

Storylines Betty Gilderdale Award 2001



Friends and Relatives – Veda Pickles

This will not be the first time I've made a fool of myself, nor will it be the last.

Recollections of a Journey

Childhood is filled with linguistic stumbling blocks, grammatical crevasses and precipices of non-comprehension. To make sense of this chaos and survive whole is a daunting and perhaps almost impossible task. I'm certain many of those present still carry with them the scars of these encounters with the unknown. This was brought forcibly to mind when "talking" to my great grandson – eight months old. What pearls of misconception has he garnered from our rather one-sided conversations? The vagaries of the English language, oral and written, gave pause for reflection; hence the title of this piece of meandering. Scanning an elderly Collins *New English Dictionary* for a definition on which to focus, the following phrase seemed to sum up my intention; reflection - "the bending back of a part, to expose underlying structures". I hope that I can expose some of the underlying structures to my philosophy/journey.

For many years I have felt that one cannot measure accurately the impact of the individual educator on the student consciousness. On further reflection I also consider that any effect one may have had on the mind of a child (whether as mother, grandmother, teacher) can only be validated in the far distant future. Therefore, with humility and a sneaking suspicion of unworthiness, I gratefully accept this totally unexpected award.

And now, in the language of oral tradition, legends and fairy tales, it is time for a story. Why book language? Book language is so well structured that it has changed very little over a long period of time. It:

- has a universal format and is not limited to a particular age group
- gives anonymity to the subject or narrator
- has a richness yet a compactness of vocabulary and phrase - the dross has been discarded
- has structure, form, sequence, rhythm, repetition and rhyme in the plot
- has a message and meaning for life
- has predictability
- is memorable,
- and, once learned is never forgotten.

Does this story have a title? Perhaps it can be left to the listener to provide one.

Long ago, in a far off country, there lived a king and queen. Even though their kingdom was tiny – in truth only a very small castle in a very small village – they were happy, for with them dwelt an old wise woman and a small princess. To many their life may have seemed humdrum yet they were content. Each day the old wise woman read to the little princess; a story of animals who spoke or acted as do humans. Sometimes at night, in the firelight, over a supper of pobs, the old wise woman related tales of wonder, tales of St Hild, Bede, Cuthbert, the monks of Blanchland, the Cauld Lad of Hilton, the Lambton Worm (Wyrm) & many others. And the child listened.

Sometimes the queen sang as she sat at her sewing. And the child listened.

At night the king sang his daughter to sleep. And the child listened.

At the end of each week the king read of Man Friday, Alice and Lilliput to his daughter. And the child listened even though she did not understand many of the words.

But over a year and a day dire disaster struck the kingdom. The old wise woman died; a changeling appeared in the Royal Crib, the queen became ill and sang no more, the king became bowed down with matters of state and the young princess went to school to learn of the world outside the kingdom; to acquire knowledge and perhaps a little wisdom. There would be a quest, battles to fight, dragons to slay, witches to confound and perhaps, at the right time, a prince as a reward. And there for a while with the tale unfinished, we must leave them.

For the narrator or for those who enjoy fairy stories, that tale may be true; but how much truth is embedded in a fairy tale, or for that matter in any tale? Mahfouz's interpretation of Akhenaten is an

excellent example. Each character gives a personal version of the truth, but the reader is left deciding which "truth" is real. Reality lies hidden under length of time and embellishment of fantasy. In much of the literature written for or by children there is a universal truth for the child in all of us. Was it Wordsworth who said "the child is father to the man"? For the fairy story just told, at least, the quotation rings true.

Fantasy aside, the recollection of those early years resolved from whence came the root growth of my interest in and love of story. Three strands there were for me to untangle:

- Lesson 1: Learn to Listen (with mother as Kate Harcourt said). Don't ever underestimate a child's ears. Listening skills were encouraged and fostered by the oral tradition still alive in my grandmother's folk tales of N.E. England and my parents' singing.
- Lesson 2: Osmosis can be applied to more than plants. Don't ever underestimate the power of doggerel. Grandmother and Rupert Bear gave me the concepts and power of pattern recognition, rhythm, rhyme and repetition, prediction and confirmation, cliff hanging, humour and the rudiments of reading.
- Lesson 3: If reading be the food of learning – read on. Don't ever underestimate the ability of the child to make sense of the unknown.
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From my father reading aloud to me from *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gullivers Travels*, *Alice in Wonderland*, I gained vocabulary, phraseology, sequence, logic, adventure and most importantly the music of language. I feel Alan Garner evokes that same emotional music in *Red Shift* when mood permeates the thread connecting the sequences. Later I discovered books for myself; not many children's books – they were few and far between; not library books – children's libraries were 30 years into my future; just books. In a school cupboard opened only on Friday afternoons when registers were "added up" I found Rudyard Kipling, Andrew Lang & Kenneth Graham (thank you Miss Woodward, perhaps you weren't the old battle axe you purported to be). On my parents' bookshelves I found Arthur Mee, Christina Rossetti, Brontë, Austen, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Shakespeare, Browning and Popular Mechanics. Like a locust, devouring all within my grasp, I read voraciously, uncritically, much of it undigested – a form of self-censorship which may have obviated the need for a public watchdog. Also my early exposure was to quality material, giving me a standard of appreciation, ignored when it came to Mickey Mouse, the Beano or *Girls Own Paper*. (Harry Potter made me think nostalgically of Barbara Redfern of the 4th).

