

# Storylines Margaret Mahy Medal Lecture 2020



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Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, bula, talofa, fakalofa lahi aut, kia orana, malo e lelei.

You might be looking at what I'm wearing and wondering why I'm dressed in Victorian clothes. This outfit came about when the Scholastic team, illustrator Marco Ivancic and I were thinking of ideas for the front cover of a book we were working on. Marco drew a rough of how the main character should stand but it wasn't quite the posture we were looking for. So, I threw on a long skirt and asked my husband to take a photo of me holding a pen in my hand. Penny Scown from Scholastic had the same idea and did a similar pose, which helped Marco draw the hand from different angles. It gave me the idea to dress like the main character at the book launch. My good friend Mary Kelleher made the outfit and here is Penny Scown and myself at the book launch of... have you guessed it?... Kate Sheppard.

The reason I've worn it today is to show you the lengths I go to, to make my stories real for children. I'm not the only author who does – you might have seen Fifi Colston or Gareth Ward dressed in their steampunk costumes, and there are others. I write non-fiction books about historical events, famous people, and our wildlife in a creative way. Part of that is bringing it alive, whether it's dressing the part or getting kids to act it out with me – or using props.

But I'm getting ahead of myself ... I'd like to first thank you all for tuning in today. There are people who have been there with me throughout my writing career and I'd like to acknowledge them: my critique group: Lorraine Orman, Chris Gurney and Heather Arnold. I'm here because of the enormous support I receive from these ladies, and others like Fifi Colston and Melinda Szymanik. Then there's all the wonderful Kiwi Write4Kidz authors and the Yak group whom I've been associated with over the last 18 years. I feel really supported by this awesome group of writers

and illustrators. Also thanks to all the publishers who publish our New Zealand stories – I specially want to mention Lynette Evans and Penny Scown from Scholastic; they produce beautiful books and I'm really proud to be published with them, as well as New Holland, Penguin, Reed, Potton & Burton and educational publishing houses. I'd also like to thank my family (hubby Rod, son Tristan, daughter Rhiannon, and mum Yvonne), who have listened to my many drafts of stories with patience.

One organisation which has been very supportive to New Zealand children's writers and illustrators is Storylines. I want to thank them for honouring authors and illustrators with these awards and medals that they give out every year.

Congratulations to all the winners and those whose books have been selected as Notable Books.

I also want to give thanks to a very special lady and her family. I interviewed her for my book *New Zealand Hall of Fame* many years ago. People told me that I should include Kathryn Mansfield or Janet Frame and I said, nope, I'm going to include an author that every kid knows. When I'm in schools, I encourage children to guess who it is. I give them a few clues. She's a New Zealander, she started making up poetry when she was three years onward; she wrote stories about witches, pirates and sharks... They'll either say Joy Cowley, or Margaret Mahy and they'd be right, but some say David Walliams (and that's the world we live in – where overseas authors are more well known in New Zealand today – except Margaret and Joy of course. Margaret was an inspiration to a lot of writers and readers. Her books, today's event, the premium book award, and this medal keep her name living on.

It is an honour to be here today to accept the Margaret Medal Award. When Christine Young emailed me to say Storylines was awarding me the medal, at first, I couldn't believe it. In fact, I wondered if I was in a time warp. I thought she was talking about the Margaret Mahy Award I had won at the 2016 New Zealand Book Awards for Children & Young Adults. I reread the email twice. Then dumbfounded I turned to Fifi Colston who was with me (We were teaching writing and illustration workshops for *Write Like and Author and Draw like an Artist* in Wellington and we were on our lunch break.), and I said, "I think I've just won something." I read it out. And Fifi jumped up and hugged me, saying you've won the Margaret Mahy medal. I don't think the reality settled in for quite a while afterward.

When all the congratulations came in from the wonderful group of writers and illustrators – I did feel the imposter syndrome. And I agonised over the speech for quite a while. Lockdown intervened, and to take a positive out of a negative, it gave me extra time to write the speech. What I've realised is that it is especially an honour to be a representative for the non-fiction writers' community. There's only been one other non-fiction author—Andrew Crowe. He won it in 2008 and talked about creative non-fiction. Interestingly, that was the year I discovered creative non-fiction picture books.

