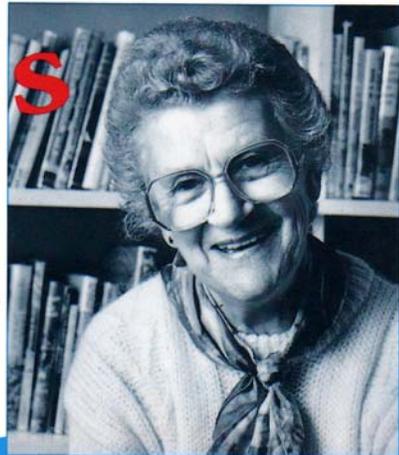


# DOROTHY BUTLER

## Telling Tales



THE 1992 MARGARET MAHY AWARD LECTURE

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*Her contribution to children's literature has been recognised by the Eleanor Farjeon Award (Britain 1979), the May Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lectureship (USA 1984), the Anne Carroll Moore Memorial Lectureship (Lincoln Centre, N.Y. 1984), the American Library Citation (1985), the Ezra Jack Keats Lectureship (University of Southern Mississippi 1991) and the Children's Literature Association of New Zealand Honour (1991).*

*Her first books Cushla and her Books (Holder & Stoughton 1979), Reading Begins at Home (with Dr Marie Clay, Heinemann 1979, Babies Need Books (Bodley Head 1980) and Five to Eight (Bodley Head 1985; reflected her interest in encouraging parents to share books with children from an early age. She has lectured widely on this subject in New Zealand, Australia, Great Britain, USA and Japan where the Japanese version of Babies Need Books is in great demand.*

*Dorothy Butler is also the author of fourteen children's picture books and editor of two books of poems and an anthology of New Zealand writing for children.*

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# *Telling Tales*

Dorothy Butler

*The 1992 Margaret Mahy Award Lecture*



New Zealand Children's Book Foundation

Te Maataa Pukapuka Tamariki O Aotearoa

*Published by the  
New Zealand Children's Book Foundation  
Te Maataa Pukapuka Tamariki O Aotearoa  
A division of The New Zealand Book Council  
P. O. Box 96-094, Auckland, New Zealand*

*First Published 1993*  
© *New Zealand Children's Book Foundation 1993*  
ISBN 0-473-01895-0

*Published with the assistance of  
the Literature Programme of the  
Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand*

*Produced and distributed by the  
New Zealand Children's Book Foundation  
P.O. Box 96-094, Auckland, New Zealand*

*Author photo by Mark Adams  
Cover design by Neysa Moss  
Book Design and Typesetting  
by KSL Consulting Group, Auckland  
Printed by GP Print Ltd, Wellington*

The 1992 Margaret Mahy Award Lecture  
presented by  
Dorothy Butler  
14th March 1992

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It is good to be here tonight. I have enjoyed a day that has been both stimulating and relaxing, among friends. I am happy.

At the same time I must confess to a certain apprehension about your capacity to remain awake. The effects of a substantial meal, on people who have been required to sit, listen and contribute for half a day already is likely to be as soporific as that of lettuce on rabbits: a claim for which we have reliable documentation.

I will try to help by entertaining you a little, and may even make you squirm in a good cause, from time to time. I will certainly tell you a tale or two - some of you will know that I am relentlessly prone to anecdote - and will assuredly repeat myself. I regard this as the prerogative of the aging; it springs from a desperate feeling that the things you *know* you are right about are being ignored, and that time is running out! 'The years teach much that the days never know,' said Emerson. One comes to feel, passionately, that he was right.

I am deeply honoured to be this year's recipient of the Margaret Mahy Award. Perhaps even more I am gratified to know that, in my lifetime, the field of children's literature in New Zealand has broadened and deepened to a point at which the establishment of such an award has been possible. We have come a long way in the last twenty-five years and I feel that congratulations are due to all those whose work in the cause of children's books and reading has been so unsparing and, in some cases, scholarly.

