



# Margaret Mahy Lecture 2017

## Stories Out Loud by Des Hunt

When Libby Limbrick rang me to tell me of this award, I experienced a spectrum of emotions. Surprise came first, then thankfulness, followed by a lovely glow of pleasure. Later, when I looked at the list of previous winners and recognised the honour and responsibility, I became nervous, almost fearful, and some of that still remains.

Thank you to everyone who has brought me to this point in my writing career: those involved with the administration of the award; the nominators and the judges; those who organised this day. Also the publishers, the editors, the publicists, librarians, all those people who ensure that what I write ends up in the hands of a reader. Thank you all.

I have pondered over this speech for weeks, trying to identify what special knowledge or understanding I might have that was worthy of being passed on today. I did jot down some notes, but was not convinced by any of them. Then, a month ago, I had another speaking engagement, one which didn't turn out quite the way I had hoped. It did, however, focus my attention and what you get today results from the analysis I did after that previous event.

The first thing I came up with was that I needed to carry a staff. A strong stick that would support me when I'm wobbly, but also one that could perform a little magic. Something like a wizard's staff, from *The Lord of the Rings*.

The three wizards of Middle Earth – Gandalf the Grey, Saruman the White, and Radagast the Brown – always carried a staff, and powerful things they were too. They could destroy mountains those staffs. They could ...

I'm going to interrupt myself here, because if I'd just made that Middle Earth statement at a school, right at this point I can guarantee that some boy would put up his hand. It would go up and stay up. Not waving around, quite still, almost frozen. For a while I'd try to ignore him, hoping that he'd get the message and put it down. Of course he wouldn't. Eventually I would look at him and say "Yes," sighing as I did so.

Then he'd stand, and when he spoke it would be very, very seriously. "Actually," he'd say, clearly pronouncing every syllable. "Actually, there are five wizards in Middle Earth. You

said there were three. You missed out the Blue Wizards, Pallando and Alatar.” He would then go on and on about the Blue Wizards. And I’d have to find some friendly way of stopping him so I could resume the presentation.

I mention this, not because I find these boys annoying, but because I was once like that; still am, to some extent. My specialty was science, particularly chemistry. If someone made an inaccurate statement about chemicals or chemistry I was on to it. Even today if someone says something like, “Wrap in tin foil, and put it in the fridge”, or “We’ll use the tin boat”, I will turn to them and say, “Actually, it’s made of aluminium, not tin. The element tin is far too expensive, but aluminium is not. Ever since the Hall process was invented in 1886 ...” And on and on I’ll go just like the boy who knows everything about Middle Earth.

Last year in Gisborne I very nearly got into an argument with one of these boys.

In my presentation I tell the students that I couldn’t play computer games when I was a child because computers hadn’t been invented. As soon as the words were out of my mouth, a hand went up. I stopped and said that I’d take questions at the end. The hand went down. During question time it went up again. I carefully ignored him until that hand was the only one left.

“Yes,” I said, knowing exactly what his first word would be.

“Actually,” he said, “you’re wrong about the invention of computers. Charles Babbage invented them in 1831 when ...” then my eyes had narrowed, my nostrils had flared. *Wrong*, I was thinking. He’s saying I’m wrong. You see, the history of computing is one of *my* subjects. This boy had to be corrected.

“Actually,” I said, “I was talking about electronic computers, not mechanical ones. Anyway Babbage’s differences machine was never

finished and didn’t work.” I was about to go on and tell him that it was he who was wrong because the invention was in 1832, not 1831 ... but some sort of sanity returned and I let it be. Fortunately, so did he, otherwise we’d still be at it today.

### Getting back to the staff.

The speaking engagement that gave rise to it was at the Hamilton Garden’s Arts Festival. The Book Council had organised an event in the Japanese Garden of Contemplation with the title: *True Stories Out Loud*. Four writers had been invited to stand up and tell a story.