I'm going to take this opportunity today to talk about non-fiction books: why I've written the types of non-fiction I have and how I think they hook young readers in. I'll also talk about how as a non-fiction author I've tried to reach my audience in schools, libraries and outside the square... Plus how I've made non-fiction writing a full-time career.

I started my career writing expository non-fiction books. Because of my teaching background, I was always asking: How can I hook children in and keep them reading? I didn't want children to read my books just for research. I wanted to make the books entertaining as well. For example, in *Save Our Seas* I used Skipper L.B. Tross to take the reader on a voyage to different coastlines around New Zealand. Each page has a joke, some facts about sea creatures, and diagrams and illustrations to emphasise other information about those animals. Vivienne Lidgard drew the illustrations. In *Earthquakes! Shaking New Zealand* I asked Marco Ivancic to draw the Earthquake God who talks directly to the reader. There's a timeline that displays the very first recorded earthquakes in New Zealand and around the world up to the publishing date of 2018. In *Running the Country* I included biographies of the many politicians who have governed the country, making sure that Māori and women were also in the book. And there are lots of other features to draw the young readers in.

There have been many excellent non-fiction books using the same techniques. These books are very relevant today—they're used in the school curriculum, for refugees wanting to learn about New Zealand culture, and for kids who obsess about particular subjects. Grandparents, bless them, also buy them for their grandchildren.

Research in America reveals that 42 percent of students would rather read expository nonfiction, 25 percent narrative storytelling, and 33 percent of children enjoy both styles equally. Interestingly, of the buyers of children's nonfiction (librarians, parents, teachers) 56% prefer narrative stories, 8% expository and 36% prefer both. Well-known American writer Melissa Stewart says that expository-loving "info kids" read with a purpose – to soak up facts, ideas and information about topics they find fascinating. Whereas narrative nonfiction gives readers an intimate look at the world, and people or animals, being described in a storytelling format. The scenes often include expository bridges that provide background information.

In Melissa's article 'Teaching Nonfiction? What you need to know about the differences between expository and narrative styles', she wrote that experts recommend a 50-50 mix of fiction and non-fiction with two-thirds of the non-fiction having an expository writing style. Yet research shows that classroom collections only have 17-22 percent non-fiction overall and only 7-9 percent expository non-fiction.

I often ask children, "Who loves non-fiction books?" and the majority by far are boys. Boys often have a passion for science subjects such as volcanoes, war, dinosaurs. They like small fact boxes, a mix of text and illustrations displayed on the page, and that they can start the book anywhere.

Dr Barbara Moss, a professor of Literacy Education at San Diego University, said, "...early exposure to the language of non-fiction helps enhance children's understanding of exposition and may prevent the difficulties many students encounter with those texts later on."

Moss also said that no other genre of books has changed as much as nonfiction. And I've definitely noticed that over the last 18 years that I've been writing them.

American educationalists changed the reading habits in schools believing that if teachers encourage children to read non-fiction early, they will be better prepared for high school onwards, where 80% of what they will read and write will be non-fiction. It increases their background knowledge about subjects, extends their vocabulary, and helps them navigate more complex texts later on.

I tell children that non-fiction books build up their kete of knowledge inside of them: teaching them how the world, even the universe, works, and it helps them learn about different cultures and languages.

Author Melinda Szymanik likens reading to giving us superpowers: we can transport to another country, and into someone else's life, through the power of words and the building of images in our mind. There is plenty of research about the power of reading books. It helps children put themselves into the shoes of others and grows their capacity for empathy. That's because when we read about a situation or feeling, it's like we're feeling it ourselves.

Creative non-fiction or narrative non-fiction or faction (it has many titles), can do that. It's not concise facts told in a conversational tone like many expository books do. Instead, it's a story with a beginning, middle and end. In *Kate Sheppard* we feel her angst when she fails with the first and second petitions. In *Abel Tasman* we worry that they won't ever find the second ship again. In *Ice Breaker!* we *will* them to find land in Antarctica.

Narrative non-fiction encourages more girls to read about New Zealand history, wildlife, and famous people, drawing them in with its storytelling powers. And that's the beauty of creative non-fiction. It combines the information side of non-fiction with the storytelling side of fiction. I discovered my first creative non-fiction story at university when I was doing a graduate diploma in journalism studies. I could see how the power of story could draw you into a nonfiction article. Several years later, I picked up the first creative non-fiction picture book in a school library back in 2008. The book *Home* by Narelle Oliver blew me away. I realised right there and then that was what I wanted to do.