That we have finally reached the thought-to-be-unattainable peak of university recognition of children's literature, in the course currently available at the University of Waikato, is cause for pride and satisfaction. Some of us present can remember the days when children's literature in this country was hardly recognised as a category at all, let alone a subject for serious study.

Many of the people - parents, librarians, teachers and specialist booksellers - who have worked away in their own homes and places of work to bring children and books together, may have little awareness of their own personal contribution to this achievement. And yet it is their hard work, however willing and even enjoyable it has been, that has finally set the river flowing and worn away the stone.

For the field is a unique one; we cannot produce child readers without adult intermediaries. The strength of adult belief and commitment to the cause will be the measure of the progress made. And it is a peculiarly difficult field, in these days when, in some quarters, electronic seduction of the young is almost inevitable.

The role of a healthy and growing body of indigenous books for children must also be given a place in this success story. New Zealand children can have no doubt any longer that it is possible to grow up to be an author; even a world-famous author.

And here we must acknowledge, and I wish, personally, to pay tribute to, Margaret Mahy herself, for her contribution has been unmatched. One likes to think that New Zealand provided the young Margaret with the things she needed for the development of her superlative talent.

At the same time I believe that her place among the great names in the international field of children's books is probably not fully appreciated by many New Zealanders, and relates to a unique capacity which we may not see again. New Zealand children and their elders are favoured indeed - blessed, I would say, by Margaret Mahy's existence. That this lecture is intended to honour her both inspires and daunts me!

I must confess that I found writing it, or rather starting it, difficult; in fact, I was obliged in the end to confront the fact that I was finding excuses for not doing so.

There is something unexpectedly moving in being honoured in one's homeland. Invitations from other countries seem slightly unreal; one feels just a little bogus, going off to tell the Americans or the Japanese how to conduct their literary or educational affairs. One can think of dozens of other New Zealanders who would do it just as well, or better.

And finally, what to say? Everyone in New Zealand must by now know that I believe that books have the power to transform children's lives, and that adults have a duty to bring the two together, and make the join. Years ago, when I was preparing an address to give at the New York Public Library, I said to a daughter who happened to be near, 'What can I possibly say that I have not said a thousand times before,' and she said firmly, 'Nothing. You'll just have to say it louder!'

I called that address *Saying It Louder* - and have been invited back next year to 'say it louder still!'

And this gives me confidence. If a thing is worth saying, it's worth repeating, and I don't feel any obligation to let *this* audience down lightly. You are the people whose ideas are likely to be useful, whose actions are likely to be effective. You are *worth* urging to extra effort! In the event, I doubt that William Wilberforce ever passed up the opportunity to thunder away in the cause of the abolition of slavery wherever the chance occurred; certainly, the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury will not have failed to leap upon any platform, however unpromising, for the castigation of exploitative mill and mine owner.

Well, slavery *was* abolished; the pitiful, undernourished children of early Victorian England *were* rescued from mines and factories; perhaps if we work at it, modern children in supposedly advanced countries may some delivered from *their* unique affliction: for millions of them, subjection to an environment in which strident noise and flashing image has

replaced the sights and sounds of the natural world; an environment in which childhood itself is under threat.

I am a New Zealander, speaking to New Zealanders. I would be doing less than my duty if I didn't spell out my fears to you, about the lives we offer children in this multi-cultured, favoured land. I may even, surely, indulge myself a little by speaking of my own life and the lives of other New Zealanders born in the 1920s or thereabouts. We are, after all, a generation which has recently been set up, dusted down and inspected - criticised even - just when we thought we might sit back a bit and leave the heavier work to the youngsters.

I believe that I am a third generation New Zealander - and here I am, slipping away from the earnest in the direction of the frivolous, with no intention of apologising. If Dickens and Jane Austen could digress, so can I. To repeat: I believe that I am a third generation New Zealander. The doubt arises from the family's uncertainty as to whether my maternal grandfather was born at sea on the way from the Bendigo to the Thames goldfields in the early 1860s, or shortly after his parents' arrival. His father had carried off his mother, the daughter of a publican in Bendigo, against her family's wishes. (As a child I savoured this tale, and added 'publican's daughter' to my collection of treasured words and phrases.)