The instructions were that the story should be vaguely true, have a beginning, a middle and an end, in other words the story arc. They should each last for 7 to 10 minutes, and should be unscripted story-telling, without notes, props or prompts.

The writers chosen were a journalist, a poet, a dramatist, and me the novelist.

The day before, three of us, along with some other writers, had been doing writing workshops at St Peters in Cambridge. Over morning tea we discussed the festival event. One of the writers said she had turned it down thinking it was too difficult; two, who had accepted, expressed nervousness about the performance, being unsure how it would go. I said nothing because at that stage I had no concerns whatsoever.

And I still had no concerns the next day, not until I walked into the room and stood in front of the microphone. That’s when the shaking began, so severe that I felt I was wobbling on my feet. My mouth went dry, and I was close to being tongue-tied, something I have not experienced for decades.

I did get through my story, albeit in a muddled way, and at the end the applause seemed to be genuine. But I was far from happy. Was this

the first sign of decay? Was this a glimpse of my future?

Over the following days I revisited that talk several times, trying to identify the cause of my discomfort. I couldn't blame the organisation of the event as it was as smooth as I've come to expect from the Book Council. The problem was with me. I eventually identified it as this:

**It was the absence of props. There was nothing of mine or me in that space. Nothing that would help me when the words were faltering.**

I can't remember when I last spoke in such an environment, one that had nothing of me other than my clothed body. When I visit schools I surround myself with objects of science, and the books that have meaning to me. I change the environment until I am comfortable within it. That didn't happen in Hamilton Gardens. I felt sure that if I'd had just one prop, it would have made all the difference.

Which got me thinking of the devices many other children's writers use: the hats, the vests, the funny clothes. Margaret Mahy and her wigs. I'm sure most people here can, at this very moment, envisage Margaret in a rainbow-coloured wig. And the image will lead to other memories about Margaret, her stories, her places, her values.

I began to think that maybe some such emblem would be of help to me in some circumstances. Not a wig, nor fancy clothes, that's not me, although I did look at a purple hat at one stage. In the end I went for a walking aid. Partly because my balance is not so good these days, but mostly because of an experience when I was a younger man.

This was back in my electronics-computing period. I was in Christchurch to speak at an international conference featuring the Logo programming language. On the first day all the participants were bussed to a local marae for

a pōwhiri where one of the speakers was an elderly kaumātua. He had a wonderfully carved stick – a tokotoko – which he used both as a support and a speaking aid. As he listed his whakapapa he highlighted things with his stick: the sky, the earth, carvings of the wharenuī. He spoke for quite some time and all of this, as the Book Council memo would put it, “unscripted storytelling, without notes, props or prompts”. Well, it was certainly unscripted and without notes, but was that stick a prop?

I don't think so. I got the impression it was much more than a third leg for support, or an extension of his arm for pointing. To me it seemed to be part of his very being. I felt sure that without that tokotoko he would have experienced difficulties reciting his whakapapa. It was helping him in ways that were more than just physical.

And that's what I hoped for from my staff. Except I knew this one wasn't going to do that. I bought this on eBay. I didn't cut it from a tree and carve it into shape. It's not even made of wood. It's plastic! If I was going to use a staff then it had to be much more than this. It had to be something that I had created and had meaning to me. And this is what I came up with.

*[Get my staff]*

The cow on the top is significant. You see, all the magic of those three wizards in *The Lord of the Rings* came from the top of the staff. Saruman's even had a crystal embedded in the top which glowed blue when it was doing its thing, destroying armies and the like. The magic from my staff also comes from the top. The cow was given to me by Rangatahi House at the end of my 30 years at Rosehill College. At that time the cow was their symbol. While it might not be magical, it certainly has meaning for me. The thing about this staff that I've made, is that I can change the magical thing on the top so I can use it in all sorts of situations. So let's get rid of the cow.