Sadly, Narelle Oliver has since died of cancer. She wrote many stunning natural science books about Australia's wildlife. When I read her story about a falcon nesting on top of a sky-rise building, I felt goose bumps all over. THIS was a way to hook those children who shy away from non-fiction books; through STORY itself. Creative non-fiction books encompass the best of fiction and non-fiction worlds.

What do creative non-fiction books have in common?

- the books are visually appealing, featuring stunning illustrations
- they are accurate and authoritative, often peer reviewed by experts

- the writing style is engaging using literary techniques.

With this in mind, I wrote my first creative non-fiction book – *Rangitoto*. I'll never forget the day when the commissioning editor said to me she'd take it, but wasn't sure about the prose in the story. I sent her *Home* and said it was a new style of writing where a true tale uses literary techniques. Luckily, she trusted me, and we kept to the text I had written, with a bit of editing of course. Heather Arnold poured her heart and soul into the acrylic, watercolour and sketched illustrations. I was so proud when the book was a finalist for the awards. Many teachers have told me they use the book throughout the primary years; the story itself for younger readers and the fact boxes for independent readers up to 12 years of age.

I've written a few more creative non-fiction books since then: *The Call of the Kokako* also with Heather Arnold about saving the grey ghosts of New Zealand; *Toroa's Journey* with Gavin Mouldey – the story of the 500<sup>th</sup> albatross to hatch in Dunedin and his journey to South America and back; And my latest *Ice Breaker! An epic Antarctic Adventure* with Alistair Hughes. The untold story of New Zealand skipper Frank Worsley, who helped save the 'Endurance' crew with Sir Ernest Shackleton in Antarctica when their ship became trapped in the ice. I wrote my first biographical book *New Zealand Hall of Fame* with Bruce Potter – the Children's Choice winner in the nonfiction category in 2012. And the first book with Marco Ivancic as illustrator: *New Zealand Sports Hall of Fame* featuring New Zealand's top sports people.

Marco Ivancic and I collaborated on five books together: *Abel Tasman: Mapping the Southern Hemisphere* – the story of the Dutch explorer who put us on the European world map, *Kate Sheppard: Leading the Way for Women* of the extraordinary woman who helped New Zealand become the first country in the world to give ALL women the vote. Including, two biographical books, which are also a form of creative non-fiction: And in time for WW1 commemorations: *Anzac Heroes* – the winner of the 2016 Margaret Mahy M Book of the Year prize featuring 30 Australian and New Zealand men and women who were on the front lines in WW1 and WW2. Then *Anzac Animals* followed—it has stories about animals that befriended Australian and New Zealand soldiers during WWI and WWII.

Creative non-fiction books can turn a dry subject into a gripping adventure story, or a captivating time in someone's life, or a peek into a creatures' unknown wilderness.

New Zealand has some very talented authors writing in this genre: David Hill, Raymond Huber and Jennifer Beck to name a few and there are many more who have recently come to this newish genre. It's so new, librarians are still unsure where to place them... with the picture books... or with the non-fiction books. Same happens at the book awards. If only it had its own category!

There have also been some that could appear in the novel category... Susan Brocker's stand-alone animal books, Joanna Grochowicz's historical series and others. I'm writing one at the moment for my AUT Masters' in Creative Writing thesis.

From when I first started writing expository, to biographies, then creative non-fiction picture books, to now creating a creative nonfiction novel, my writing has changed along with the styles. When I was writing *Bird's-eye View*, I pared my writing back; facts told as they were. I didn't dress them with description or imagery. The designer displayed the informational text in a text box or with sub-headings.

In **biography** books such as *Anzac Heroes* I picked the most prominent moments in a person's life and chronologically tell their life story. Text boxes and timelines highlight the climactic moments.

In creative non-fiction picture books, I've reduced the events to the highlights and then add thoughts, dialogue, action and description so I'm showing, not telling, the story. Author Lorraine Orman has mentored me in this style of writing, telling me where I need to show more of the character's soul or some insight into what they're feeling in the story.

I've discovered in my Masters' course that when you write a chapter book, you have even more room to elaborate on those devices. In creative nonfiction novels you can also include back flashes, memory recounts and cliff hangers like you would in a fictional novel.

Some of you might wonder why I didn't just write fiction since I enjoy using these techniques in creative non-fiction books. I guess it all comes down to my background.

