which did they talk to each other about or pass along saying "you should read this"? Given free choice which novels had the most junior fiction readers? I took to using some shock tactics by saying "There are some great books here, but there are some terrible books"; "just because a book is published doesn't mean that it is good"; "you don't have to like it, but if you don't can you tell me why?"

My fellow judges had no such problems expressing what they thought was good and bad about the books we read. It's quite mind-boggling to think that over the two years I read more than 300 books – and that doesn't include everything else I read from overseas or the tiny bit of adult reading that I manage to fit in now and then. I was in awe of everyone's ability to express themselves when talking about books and I learned so much in both years, from these amazing readers and writers. I've been truly changed by the experience.

This year I also took on the job as New Zealand Coordinator for *Magpies* magazine, that amazing Australian publication that keeps us informed about what is new and good (and occasionally not so good) in books for young people in our part of the world. Julie Harper had managed this role for as long as I'd been involved, but her partner Colleen was very unwell and they needed space in their lives so it was time for someone else to take on *Magpies*. I've written reviews since 2005 (Alison Robertson's *Finding Isabella*) and wrote my first article the following year. What I've most loved is writing about illustrators – it's the picture books where my heart really lies. I always want to see where artists work. I remember one of the early articles I wrote was about Bruce Potter. I went to his home in Tuakau. I walked into the enormous garage where he works, which had bookshelves down a whole wall, and not cars but weightlifting equipment occupying the main area, and there was Bruce, who is a big bloke and a powerlifter (hence the equipment), sitting in a corner at a small child's desk, bent over the page he was quickly creating with the tiniest paintbrush I'd ever seen.

I'm fascinated by the tools of the trade, and how each artist goes about creating their work. I've long wished that it was common practice for publishers to include details of the media used to create the illustrations in a book. The only publisher who seems to consistently do this is Scholastic. If you had an artwork in an exhibition it would always say what had been used to create it, and picture book art should be given the same respect. These days the media is frequently digital, or beginning with hand-drawn and painted textures, scanned and put together in Photoshop. In the early days, I know people often looked down their noses at digital illustration, thinking it was cheating in some way, and initially there were some obvious digital tools that were overused. Now, when I look at illustrations and try to guess how they've been made I love to be surprised, as I was last week when I asked Giselle Clarkson how she had done her gloriously loose scribbly drawings in Joy Cowley's *The Gobbledegook Book*. I was thinking watercolour, crayon, maybe some coloured pencil. But no, she works entirely digitally. Those are special skills. I have the greatest admiration for those who work in watercolours. Having done workshops with the champion of this media, Sandra Morris, I know just how hard it is to work with. I'll never stop peering at people's desks to see their tools and wondering 'how did they do that' when I see something extraordinary in an illustration.

Much as I've been riding the wave of excitement of judging, running my library and all the other book business of the last couple of years, the most exciting venture in books has been sharing them with my granddaughter Lexi, and seeing her at nine months old now loving them, peering at the pages, reaching out to turn – or eat – the pages, responding to the rhyme and rhythm of the many books her family have showered her with.

That is what it's all about. I'm back to telling everyone to read to their babies, read to their children, even when they start to read themselves, read to their big kids to keep those points of connection, read to each other.

There are so many other factors that have brought me to this point today. The book club I've been part of at the Time Out Bookstore for more than a decade, where we adults share books for teens and thrive on our diverse opinions and broad and deep book choices; the many authors and illustrators who have shared their skills with me so I could write about them; events like the Auckland Writers Festival and the IBBY Congress that brought so many children's literature devotees together, including several of my book-world heroes. And all of you – people who have been my reading, writing and creative friends and family for all these years. There's still a bit of room on the bookshelves I'm sure.