*[Swap cow for kiwi.]*

I've searched the internet for the name of the object on top of a walking stick, without success. Until I get a better word I'm going to call it a totem. According to Google, a totem is defined as: *A natural object that has a special relationship to a person, family, or clan.*

The kiwi has a special relationship to me, as it does for many New Zealanders. It reminds me of the two times I've seen kiwi in the wild on Kapiti and Stewart Islands. It also represents my strong feelings about this country, the people, the landscapes, the active geology and the wildlife. I'm proud to be known as a Kiwi.

Also, at the moment, this totem is a reference to my current writing, which is a kiwi story set around Kerikeri in the Waitangi Forest.

*[Put on poppy totem]*

Next year I'm sure I'll be using this poppy totem, because sometime during 2018 my story *Broken Poppies* will be released. That book, the last in Scholastic's *Kiwis at War* series, commemorates a hundred years since the signing of the Armistice that ended the First World War. I'd be surprised if this totem doesn't get several outings.

*[Put on bottle totem]*

This is the totem I should have had at Hamilton Garden's a month ago. I'm going to tell the story here because it gives hints to the origins of the adventure stories I would write 50 years later.

The year was 1954 and I was aged 12. The place was Palmerston North where I lived my first 18 years. My closest friend was Graham who had similar scientific interests to me, although he was more archaeology than chemistry.

During weekends and school holidays we were allowed to do pretty much what we liked, within the constraints of the values maintained by our families. Day after day we would go off on our bikes seeking adventure. Sometimes we found it in the city, other times we rode miles into the countryside. Often we joined up with other groups of boys; we weren't the only ones given such freedom.

On the day that this bottle represents, Graham wanted to explore the southern end of town, towards Longburn where Scandinavians had first settled in the 1860's. I knew that end of town well because it was part of our milk run. Dad was a milk vendor and I had to help him on weekends and school holidays. But our run finished at the edge of town, and the houses that Graham wanted to visit were on farmland outside the city, so it was new territory for me as well.

As usual during the ride through town we smoked a couple of cigarettes. This was definitely outside the values set by our parents, but all the boys our age were doing it; secretly of course as it was against the law, or so we'd been told.

Once we got south of town we rode around looking for a suitable place to investigate. The one we picked was a huge two-storied wooden house, chosen because of two broken-down sheds out the back. We knocked on the door, well, Graham did – he interacted with people far better than I ever did. When nobody answered we decided to take a quick peek in the sheds to see if it was worthwhile coming back later.

The first was a woolshed that was still getting some use; it didn't seem anything special. The other shed, however, ended up being pure gold. It was the old carriage house and the carriages were still parked inside along with all the paraphernalia that went with that era. We couldn't resist exploring further. Anyway, there was no side to the

shed, so we weren't breaking and entering or anything like that. To us it seemed as if the carriages were almost inviting us in. Sometime in the past, they'd been backed in after a day of use, and never taken out again.

The first thing I noticed was that the best of the carriages had carbide headlamps. I knew about carbide lamps and how they worked. Water dripping onto calcium carbide made acetylene which was then burnt to give light. The reaction also makes an impurity which has a strong, unpleasant smell. I knew that calcium carbide could be used to make stink bombs.

While Graham explored the carriages, I went looking for any carbide that might still be around. On the rear wall was a shelf which had bottles and jars of all shapes and sizes. Some contained oils, others horse medicines and the like. I didn't find any carbide, but I did find two soft drink bottles like this one on my staff. Despite being empty and filthy, they were still worth money: threepence each if cleaned up and taken back to Dixon's cordial factory. Collecting bottles to get the refund was something all boys did to supplement their pocket money. Four bottles and you had enough to buy a packet of ten cigarettes. I took the bottles and put them in the bag behind the seat of my bike.

Eventually we became bored with this adventure and headed back home, sneaking another cigarette or two on the way. Graham lived a couple of streets across from us so he separated off and I continued on to our place in Knowles Street.