This great-grandfather was a source of fascinating speculation. He was described by an acquaintance as 'a gentleman, and a scoundrel', and one was meant to disapprove of him. But this was difficult; ancient rumour had it that he was a charmer. There is some uncorroborated evidence that John Brown was a 'remittance man', being paid by a high-born English family to stay away from England - and certainly, his name gives rise to suspicion. (It would, of course, as well support a 'confidence trickster' theory.) At all events, there is no family history on this side, before the advent

of John Brown. In due course he fathered two daughters to follow my grandfather George, and did his duty, we are told. Certainly, a 'John Brown' is listed as a Town Councillor in Thames in the 1870s.

Then, he contrived to disappear. Now, to disappear from Thames at that time was difficult; there was only the steamer to Auckland, and John Brown would have been a familiar figure to other travellers. That he had not been accidentally killed and his body never found, was only proven conclusively ten years later when he wrote to his son, my grandfather, from Salt Lake City in America.

George was by now a young man of stirling quality and rather scholarly bent, who had left school at twelve following his father's disappearance, and found employment with the *Thames Star*. In effect, he had become the man of the family, supporting his deserted mother and younger sisters, the Bendigo relatives having either opted out of their daughter's affairs, or been cast out. Family hearsay has it that this grandmother was not the sort to crave forgiveness.

John Brown's letter informed his son that he had amassed considerable wealth as a land speculator, had no other heir, and wished George to join him. If we children needed an example of the sterner virtues to counter-balance the rascally (if engaging) qualities of our great grandfather, we had it in our grandfather. George Brown rejected his father's offer out of hand. That was the end of that.

On a plate, we were handed a lifetime of speculation about what might have been. That *we* might not have existed at all, had our grandfather cast aside his immediate responsibilities and set sail for America, did not occur to us; how could the world function without ourselves at its hub?

And of course we had cousins called Brown; but the line subsequently ran to daughters only, and we have been spared any rascally manifestations.

On the other side of my mother's family, interesting if not spectacular events had taken place. My maternal grandmother was one of eleven children who made the hazardous, five-month journey to New Zealand with their parents in the 1860s. The youngest, little Effie, died on the way, and we grieved over her as if she were our own little sister.

My great grandfather, Edwin Stewart, had established a successful cabinet-making business in Kent; but his eyes were on the horizon, his longing for his own piece of land insistent. And so he by-passed the raw new capital of Auckland - where his skills and his money were needed - and bought a tract of fine farming land near Cambridge. This he farmed with signal ineptitude, ultimately losing the lot. His sons were obliged to take whatever jobs they could get, and his ladylike daughters to 'go into service'. In fact, it was the daughter 'in service' in a big house near Thames who married young George Brown and became my grandmother.

There now - I have told you a story; several stories in fact. And I cannot abandon the theme without commenting on a circumstance which has always amused me. It is this: Among my friends of similar age there is not one who cannot tell you, if encouraged - and who usually, thereupon, will not *stop* telling you - about forbears who have, to say the least, behaved irregularly, if not always with less than Christian rectitude and the stories make such delectable listening! A friend of long standing positively boasts about her grandfather, a dignified Victorian papa, father of eight, who made off with the children's governess. The couple were pursued to Aberdeen by the wife's father and the seducer's brother, who, legend has it, advanced upon the breakfasting pair across a hotel dining room and cried,

(in tones which were certain to have been ringing), 'You dastardly cad, you!' - a phrase which has been used with relish by the family ever since.