I grew up as the eldest of three children, living in Auckland for the first 13 years of my life, shifting often because my father liked to renovate old houses and sell them. When he managed an ice rink, normal suburban life went out the door. For the next three years, we spent most of our life in an icy building, watching long haired

teenagers racing around the rink. We all became ice skaters, competing in Auckland and national competitions. We didn't watch TV; we ate our dinner at the rink, played pool and came home when it was bedtime with Mum, while Dad stayed at the ice rink working until midnight. This experience gave me an interest in sport psychology. I knew the only thing holding me back in competitions was my lack of confidence in myself. And that's why I wanted to write a sport book that gave kids tips on how to further their sporting techniques much later.

After one stormy separation and make-up afterwards, we moved over to Brisbane, Australia to start afresh. We lived in a small caravan and travelled for two years around New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland, driving mostly in the outback, fossicking for stones, fishing in freshwater creeks, swimming and biking around caravan parks. We met many unusual characters, found ourselves in a few hotspots sometimes, and carried on being the dysfunctional family we were. Still no television or radio or even books to entertain us. Adventures on our bikes and observing nature kept up our interest. The only way I could socially distance myself was to throw myself into my correspondence studies. My parents gave up trying to coerce my brother and sister into doing their schoolwork. It was living amongst the wilderness, making our own fun, and letting our imaginations go wild that gave me an interest in writing about our New Zealand natives and how we could save them. I believe if we can give kids the tools to help endangered animals, they will feel more empowered to do something about it.

When I left school, I travelled for three years, mostly by myself. I was a nanny in Greece, shepherd and grape picker in Israel, and a barmaid in England. All the travel and work experiences gave me an interest in how people tick. That led to writing biography books with the underlying message in these stories is to give it your best shot, pick yourself up after a disappointment or setback, and strive for your dreams.

When I came back to New Zealand, I knew my heart wasn't in working in an office anymore. I felt trapped within its four walls. I went back to school... university, teachers' college and then another degree completed extramurally while my children were babies. I loved it! Surprisingly, I didn't love teaching. I enjoyed the creative side of it, devising interesting lessons, reading aloud to kids, and growing their young minds. I didn't like dealing with parents and naughty children. I left to be a stay-at-home mother and write on a lifestyle block with lots of animals. I also became



involved with releasing three-week old kiwi on Motuora Island for eight years, educating the public about the Operation Nest Egg programme. That was 18 years ago and since then I've had the privilege to write one-three books a year.

It hasn't been just about the writing for me. It was also being part of a community of writers and illustrators. Early in my writing career I joined Storylines and New Zealand Society of Authors. Then started up Kiwi Write4Kidz. I felt there was a gap for people who wanted to write for children. When the group started only Kathy White and Clare Scott had books published. We organised author talks, workshops and conferences with seasoned writers and illustrators, and wrote a monthly newsletter keeping everyone up to date on what was happening in the industry. I was lucky to have a great management team: Heather Arnold, Melinda Szymanik, Jean Prior, and others who helped with the organising. Our very first speaker was Jennifer Beck. We drove out to her house in South Auckland and she served us cake and tea. That was when the group was small, and afterwards Jennifer kept in touch to see how we were going. We grew to 100 members.

We also had Brian Falkner talk to us several times, sharing the secrets of his very successful career, along with other wonderful writers like David Hill, Ken Catran, Barbara Else and illustrators like Sandra Morris, Gavin Bishop and David Elliot. We even organised a weekend workshop with one of Australia's most successful authors, John Marsden. One of the lovely stories from that weekend was that a 14-year-old boy asked – begged – if he could come on the workshop. His mother assured us he was a keen writer and wouldn't be any trouble. That 14-year-old boy had already written a novel and rewritten it several times. He kept in touch with John Marsden and me. I learned later that he sent letters to famous writers in Australia and New Zealand guaranteeing that he would be a writer one day. When he turned 23, he self-published his novel, which he had rewritten nine times by then. He's now up to book six in the series.

There were heaps of success stories over the 13 years that KW4K ran. From only two published authors to 75 percent of the group being published. In fact, I remember two years after our first course, sitting in a café in Aotea Square after a Storylines Festival Family Day and saying... Just think it could be one of us one day giving one of those talks about OUR books. We grinned, crossed our fingers – it seemed an impossible dream, even an audacious one. We were so full of doubt and

it seemed such a difficult industry to break into. One year later, two of us had stories accepted, and the rest of the group followed.