Arriving at our house I was shocked to find a police car was parked in our driveway. This was well outside the values of our family; this was shameful.

My first thought was that someone had seen us smoking and reported it to the police, and they were now telling my parents.

However when I went inside I found that everyone was showing concern more than anger. "Desmond," said my father, "these policemen have some questions."

It turned out that it wasn't about smoking at all; it was about visiting the property at the other end of town. And it wasn't even about trespassing. It was about stealing the bottles.

"Did you take a bottle?" asked one of the policemen.

"Yes."

"Where is it?"

"In the bag on my bike."

"Go get it." I went outside and came back with one of the bottles. My thinking was that stealing just one might be less of a crime than stealing two.

When they saw the bottle, their expressions changed to puzzlement.

"Is that the only bottle you took?"

Oh heck, they were on to me. So out I went and got the other one. But this still didn't make them any happier. They wanted to know if there were any others. There weren't and I told them that.

Only then did they tell me what they were looking for. Apparently, after the owner of the property arrived home, he'd got a phone call from a neighbour who said some kids had been messing around in his shed. He rushed out to take a look to see what we'd done. When he saw that we'd been into the bottles, he panicked and ran back to the house to ring the police. He told them that we'd taken a bottle of strychnine, a poison that he used to kill rats. The police immediately contacted the neighbour who said one of the boys was the milkman's son, which then led them to our house and to me.

Now, at last, I understood their concern, for I knew about poisons: the big three were cyanide, arsenic, and strychnine, and they killed people. Well they definitely did in some

of the stories I read. I certainly appreciated why everyone was so concerned.

What I didn't appreciate was the telling-off I got because somebody else had been wrong. I never heard if the farmer ever found his strychnine or not. I imagine he did, probably in the other shed and in exactly the place where he'd put it.

What annoyed me the most, however, was that I had been identified as the culprit so quickly, even before I got home. For the first time I realised that people were watching us, spying on us as we had our adventures. Busybodies with nothing better to do. After that our adventures never felt quite the same again.

Only as an adult have I come to understand what was really happening there. Although by that stage Palmerston North had a population of 35,000, it had a culture similar to that of a village. More than just the parents took an interest in the upbringing of the children. Others in the community would step in as required. The freedom that Graham and I valued so much was not restricted by this culture, it existed because of the culture. Our parents could let us go off on our adventures knowing that if we overstepped too far, other people would step in to remind us of our responsibilities.

Many of those adventures were the seeds that have grown into the stories I write today. And if you've noticed that my characters have considerable freedom of movement and experience, that's no accident: it is the way I would like the life of a child to be.

My next totem is a gecko. Not just any old gecko, but a giant one. It represents my first published novel, *A Friend in Paradise*.

I'd been a published author for almost 30 years when my gecko book came out. Altogether there had been 14 nonfiction titles ranging

from thin 24-page readers up to full 500-page texts. But I'd not had anything for 15 years. Half of that time had been spent developing electronic systems for the teaching of physics, the other half was learning to write fiction.

I had in mind that the ideas I'd used to interest youngsters in science through my textbooks, could be adapted to fiction. I wanted to write stories that included science and nature in a way that children, particularly boys, would find interesting. And not just any stories. They would be New Zealand stories: Kiwi stories for Kiwi kids.

Despite the transition from nonfiction being much harder than I'd anticipated, I eventually came up with something that HarperCollins were prepared to publish. Six months later came the excitement of receiving my first copy; that wonderful moment when I held the book to my chest and experienced the thrill of achievement.

By this time, 2002, I'd been teaching at Coromandel Area School for three years. They knew that I'd written texts in the past, but I'd not told them anything of my fiction aspirations, mostly because of fears of failure. On the day that the book was released, HarperCollins had arranged an interview on Radio NZ National's afternoon programme. As this was during class time, I had to get a reliever to look after my class while I did the telephone interview. That meant telling management what was happening. When the AP heard about it, she demanded a copy of the book to read that night.