With adolescence, like Shakespeare's Autolycus, I became a "snapper-up of unconsidered trifles" and regularly dreamed over/drooled over supposedly historical romances or thud and blunders. I did rediscover Kipling which resulted in one of my many tussles with authority as did my infatuation with Edgar Rice Burroughs. Teachers College Durham curtailed my private reading but I fostered a small talent in the performance of anecdotal excuses for non-presentation of assignments. Honesty compels me to say I was not a shining star in the educational firmament. There was plenty of room for improvement. Teaching began in London in a school in SE17 still suffering some damage from the war years. The bombed site next to the school became an Adventure Playground (far removed from the sanitised modern version); I learned grass was what you weren't allowed to walk on in the park (how definitions change) and boys' sport was boxing in the school hall! There was also a language problem; I had no rhyming slang! My accent not being considered "proper", time was spent at the Borough Poly with a voice coach from the Old Vic. Alas, to no avail. Her advice was "leave the accent alone, you'll never master BBC. Learn to speak slowly and clearly." (Shortly afterwards Wilfred Pickles – no relation – became a BBC newsreader). However there was a bonus. Interest in the oral tradition was re-awakened by the lively little perpetrators of terminological inexactitudes – "story telling" for these children was a means of survival in a harsh adult world.

Thus my fairy story telling whiled away the tedium for my hairdresser's young son and also, so I learned much later, delighted the clients in neighbouring cubicles. I evidently raised my voice to combat the noise of the hair dryer. Again, alas, the accent, not the skills, was the main attraction. So, looking for more experience, broader qualifications and with the optimism of youth, I applied for jobs in the Royal Air Force, France, Germany, South America, New Zealand and Canada. I decided to accept the first post offered. So, for better or worse, purely by chance and at a cost of £160, the New Zealand Government obtained my services.

New Zealand in 1950 was a culture shock. It was a land flowing with milk and honey, meat, dairy products, chocolate – no ration books, identity numbers or restrictions on travel. Afternoon tea (bone

china and cake forks), social evenings (bring a plate - another gaffe), savs and pavs (never heard of them) and education (Wellingtons are gumboots, vests are singlets, cossys are togs, etc. etc.). Dorothy Butler tells it so well. Before I could apply for a permanent position I had to obtain a New Zealand Teaching Certificate. In 1951, armed with two teaching certificates which surely must have made me twice as good as any teacher with one teaching certificate, I began teaching at a prestigious primary school in Christchurch.

So there I was Term 2, Standard 2, C stream. They looked at me, I looked at them. Once again my accent wasn't "proper" my pronunciation of Durham, food and very was incorrect. The head handed me the syllabus from which I was to write a scheme for my class, nothing was to be added, deleted, altered. No deviations. What in heaven's name was Social Studies? Six weeks on the Maori? Panic! Borrow from the library? What library? Find school texts? What school texts? Panic! Enquiries from helpful staff produced a list of suitable books. Enquiries at a helpful bookshop produced the cost of the books - a month's salary on a six weeks topic. Panic! At half-a-crown per pupil Whitcomb and Tombs supplied an Activity Book for each child. Each page made a statement. By sending the children home with questions to answer, each lesson became a model of interactive discussion and a wonderful example of role reversal - teacher taught by pupils and parents. The *School Journal* was the only reading material in the room. Alas, the road to hell is surely paved with good intentions (Education Department) and bureaucratic non-deviants from Political Correctness.