Over the years, I've visited a lot of schools through speakers' agencies such as Read NZ, Speakers Ink in Australia, Storylines, Duffy Books and privately. Even though I had been a teacher, I was nervous about giving talks at first. My goal was to inform. I quickly learned that being entertaining was just as important. From people like Brian Falkner, Fifi Colston and Des Hunt I learned to make my talks interactive.

When giving author talks, I start with showing students a picture of myself at 12 years of age. I'm about to start my free figure skating programme in the Auckland Junior Figure Skating competition. I was not a confident teenager. But I had practised before and after school, and every day in the weekend. I tell kids that I believe everyone can achieve their dream if they practise hard for it. And my dream that day was to place in that competition. I thought my chances were slim. I was competing against two girls who had skated since they were toddlers. One was from England, the other from Canada. I'd only been ice skating for several years. I practised every day and had the attitude of not giving up. I was determined, not to win so much – but to do my best. I tell kids I think I was more surprised than everyone that day when I won that competition. That's when I turn to kids and say – if you practise hard, don't give up, and try your best – you can achieve your dreams too.

I then segue into the grown-up me saying back then I knew I wanted to be a writer one day. The week we left to go to Australia we visited family friends, and they urged me to sign their friendship book. Thirteen-year-old me wrote 'I want to be a writer' one day. I didn't know how I'd achieve it. It was just something I kept in the back of my mind as I was growing up. I always read lots of books and wrote lots of letters and stories. It wasn't until I had children of my own that I put that dream into practice. Like the ice skating – I practise a lot and write every day. I don't give up – even though it is a difficult industry. And I give it my best shot; always editing my work.

When writing non-fiction books, I spend a lot of time researching. I've been fortunate enough to receive a couple of Creative New Zealand grants that enabled me to travel to Australia to visit the Australian War Museum in Canberra while writing *Anzac Heroes* and *Anzac Animals*. Because of my strong connection with Australia I

wanted to include Australian men and women and animals in the books too. Sometimes I must put my investigator hat on and delve deep for stories. For example, in *Anzac Heroes* I wanted to include two Aboriginal soldiers. I couldn't find any information online or in books about Lance Corporal Albert Knight who won a DCM medal. I resorted to the phone book and rang all the Knights in Bourke, New South Wales. On the sixth phone call, I found a relative; he gave me several other people's phone numbers and between them I was able to tell Albert's life story. A wonderful outcome. After talking to an RSL representative and putting him in touch with Albert's relatives, this resulted in a long-overdue headstone and plaque being put on Albert's grave in 2015. Often the stories that are the hardest to get are the most rewarding. The book took eight months to write, working seven days a week. We all put a lot of work into making it the award-winning book it is. It's been my most successful book.

Some people might think we writers sit in our PJs all day and write when the muse hits us. It couldn't be further than the truth. The authors that keep getting published year after year, are most likely the ones that work seven days a week on their stories, working past midnight to hit deadlines, and having to factor in daily exercise to ward off RSI from using the keyboard too much, or back aches and blood clotting issues from sitting in a chair all day, and headaches and insomnia from looking at a computer screen too long. But that might only apply to the **workaholics** in the industry. And it doesn't include the mental issues when our stories are rejected, when we're not shortlisted, a grant is denied, we get a bad review, or are ignored by influencers, festival organisers, etc. Over time, we learn to shake off those disappointments and carry on. And be proactive at organising events, school visits, workshops, etc.

Of course, there are lots of fabulous moments, too. We're our own boss when we're at home tapping away on our computers. We work the hours when we want. We get to travel the country and, for some, overseas, talking to children about our books. We meet and interview interesting people, research subjects we're fascinated in or didn't know much about before, and we produce beautiful books. Kids listen to your talks with rapture and some kids come rushing up and hug you afterwards because they enjoyed your talk so much. Though, one time I had been talking to a group of high school students and they watched with dead pan faces throughout the talk and I

thought, well, I've failed to engage this audience. Then afterwards a group of girls came up and told me it was an awesome talk.

Most of my income comes from giving author talks and workshops in schools. Duffy Books has taken me on dirt roads to small schools with only eight kids in Middle Earth to large schools in the far North – places I might never have visited. These schools rarely have visitors, let alone authors, visiting and they've been a joy.