Well, the next morning, at staff briefing, she stands up and gives a review to the whole of the staff.

"A Friend in Paradise," she said, "is a story about grief and how new experiences can help with the grieving process."

I was flabbergasted. She was so wrong. I wanted to stand up and shout, “No it’s not! Actually, it’s about a giant gecko called *Hoplodactylus delcourti*, known to the Maori as kaweau. It was killed off by humans and is now ...” Oh, I could have gone on for hours about it.

Meanwhile, the AP was telling the staff about the main character who has lost his father to cancer, and is sent to a farm near Opotiki ...

Yes, that was all true. But that wasn’t why I wrote the story. I wanted kids to learn about kaweau and environmental effects of human activities. To me, the father’s death was simply a way of getting the boy to the area where kaweau once lived. At no stage did I see it as a story about grieving.

Of course, I didn’t interrupt the AP to enlighten her. I let her finish her piece, and for the rest of the day basked in the congratulations of the staff and students as news spread of my achievement. It ended up being a particularly memorable day.

I learnt a lot from this gecko and its story. First of all, I discovered that the human story is more important than the animal one. I do still start by thinking of an animal and building a story around that, but I now know it is a human story I’m telling. While, for example, I can represent Whale Pot Bay by this whale-tooth totem, [*hold up whale tooth*] I do think of that book more as a blendedfamily story than one about whales.

The second thing I discovered was that the majority of my readers were girls, not the boys whom I’d originally targeted. Mostly, this was a consequence of more girls reading fiction than boys, so it should not have come as a surprise.

What did come as a surprise was the third thing. It is this: more children hear my stories than *read* them.

Not long after *A Friend in Paradise* had been released a teacher at Coromandel told me it

was a good read aloud story. She asked if I read aloud when I was writing and I said that I did. And I still do, not with full voice, or that would be very annoying for my family, but not quite sub-vocal either – a gentle whisper, a breeze swishing leaves.

### Time for an aside:

My parents never read to me as a child. Nor did my siblings who were both older than me. And as far as I can remember, neither did my teachers; not in the way that they do today where chapter books are told in serial form over several weeks.

Despite this, I was an avid reader, and frequent user of the Palmerston North Public Library. I read all sorts of things, many of them inappropriate for my age. And of course they had words that I didn’t know. But I would work out their meaning along with a way to pronounce them. Unfortunately, more often than not, I got that last bit wrong, and when I used those words people would laugh, but I learnt to live with that.

As far as writing was concerned, I never wrote for personal enjoyment like some children do. If asked to in class, I was happy enough to produce something or other. That was until my third form year.

At the start of the year the English teacher asked us to write a piece detailing a typical day in the summer holidays. As usual I took the instruction literally. He wanted details, I gave him details. I described getting out of bed, walking to the toilet, how I used the toilet, how I flushed the toilet, how the water flowed into the bowl. Then, after that: getting dressed, moving to the kitchen, fixing breakfast, eating breakfast ... By the time I was just starting to get to the good part, where I went outside to feed my birds, we were told to stop.

All would have been well, if the teacher had not chosen me as the first person to read their piece out loud. I'd only got to the part where I'd flushed the toilet when they started laughing. Yes, it did sound funny, and soon I was giggling too. But not the teacher. He thought I was taking the micky. Our relationship went downhill from there, and I began to hate English.

In school Certificate I got 36%, just enough to get me through to the sixth form. And what that did was bring me back into conflict with my third-form English teacher. I remember one lesson in particular.

We were asked to do an analysis of *Crossing the Bar*, a poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson. The last two stanzas read:

*Twilight and evening bell,  
And after that the dark!  
And may there be no sadness of farewell,  
When I embark;*

*For tho' from out our bourne of Time and  
Place  
The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crost the bar.*

Once again I took it literally. I never gave it a thought that this might be a metaphor for dying. I wrote a lengthy piece about a fishing boat attempting to cross the Manawatu River bar. Of course that didn't go down well at all. The teacher went out of his way to ridicule me in front of the whole class.