Quite in the class of my gentlemanly, scoundrel great grandfather! And the story does not end there; the forcibly reunited husband and wife, doubtless to escape lasting public disapproval, decided to emigrate to New Zealand. Here, Mama, already frail and no doubt worn out by all this junketing, died; whereupon Papa sent for the governess, married her and fathered another family. All of these descendants, from whichever female line, have thrived; the ones I know are intelligent, articulate and reliable. In fact, there seems some evidence that current generations have not actually deteriorated, by comparison with these ostensibly worthy but surely questionable Victorians - a fair proportion of whom do seem to have arrived here in retreat from uncomfortable situations. If the Australians will insist upon claiming their convict ancestry with such pride, there is no need for us to consign our scoundrelly ancestors, gentlemanly or not, to the closet.

I must tell you that at this point in the writing of this paper, I stopped suddenly and said to myself 'You can't go off at such a gossipy tangent in the middle of the Margaret Mahy Lecture.' And then I answered myself 'Why not? Most of the people present have spent the day in earnest application, however satisfying they have found it. What they need now is a brace of good yarns!'

For a belief in story is central to my philosophy. I believe that 'storying' is part of life, whether we recognise it or not, from our earliest consciousness of self.

It is gratifying to know that modern psychology affirms this faith as fact; assuring us that we cannot make sense of our lives except by devising narratives to explain and construct, to deliberate on the past, consider the

present and speculate on the future, and that our dreams and daydreams reflect, modify, reinforce and are part of this purpose. Storying is, indeed, a primary function of mind.

It has always seemed self-evident to me that the spontaneous fantasies of early childhood exceed in horror anything the mere storyteller can invent, and that one of the functions of storytelling and reading aloud must be to give form to the nameless and to substitute the acceptable for the unbearable. The more successfully we stock children's minds with stories which can become the raw material of invention and expression, the firmer their feet will tread the earth, the quicker will be their response, the more ready their laughter, the deeper their understanding.

The Jungian psychologist James Hillman wrote: 'From my perspective as depth psychologist I see that those who have a connection with story are in better shape and have a better prognosis than those to whom story must be introduced... To have 'story- awareness' is psychologically therapeutic. It is good for the soul: Of course, ordinary people have always known this. Conversation - whether gossip round the village pump or scholarly disputation in halls of learning - has always taken story form; our earliest ancestors related their feats and made stories of their fantasies around the tribal fire. The benefit is, clearly to the teller as well as the listener. Now, as then, we all eagerly await our turn to contribute an anecdote, offer an illustration, give our version of how or why it happened. News is story; life itself is narrative.

The implication for modern children is clear, as is the duty of informed adults; children need books, and we must provide them, thereafter moving heaven and earth if need be to ensure that true and lasting contact is made between the two. The size of the job must not put us off. Eleanor Cameron, noted American author and critic, has said: 'I should like to say

to all parents, your small child *must* be read and sung the Mother Goose rhymes at the earliest age, *must* be read the Beatrix Potter stories and the finest of the picture books. (Go to the library and find out what they are' ) ... Remember that the poet Dylan Thomas's father read him Shakespeare when he was four...'

And Joan Aiken, unsurpassed in my view as a living author for children, has asserted, in her down-to-earth way that '... any adult who isn't willing to read aloud to a child for an hour a day I personally think doesn't deserve to have a child!'

And what do the mass of modern children have as their lot?

The world into which children are pitched, willy-nilly in these days of supposed enlightenment, is a frightening one. It is true that the poverty, ignorance and injustice of the last century led to appalling and widespread hardship. But men and women of good faith were able, at least, to see some justification for hope. 'Let's get the children out of the factories and mines and into the classroom,' they said. 'Let us assure their parents of a living wage and a voice in the government, and *then* let's see what sort of a world we may build!' There was scope, not only for idealism, but for action. The necessary reforms were self-evident.

Cruelly, the faith of these reformers, has proven unjustified. Progress has not brought in its wake the benefits once believed to be inevitable. Mass opportunity for education has not proven the panacea for ignorance and neglect. The world has merely exchanged one set of problems for another; and the current crop has aspects that terrify.