When giving **author talks**, instead of reading my stories aloud, I tend to get a group of kids up and give them masks and we act out my *The Last of Maui Dolphins* book. Or I give them **puppets** and I read aloud while they stand very shyly holding a puppet. I scoured shops all around the world online to get every predator so we could act out the *Operation Nest Egg Chick* book. And I've rewritten several pages from *Kate Sheppard*, *Abel Tasman* and *Ice Breaker!* into Readers' Theatre scripts so kids can read aloud the story in front of their classes with me. I also take a lot of props with me, from a three-metre long picture of an albatross, to a model of Parliament House, a cardboard model of the 'Heemskerk' from the *Abel Tasman* book, etc.

During the school visits I've been asked the darndest things: The cutest so far was one little girl with her hair tied in tight plaits who shyly sidled up to me while I was packing up and said, "Did you brush your hair today?" I assured her I had. She looked at my wild mane – frizzier than normal because of the wind outside – and gave me a look that she was very sceptical that I had done so.

In schools I invariably get asked my age. I remember one time I had just turned a new decade, so I was a bit sensitive about my new golden age, and a kid at the back of the hall asked how old I was. I answered, "very old". But he wasn't satisfied with that answer. I should have done what Kyle Mewburn does and shout, "I'm a hundred years old!" The young boy waited until everyone had filed out of the hall and came up and asked me again. I tried to fob him off with another glib answer, but he wasn't having that. I could tell he wasn't going to leave until I told him the truth. "Half a century," I said. His mouth dropped open – that's very old in kid-time. Happy he had his answer, he ran off to join his class.

I ask questions, too, and get surprise answers. After my book *New Zealand Hall of Fame* came out, I asked the audience, "What would you like to be when you grow

up?” Half the room put their hands up: an All Black, Silver Fern, but once one kid answered... I want to lie on the couch and watch TV all day.

As a full-time author, I need to spend a lot of time getting my books in front of my target audience. In the past I've talked at libraries, signed books at bookstores, and attended events.

I am a teacher on Write Like an Author camps. Brian Falkner founded and wrote the one-three day workshops. It's the most comprehensive writing course I've ever come across, and the kids love it. It's also fun; we **play Story Sports** – a bit like theatre sports, Reverse Charades using book titles, and Covers & Lines – where kids guess the name of the book from the blank cover or opening sentence and there are role plays.

I've also organised a lot of literary events to help other authors and myself promote our books. We used to get crowds up to 100 to these events; over the last few years, it has dropped to 20 people, and we've even had audiences as low as three. What's changed over those years? Teachers and librarians are busier, have smaller budgets, and dare I say it... people are reading less. Also, if I ask kids what their favourite book or author is, most will name an international author/book. It is very disheartening for New Zealand authors. I've tried to address it in several ways:

- Early on I realised we needed to have more of an online presence; children's books were rarely being reviewed in newspapers and magazines. I started up the KidsBooksNZ blog with **Lorraine Orman**, who 12 years later is still one of the main contributors. Other authors have also come on board including Melinda Szymanik, Michele Powles, Vanessa Hatley-Owen, Clare Scott, and Brin Murray. We've had nearly 500,000 pageviews over the years. And it's now on Facebook and Twitter, helping to grow the audience of people interested in New Zealand children's books.
- I've also organised displays in New Zealand and Australian libraries. I held the first two New Zealand exhibitions at the National Library, and the third one travelled around libraries all around the country. Libraries packed it up at the end of the month and sent it to the next library. On the display boards, authors and Illustrators showed what the research process was for their book.

- I took two of these boards over to Australia and had a meeting with the Brisbane Central Librarian. They were keen to do something similar. They had a **budget to pay designers to design the boards**, and we printed them on foam boards. They displayed the Anzac-themed boards around Brisbane libraries over a two-year period. I sent the pdf files to other libraries around Australia and they printed them off and displayed them in their libraries. They were displayed in libraries as far away as Broome, Adelaide, Canberra, and Tasmania. Jackie French, Anthony Hill, Sally Murphy, Dianne Wolfer, Claire Saxby and others, plus New Zealand authors/illustrators: Melinda Szymanik, Glyn Harper & Jenny Cooper, David Hill and Fifi Colston, and Marco Ivancic and I took part in this exhibition. For both exhibitions I wrote a blog, included biographies, reviews, teaching resources and interviews. They are still available online.