Fortunately, back then, you could be accredited University Entrance, and my performance in the sciences and maths got me through to the seventh form where I could take an extra science instead of English. I didn't have to go to another English class ever again.

But that was not the end of my instruction in that subject.

By 1972 science education in New Zealand was undergoing radical changes. A teacher at Rangitoto College called Maurice Petchell was writing texts to support this revolution. Originally he'd been an English teacher, but had swapped over to science with his specialty subject biology. He wanted someone to write the physical science parts of the texts and he thought I was that person.

I've no doubts that he had second thoughts when he first read my writing. But instead of sacking me, he set about teaching me to write.

At that time I was teaching at Rosehill College in Papakura, 50 km away from Maurice. So we did it all over the phone. I'd write my pieces, send them to him, and then he'd rip them apart in phone calls that often took hours. It was brutal, but it worked, and I wouldn't be standing here today if it weren't for the effort Maurice put in way back then.

*[Put on the frog.]*

In the early days of writing fiction I would repeat a mantra when I was writing: "Write for the reader," I'd mumble. "Write for the reader." This was to remind me to always consider how what I write will seem to the reader. And it wasn't just any reader I was thinking of, it was boy readers, the ones who weren't particularly turned on by fiction. The ones who take everything literally.

As it turned out, writing for them seemed to work for a much wider range of readers – and also listeners, because, increasingly, my stories were being read to classes.

By the time *Frog Whistle Mine* was published I had started writing for the listener as well as the reader. Some were simple changes such as making sure that character names sounded quite different so that they couldn't be confused by poor listeners. Other changes required much more work.

Reading dialogue out loud can be tricky, because the listener can't see the new paragraphs that indicate a change in speaker. Sure, some readers can do lots of different voices, but most of us can't. Therefore more speaker or action tags are needed, and while this may seem clumsy writing to the reader, they are essential if the listener is going to make sense of the dialogue.

The structure of chapters also needs a lot of attention. First of all, I try to make them the same length, as that will better suit the timing in a classroom. They should also be a story in themselves so that listeners feel good about what they've just heard. This means that a chapter must follow the story arc with a beginning, middle and end. I consider the ending to be critical. Listen to this one:

*Max went to bed that night pleased with how the day had gone. Soon he was asleep and pleasantly dreaming. However, if he'd known what was happening at that moment on the other side of town, those dreams would have quickly turned into nightmares.*

Many boys hearing this will get annoyed. I know nothing about girls, but I suspect many of them would too. That last sentence is such an obvious, page-turning ploy. It is trickery and the boys I've been talking about, don't like that form of trickery.

See, what the writer is effectively saying is this: "I know a secret, but I'm not telling you." We don't like that. It makes us feel different in an unpleasant way. We're being left out of things, and that happens far too often to us.

Now listen to this ending:

*Max went to bed that night pleased with how the day had gone. He quickly fell asleep, content in the knowledge that, at last, all his problems were finally over.*

I can almost guarantee that, if I were to read this to a class, some boy would yell out: "Oh no it's not!" That boy isn't annoyed, he's pleased. He has become involved in the story; he's now part of the telling of it. And how does he know that Max's problems are not finally over? Well, apart from what's happening in the story, he can see the book, and there's still half of it left. The thing is, he's now anticipating the next instalment, partly because he's opened the opportunity for an I-told-you-so, which is something us boys really, *really* like.

*[Change totem to pukeko and kiwi]*

These two are to remind me of the social aspects of reading aloud to children.

Lynne and I read to our two children over many years and know, as most parents do, what a wonderful finish to the day that can be. However it wasn't until I started doing school visits as a writer that I discovered the magic can also be there in the classroom.

My preferred age group when I started visiting schools was Years 4 and upwards. Over the years it has crept downwards until I'll now happily work with younger students, even new entrants.