From A stream to Z stream Standard 2 read Part 2 Journals and only Part 2 Journals - no deviation. Part 1 or Part 3 were equally forbidden territory. Back to Whitcomb & Tombs who published some wonderful paperback classics at one shilling and sixpence (I think). On reflection I bought without discrimination, from *Milly Molly Mandy* to *Hereward the Wake*, and without considering age, maturity level, reading ability, taste or interest level. I can't even claim to have flooded the classroom with books - it was more of a trickle. Again I fell back on storytelling to flesh out my inadequate teaching skills. In those days of very mild expletives the class enjoyed to the full my tales of the Bloody Tower. It was also at this time I had my first experience of ESL and Mainstreaming (not that they had been invented then). Irene arrived, a DP from Latvia or Estonia via Germany and several "camps" for displaced persons, and six-week indoctrination in Wellington. With no training all I could do was buy her two picture dictionaries and try to give her a working vocabulary - one word a day (pattern recognition) and a sentence on something she'd done or seen that day (language experience?). Compare that with the money earned by trained administrators and volunteers and paid staff who deal with refugees now. Christopher, with osteomyelitis and a locked jaw was a maths whiz who, to the delight of the males in his group, drew magnificent airplanes.

The following year I was transferred to the Infant Department - a demotion in many eyes. Janet and John had recently arrived, a breakthrough in modern reading teaching method. Again no deviation: a minimum of six weeks pre-reading, a period of reading readiness then into reading - a mixture of "look and learn" word pattern recognition and phonics. The standard of literature in the early readers was not high; the controlled vocabulary hindered freedom of expression as Catherine Storr points out in the *Cool Web*. But we did have an excellent leader in Tot James - a true Wise Woman. Auxiliary reading was sparse but there were Little Golden Books, Enid Blyton's Sunny Stories (tuppence weekly?) and the friends from my childhood. Gradually I became appreciative of the strengths of the policy of non-deviation - equality of teaching, opportunity and option and equipment from school to school, but I also became concerned over the inadequacies of the system when dealing with "square pegs" - the very bright, the lateral and deviant thinker. This became apparent the year I was gifted with a very bright group. They had everything: brains, physical endowment, a questing and questioning spirit, caring parents, wealth, opportunities and options.

Disaster struck and once again I was in disgrace. In two terms, the class completed the syllabus for the year. What to do in Term 3? No deviation, decided my elders and betters; repeat the syllabus; no encroachment on the syllabus for Standard 1 would be permitted. Encroachment could lead to erosion of the system and then where would it all end? Children of fourteen at university? Impossible! Intervention by Tot and compromise by others followed. Regular revision and testing would ensure none of the syllabus was lost BUT I would be allowed to extend the music, nature study and art programmes (occasional walks outside the classroom to look at things) while inserting a little history and geography sub rosa. By some quirk of fate, 50 years later, I was invited to this same school to participate in a Book Week. The very bright 7-10 year olds I talked to had just spent the previous term (ten weeks) planning, setting up and running a profitable business. Things do change - although the wheels of the gods grind slow and exceeding small. Fortunately for the status quo in 1955 I resigned to embark on a new career - Motherhood!; the Family Thing; doing things together; Friday night (late

night) shopping; gardening on Saturday; church and the beach on Sunday; bedtime stories – although there was still a dearth of picture books for the very young.

All castles in the air; my recollections of that period centre on the washhouse and the coal range - no washing machine or fridge. My husband had a massive coronary thrombosis so my elder son and I started the local primary school together – one new entrant and one teacher for Form 1 and 2. Once again I looked at them and they glared at me. Forty-eight plus me cooped up unwillingly in a battered prefab on the farthest edge of the asphalt. At least a third of them had "future drop out" printed on their forehead. A weak ray of hope heartened me in those first few weeks. A more liberal education policy was being implemented. Someone was looking at education through child-oriented eyes. Welcome Messieurs Gategno and Cuisenaire and Mr Arvidson. As pack leader of the pariahs on the fringe of society I was given some leeway in my teaching methods until we gained a small measure of respectability. "Out of sight, out of mind" was my aim. Bribery ensured at least a minimum of academic study and we became competitive. On Sports Day the Cricket Ball Throw was won by my stone throwing ex hooligans and the High Jump Cup was won by a regular escapee. This group taught me much. Harness and channel the energy became our motto. Two Prefects were chosen from our "B stream". A notable first! Atmospheric changes encouraged me to tackle our biggest problem. Reading! We used Parts 1,2, and 3 School Journals as basal texts, we read Part 4 together and I read to them Masefield's *Magic Box*.

The wolves were running! Once a month after school we walked to the Memorial Library in Papanui. Kjelgard's Big Red was a door opener. We wrote to authors and publishers, and got replies and book jackets. We ventured further afield to the Country Library Service in the Square – a hazardous journey by bus and on foot.