And no longer are the remedies apparent. In the world we have created, it is hard to frame appropriate questions, let alone find answers. What is worse, individual action may seem impossible. A feeling of impotence is added to our confusion and despair.

In his poem 'Prayer Before Birth', Louis MacNeice suggests with chilling vision the hazards which await the child, and the strengths that child will need to become purposeful, rather than driven, complete, rather than fragmented.

'I am not yet born; O fill me  
With strength against those who would freeze my  
humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal automaton,  
would make me a cog in a machine, a thing with  
one face, a thing, and against all those  
who would dissipate my entirety, would  
blow me like thistledown hither and  
thither or hither and thither  
like water held in the  
hands would spill me.  
Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me.  
Otherwise kill me.'

Earlier in the poem MacNeice provides a glimpse of the world he would have children enter.

'I am not yet born; provide me  
With water to dandle me, grass to grow for me, trees to talk  
to me, sky to sing to me, birds and a white light  
in the back of my mind to guide me.'

Can we equip children to cope with the contradictions, the ugliness and the lies of the world, as well as to recognise and embrace the certainties, the beauty and the truths? Remember MacNeice's plea for the child: '... a white light in the back of my mind to guide me.' How much hope is there, in the world we have created, that each child will find his or her own 'white light'? The outlook, I suggest, is bleak for many millions of the world's children, and I am not referring only to those who live in underprivileged countries.

And yet it is with children that our hope lies. Many of you here tonight will have heard me say before, that children are the most important people in the world. I wish it were not necessary to repeat it; or even that I had reason to hope that the conviction was beginning to take root in the consciousness of those authorities and institutions which have apparent control over children's lives. I say 'apparent' because we all know that outside agencies have limited capacities for effective action. For parents are the people with the *real* power; the power to change things around, so that the next generation will be stronger, kinder, less given to sudden anger and violent action, more disposed to friendly disputation, quicker to gather a child - any child - into its arms, slower to blame, quicker to laugh, to listen, to explain.

I do not believe that any society will make real and lasting progress until it can assure its newborn children of these things.

The problem - the gigantic stumbling-block - is that very large numbers of parents have been - one might almost say still are - children whose needs were not met, are not being met, can never, now, be met.

There is no room for generalisation here. I have seen a child's need for love, security and laughter met superbly by a single modern parent; I know that my own working-class parents in Depression New Zealand gave to their children unstintingly those things of the spirit which overrode every kind of material lack.

But of course, the parents in both of these cases had themselves been loved, valued children. One cannot compare their lot with that of the generations of inadequately served children who grow up and, in their turn, neglect or abuse their children. There is bitter unfairness here, and seeming hopelessness; but we cannot cease to hope.

Somehow, we must break the cycle, taking up whatever tool we use most skilfully, wherever we find an opportunity. For most of us here, this tool will be the book.

It is likely that everyone in this audience believes in the book as a humanising force - a force which has the potential to rescue children from lives of mediocrity, to offer them insight and pleasure, to lead them to wonder, to laugh and to care. Many of us see this process in operation daily. But let us also recognise that vast sea of children whom we will not reach except through extraordinary measures.

The lost potential is enormous. For it is the honesty and realism of childhood, with its good humour, its resilience, the capacity of the very young to forgive us our trespasses, to love and to laugh against backgrounds which are less than ideal, that are the real strengths of the world: the qualities we must entrench and build on if we are to survive.

I am not, of course, the first to say this on a public platform; nor is it usual to hear anyone contradict it. No-one is prepared to go on record as saying that children's welfare is *not* as important as the state of the highways, the funding of adult sport or the state of that nebulous entity, the economy. It is just that no government has ever been prepared to make children's welfare an absolute priority. The truth is, of course, that children constitute a wonderful subject for rhetoric but do not help politicians win votes. Children have usually to be molested or murdered before they qualify as prime-time news; and even then, public passion emerges in the form of demand for the punishment of the adult offender, rather than any real concern about a society in which such acts are common.