Usually I'll show them a few of my science gizmos, and then I'll read a story. It works every time. I leave the room feeling good about what I've done, and they feel good about my having been there.

Very early on I did a full day at a college on the North Shore where I was given a 90 minute slot with all of Year 10. Two hundred of them.

I did my usual presentation followed by questions, but that still left 20 minutes and I'd run out of ideas.

The HOD English came to the rescue. She handed me a copy of *Whale Pot Bay* and said "read to them". So I did, from the beginning,

and that kept everyone happy for the rest of the session.

Hearing stories read aloud seems to calm the listener. But I suspect there's also something more. By listening together to the same story, we somehow make a connection with each other.

*[Change totem to red-headed boy.]*

I use this totem to remind myself of what it was like being a full-time classroom teacher.

During my teaching career I taught around 8,000 students and had contact with a whole lot more than that. Not all of them were receptive to my teaching and, like all teachers, I developed strategies to cope with the less motivated. I will mention two of them here.

The first is the aside, or the diversion, depending on your point of view. Teenagers like to sidetrack the teacher; get the teacher talking about something entirely different. I used these opportunities to tell stories that I hoped would help them remember the content of the lesson. It was a bit like giving a character in a novel some quirky attribute that will help the reader recall the role of that character.

Over the years I developed lots of these asides. Some were true, most were not. It didn't matter to the students, they were happy for the interlude. I now realise that I was using storytelling to calm and unite the class. And it worked in that regard, but not in the one I intended. Often if I meet one of my ex-students today, they'll say, "I remember when you told us about ...". Usually these stories have been embellished with time, but yes, the student does remember something from being in my classroom. The problem is, they know the stories but have forgotten the stuff they were meant to learn.

The second strategy is about the story arc.

Look at this little fellow on my totem. I think he would have had some problems at Rosehill College: to begin with, his hair is well outside the grooming guidelines. And yet, he's smiling, his eyes are wide with anticipation, his arms are out. Everything about his body says, "Let's go. I'm ready for work," – just the way we hope our students will be when they enter our classrooms. Unfortunately, in secondary schools, our students are not always like that. But if it is to happen, most likely it will be at the start of the year.

I always considered the first week of lessons the most important of the year. Not to set the behaviour standards or rules or anything like that. I felt it was an opportunity to hook students onto my subject while they were still smiling. I had a mantra for these lessons: *Start with a stink, end with a bang.*

I now know it was just the story arc in a different form.

At the start of a period I'd get their attention by doing something stinky, messy, or scary. Then we'd get down to the lesson. When it came to the end, I'd do something exciting, something that would end up with a, "Wooh!" Something that would leave them feeling good about the lesson and keen to return for the next one.

When I think of these things, the asides, the "Start with a Stink", the "End with a Bang", I recognise that I've been a storyteller all my life. I'm just doing it in a more structured way these days.

*[Put up poster totem that reads: Imagination of a child + Wisdom of an adult]*

I like the idea promoted by this poster. To be a writer for children you need the imagination of a child combined with the wisdom of an adult.

The problem for me, is that conflict between the two can cause some difficulties.

See, the child part of me seriously considered structuring this presentation like a lesson. I'd start with a stink, and end with a bang. On the other hand the adult inside said, "Hold on! This is a really special occasion. Stinks can go horribly wrong. People have allergies these days. You could kill someone."

As you've seen the adult won that round. But the child part is still nagging away, talking to me. "C'mon Des, you've got to do something. Do some chemistry, mate. End with a bang." So I will.

I gave away the stink, but I can't give away the explosion. Anyway, explosions are much more controllable than stinks – usually.

*[Put on Cool Nukes totem]*

This is my *Cool Nukes* totem. There are several explosions in *Cool Nukes* so it is appropriate that this totem can explode.

*[Point out red button. Put in breath freshener. Do the explosion.]*

*[Put up poster saying: The End]*