Pleasure reading - back to Whitcomb & Tombs for paperbacks. Edgar Rice Burroughs provided almost two dozen Tarzan books – the beginnings of a class library. Gradually the boys brought war comics; the girls had the *English Woman's Weekly* and even some old Classic Comics. Marcia William's *Robin Hood*, Shakespeare, etc. and Gary Crew's *Tagged* and *Water Tower*, would have been welcome then! The programme's success can be judged by the fact that by the end of the year all the *Tarzan* books had been stolen and some people were reading real books.

Alas, disaster struck again. An inspection showed my semi-literates hadn't produced a "composition" since April in spite of the community work adorning the walls. The fact that creative writing was now enjoyable and everyone could produce one grammatically correct sentence with pride was ignored. Rough copy/corrected, fair copy/corrected, corrections/corrected should be reinstated. My headmaster intervened and supported me - I think. His statement was "I place my staff where they do the most good... or the least harm." Which category I fell into, I didn't dare ask. He also realised the need for a school-based library. Gifted by the Country Library Service with hundreds of books which were housed in an ex-classroom – substandard natural lighting precluded constant use by pupils – we must have been one of the first primary schools in Canterbury to be so enriched. The Country Library Service was still used, mainly for nonfiction. My heartfelt thanks to them for their patience and understanding and their ability always to find suitable material for enjoyment. It couldn't have been easy to provide material with an interest level of 13+ and a reading age of 8+.

I should also fleetingly mention the SRA Laboratory, America's answer to Russia – the Space Race. The next interesting development was the decapitating of primary schools and the birth of intermediates. I opted not to transfer but to spend my twilight teaching years at primary level from New Entrants to Standard 3. Principal after principal placed me presumably where I did the most good... or... In retrospect the grounding I received – teaching all age groups – gave me a broad knowledge – jack of all trades but master of none.

Change was in the air. Maths from America (long before we went metric), nature study from England, new reading books (*Grandma comes to stay*), and teaching methods, Fenwick Report and finally ERIC.

ERIC was one of the most soul-stirring events in my life. There were other actual like-minded people working with children. I was no longer alone outside the box. Teachers in Auckland had the courage to say teaching methods should suit the child and not vice versa. Twenty-one Canterbury teachers left class and school for a term and as a group immersed themselves in these wonderful ideas. At last children were being recognised as individuals. The group had fun, challenged the establishment, sang, talked with inspectors, exchanged ideas on parenting, teaching methods, concepts libraries,

blew up books and discovered the burgeoning wealth of New Zealand children's literature. Refreshed in spirit they returned to the classroom as missionaries determined to promote New Zealand books and a literature-based programme. They questioned everything and asked questions of everybody. Visitors from overseas fired their imaginations. Names rolled off the tongue, Yetta Goodman and husband, Harris Spache, Warwick Elley, Marie Clay and our own John Doran. Margaret Mahy was a librarian Jean Biddulph a reading analyst, her husband Fred was interested in interactive teaching. Nada Beardsley worked with Warwick Elley in reading inventories. New words entered a teacher's vocabulary: theme, genre, evaluation, psycholinguistics, interactive, didactic, pejorative. ERIC gave me the courage to speak up, join CLA and IRA and take AST courses. LARIC was the Canterbury follow-on from ERIC. There were courses, seminars, Writers in Schools. What more could anyone want?

Anyway I was retiring. Wrong again. Enter John MacKenzie, an ideas man. And what an idea! Something new. A course devoted to literature for children. A committee was formed and we spent almost two years hammering out a framework. John then wrote the first modules of the course. Thus began a most pleasant educational period. I have never ceased to be awed by the depth of talent in New Zealand. As the course expanded, modules were written by John, Gavin Bishop, Rosemary Sladen, Doreen Darnell, Lwyen Couper, Carl Nixon, Janice Ackerlap, John Cohen, Sue Clancy, Judith Catton, Don Long, Diane Hebley, Murray Freeth, Janinka Greenwood.

However by the year 2000 I had reached my "use by" date in education and began a new career as a doting great grandmamma. Life was so much more leisurely: mahjong, smocking, gardening, a few book reviews, visiting friends, reading (back to the thud and blunders) and Mitchell (31.12.00).

Looking back over my journey I have never been a writer or composer so books have been my tongue. Authors have said for me what I could only express inadequately. My thanks must go to them for without their labour many of us would be voiceless. I was never an innovator or leader; rather a disciple of those in the forefront of educative thinking. I would like rather to categorise myself as a catalyst, bringing together two elements, children and books, and causing a chemical reaction. Perhaps with many fellow travellers I can say "we wrote some of the resources for those who follow".

And for those who like their fairy stories to end happily... The king and his new queen lived long and happily and the changeling became human and turned into a sister, the handsome prince was slain by a dragon and the princess grew up and almost became a Wise Woman with children, grandchildren and even a great-grandchild.