We are obliged to face the fact that children come into the world with all the qualities our planet needs to ensure not only its survival, but its triumphant survival, and that we somehow contrive to reduce this torrent of

energy and originality to a mere trickle. Striking a note of levity, G.K. Chesterton asked, 'Why is the world full of brilliant children and dud grown-ups?' and while we laugh, we have to join him in the query. We know that the question is justified. We are confronted by the phenomenon daily.

Why then, is it not a question which is addressed by educationists? There seems to be a tenet of belief in our society that children automatically - quite properly, even - lose their freshness of vision, their insatiable demand to *know*, their imaginative energy as they mature. Only occasionally, do we hear a welcome voice, wondering aloud on this score. One such voice, that of Mario Salvadori, speaking at the Loughborough Seminar on Children's Literature in Knoxville, Tennessee in December 1983, refuted the idea that adulthood is reached simply by 'growing out of childhood: He would not have it that to mature we must deny the characteristics of childhood, and that 'this abandonment is growth'.

Salvadori pointed out that this view of childhood, as a stage to be left behind in the interests of personal and social progress, is contradicted by the behaviour of one particular group of adults: the creators. The most successful poets, scientists and artists, he says, see the world with the eyes of children; unlike the mundane majority, they manifest a freshness of approach to the world which allows them to move along untrodden paths. The true creators seem, in short, to have avoided or remained unaffected by those processes which extract from the great mass of developing youngsters, those very qualities which, nurtured and extended, might be expected to produce a very different adult population.

We all recognise that claims of child virtuosity - every child's virtuosity - have substance. We are constantly regaling one another with anecdotes

about our children's conversation or behaviour which, if we are to be honest, are funny only from *our* point of view.

The children themselves are usually in deadly earnest, their remarks or actions the result of reasonable speculation, or serious wish to know. Children's curiosity and energy, untempered by notions of what is proper, appropriate, or polite, lead them headlong into breathtaking exchanges which reveal prodigious capacities for response which is not merely lateral, but shoots out to every point of the compass.

Let me give you several examples:

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Some years ago, my cousin's son, aged five, was encountered by my mother (his great aunt) and myself, experimentally spitting.

'Oh Sheldon,' said my mother gently, 'little gentlemen don't spit.' 'Who are they?' asked Sheldon, round-eyed. 'They are polite little boys,' said Great-Aunt Em. Sheldon thought about this. 'Then who does spit?' he asked. As I recall it, my mother changed the subject in a rather cowardly fashion.

Again, I showed a little vase given me by a friend, to a four-year-old granddaughter. I explained that my friend had bought it out of a basket on the back of a donkey, in Spain. My granddaughter had no eyes for the vase. 'Did she buy the donkey?' she asked.

My point here is that children are open to sensation and experience in an extraordinary way; the paths of possibility which surround them are not yet closed off by the gates of apathy, hopelessness or at the very least, fixed ideas of how things *should* be.

Effort and initiative are still thought to bring results.

As they grow of course, children experience constraints which lead - are almost designed to lead - to that mysterious narrowing of capacities which we have traditionally seen as part of natural development; a 'putting away

of childish things'. To a lesser or greater extent, they are all cowed into acceptance of concepts - call them realities if we will - that are unnatural and incomprehensible to them; and to many of us, if the truth be told. We choose to call the process 'growing up', as if the impetus came from the child, and as if the journey were an ascent. For how many young people is this so?

Twenty years ago, Maslow talked about what he called 'the healthy childishness' and 'second naivete' of adults here and there whom he found to be integrated and creative; he noted their openness to ideas, their quick consideration of new alternatives; their capacity for both self-criticism and good-humoured acceptance. Are these not the qualities we need, in every part of our confused, ill-functioning world, if we are ever to make real progress towards the illusive goals of peace and goodwill, person to person and nation to nation?

I like to remember Alfred North Whitehead's definition of culture: '...activity of thought and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling; and I recall his prescription for educating the young: that we should aim at producing people '... who possess both culture and expert knowledge - some special direction' and I wish that we could enshrine these principles in the charter of every school in the world - and even more importantly, in all the *homes* in the world.