It would be great if our Aussie cousins and New Zealand authors and illustrators could cooperate on more projects like this. Trans-Tasman marketing would give us a more even platform against the hundreds of American and English titles that invade our bookstores every year. Those international publishers mass-produce their books and therefore have more money to spend on marketing. So, when you walk into a bookstore, the first thing you'll see are stand-up cardboard displays of David Walliams, Dave Pilkey, and other international children's books. This has been a problem ever since I started writing and has only become more so over the years. But now we also compete with puzzles, children's toys, and fancy stationery. Thank goodness for the Dorothy Butler Bookshop, Children's Bookshop in Wellington, Books for Kids in Hamilton, and other like-minded bookstores that support New Zealand books and their authors and illustrators.

And so, I take this opportunity today to encourage you all – and I know I'm talking to the converted here—to read more New Zealand books. Make displays in your classrooms, school and public libraries of the latest New Zealand books, read them aloud to your students, use them in your high school English studies. Invite New Zealand authors and illustrators to give a paid talk or workshop at your school or library. And download the excellent teacher resources publishers have written for these books. We have so many gifted authors and illustrators in New Zealand – let's not look over their shoulders to international authors and books.

Even though we've just come out of a lockdown, authors and illustrators have been busy producing new books. During that time, I rewrote the pandemic section of my *Disaster* book. I started that book a week before the mosque massacre, it was being illustrated when Whakāri White Island erupted, edited when the bush fires in Australia were raging, and designed when the pandemic started. I don't think of the book as being jinxed – more a sign of the times; with this book, we've recorded the very latest disasters in real time.

After the pandemic, Scholastic delayed its release by six months; when we've hopefully returned to a more normal, normal. I've rewritten the pandemic chapter several times; hopefully we won't have any more lockdown scenarios. *New Zealand Disasters: OUR RESPONSE, RESILIENCE AND RECOVERY*, comes out in February complemented with Marco Ivancic's realistic illustrations. We didn't want a doom and gloom book. Instead, we've put a positive slant on the subject. I've written creative non-fiction stories about the disasters, what we learned from them, and who the amazing people are that get us through those difficult times and what kids can do to help themselves recover after a disaster. Disaster books always need updating and schools study disasters at least every two years.

During the pandemic, I also emailed people I had interviewed for a true animal tales book I've written, asking for photographs. Illustrator Emma Huia Lovegrove is drawing the animals at present and Scholastic intends releasing it in June 2021. It includes gorgeous stories, for example a Burmese cat that competes in a dog swimming competition, a 12-year-old girl who is a koala whisperer, a lonely gannet, an unlucky-in-love albatross, a talkative kokako, and other funny true animal stories. I've loved writing these stories and can't wait to share them with you.

Other author and illustrator friends also have exciting new books coming out – so look out for them, too. It might be harder to get published today, but if you persevere and work hard it is possible to get published in today's tricky times. If you want to write and get published, I suggest you attend workshops – there are plenty offered online at present – go to conferences, and write and read every day.

I've been writing for 18 years but still consider myself a learner. This year, I've participated in two online workshops and a Masters' in Creative Writing degree at AUT. I've been very lucky to have author lecturer James George as my tutor, and

I've enjoyed meeting the other talented writers on the course. We're collating short stories and poems and producing an anthology due for release in December.

Finally, what I've learned over the years is that writers are not on an island typing their stories. We're part of a vibrant community of writers, illustrators, publishers, designers, booksellers, librarians, reviewers, educators and readers. The germ of an idea might start with an author, but it takes a village to make a book and a community to get it seen in the wider world. But writers and illustrators can't sit back and wait for everyone to come to them; we need to be proactive in getting our New Zealand books to our target audiences. That might mean participating in social media, writing a blog, reviewing books, becoming part of the Storylines and New Zealand Society of Author's teams, or holding events. And it might also mean donning a crazy hat, a tee-shirt emblazoned with your book cover, or a costume to bring your books alive to the target audience. We're not just writers and illustrators, we're also presenters and kids like a bit of flair!

If you're a writer or illustrator, I wish you all the best with your journey. It's a roller-coaster ride full of joy, learning, and ups and downs. And for all the readers out there ... enjoy your next New Zealand book; it's due to your support that books keep getting published in this country.

Thank you!

Maria Gill, 2020