Whitehead died in 1947. One wonders if he could possibly have foreseen the difficulties future generations would encounter in the task of inducing 'activity of thought and receptiveness to beauty and humane thought' in the young of the species. Could he, for example, have envisaged the way in children's lives would be invaded by the strident noise and hypnotic image of the television screen? Certainly, he would have encountered the

monster in its early manifestations - but who among us at that time could have foretold such a wholesale takeover?

Nearly two decades ago, Marie Winn warned that '...the child's early television experience will serve to dehumanize, to mechanise, to make less real the relationships and realities he encounters in life', and many of us were in uneasy agreement. There was, however, a feeling abroad, even among professional educators, that Winn was over-stating the case; that children would take television in their stride once it ceased to be a new toy; or perhaps, that *their* families were unlikely to be snared, even if less discriminating people fell into the trap. After all, they reasoned aloud, hadn't the same warnings been posted years before, when radio became part of family life?

Tragically, the reassurances have proven empty, for television is quite different both in nature and effect from radio. Radio merely allows the human voice to be heard at greater distances than was formerly possible; and it demands something of the listener. One must opt in, listen with attention, become involved with spoken narrative, discourse and argument if radio listening is to be profitable. Concentration is required; the capacity to hold in the mind what has gone before, relating what is heard to known concepts, taking unfamiliar words and constructions on trust as the mind grasps for meaning.

There is nothing passive about *listening*.

I remember my father's warning glare as he tuned into a programme on the 'wireless' of which we were so proud, over fifty years ago; the admonitory finger which reduced us all to attentive silence. The reception was crackly; one had to listen with all one's heart and mind if the pictures were to appear.

I cannot fail to compare the experience with that of modern children watching television. *Listening*, too? Well, as the action gets faster and the music gets louder, the conversation - mostly staccato half sentences, anyway is lost in the general crashing chaos which tells you that the climax has been reached and the show is nearly over. Never mind; the music can be relied upon to tell you whether you should feel sad, or glad. You are certainly being robbed of your human right to individual response – but was there anything worth responding to in any case? Isn't there a chance that somewhere along the way your precious human sensitivity might prove to have been the most tragic casualty of all?

It is impossible for people of my age to look around them without recalling their own early days; pre-World War II days when, for better or worse, everyone at least knew what age-group they belonged to, and what was expected within its boundaries. (Not that we always conformed; but the structure was there.) Those were the days when the popular songs were not only *fit* for children's ears; musical accompaniments were meant to act as background to the *words* - to actually embellish them. This is not to say that the tune was unimportant. After all, I am talking about the great age of whistling! (I would love to stop and ask 'Where have all the whistlers gone?' – but that *would* be a tangent.)

But children in those days vied with one another to get the *words* by heart, whenever a new song 'came out'. This phenomenon lasted well into the sixties I think; my own older children knew the words of *Oliver*, *Annie*, *My Fair Lady* and *West Side Story* by heart - not to mention the popular peace songs of Joan Baez, Pete Seegar and others - and the American Spirituals, the English fairground ditties and music-hall ballads. Working-class children of my own generation recognised famous arias from operas and sang the best-known choruses from Gilbert and Sullivan:

'A wandering minstrel I, a thing of rags and patches  
Of gallant songs and snatches ...'

What have modern children in place of this richness?

I suggest that many of them are nurtured on the trite and the banal. We have allowed the most grievous sort of poverty - poverty of the spirit and the imagination - to engulf them. I believe that we were luckier, poor though we might have been in material possessions.

Writers from Winn to Trelease, and beyond, have documented the destructive influence on the young of constant television watching. Strangely - or is it strange? - it is a subject about which parents are inclined to squirm defensively if challenged, while still doing little. It is our children's tragedy that the medium which robs them of their childhood also provides their parents with peace and order - however spurious - in their own lives, and so is not merely tolerated, but welcomed.

However unpalatable this truth is, it must be faced. Our society largely ignores the fact that its children are being denuded of their spontaneity, their initiative, their infinite capacity for speculation and wonder by constant exposure to mindless, chaotic image and blaring sound. The vast mass of people ignore the truth because it is uncomfortable for them to address it. Personal peace, in our demented world, must be pursued even if it means sacrificing our children.

The gravity of it all seems to have induced a crippling numbness in us; a numbness which we must slough off. We must at all costs look honestly at what we have done; even face the fact that the privileges of lifestyle and education *we* enjoy must increase our share of guilt in the plight of those children who are less fortunate than our own. For where they need the precise and pointed phrase, we have given them fragmented and vulgar platitudes; where they need time to stare, to scan, to look and look again,

we have given them garish, ever-changing images interspersed with frenetic exhortations to buy *this* breakfast food, drive *that* car; where they need to question and be answered, to recognise the adult world as a valuable, always available resource, we have given them an electronic contraption to still their limbs and stultify their minds. 'Here,' we say, 'is your model of the way the world works.'

How can we pretend to be puzzled by the outcome? We must surely be filled with wonder that so many children survive, that the few hold tenaciously to their own individuality.

Most people will attest, willingly, to the importance of childhood. I believe, however, that there has been an ominous shift of emphasis over the past, perhaps thirty, years.

I can only describe this new philosophy as one which sees childhood as merely preparatory; adulthood is all. Once, we saw childhood as a time when children were, ideally, protected from the harshness of the real world; we wanted children to remain innocent for as long as possible; to rehearse future roles in endless play which would, we believed, fortify them when the floodgates finally and inevitably opened and they were obliged to take their chance 'out there'.

Of course, we never really managed this idealistic progression, but it was based on a theory which is irrefutable; that humankind's superiority over all other species is related to the greater length of time the young of the species spends growing up. Over the last few decades, this time has shortened alarmingly, so that we now have pre-pubertal children aping their elders in frightening ways; rushing into areas of life for which they are quite unprepared.

The virtual disappearance of childhood play in the six-to-twelve-year-old group has been noted by sociologists in America who usually relate it

to television viewing and its effects. But there is another factor in active operation, I believe, a factor which we certainly see in New Zealand. This is the belief among some educators - and many parents - that direct teaching of facts must begin at the earliest possible age, if the child is to 'compete'. Thus we see many nursery schools, once centres of diverse and creative play, restricting the spontaneous activities of their small students in favour of blinkered concentration on letters, numbers - and sober reality. That this is a narrow philosophy, and that such rigid attention to arbitrarily-chosen facts is the absolute negation of that osmosis-like learning which is the very nature of young children, seems to evade both the instigators of such programmes, and the parents who patronise their schools.

If creative play is wiped from the curriculum at two years of age, what hope is there for the world?

After a near lifetime of involvement in early childhood education, I am forced to the conclusion that pendulum swings are usually started by professionals who, looking for new leads in the formulation of policy, can find no path except that which leads backwards. All too often, this means that years of stirring work by both academics and practitioners are wasted; thrown out, as of no consequence.

Thirty years ago and longer, books on play and its relationship to children's development and learning were welcomed, read avidly and used as manuals in setting up programmes in nursery schools. Interested parents threw their weight behind the movement (which had, of course, been run for generations by the children themselves). In those days, one's back yard was *meant* to contain boxes, planks, ropes, spades, old tyres and any other cast-off paraphernalia which might be turned to constructive use.

Remember *The Sign on Rosie's Door*, Maurice Sendak's wonderful gift to the world, with 'Alinda, the lovely lady singer' and Cha-Charoo, the - Arabian dancing girl? And Lenny, barging into the middle of the concert in his fireman's hat?

'Can I play too?' he asked. 'We're not playing,' Alinda shouted. 'It's a real show and you can't: 'Why?' 'Because'.

And the unquenchable Lenny getting into the act, anyway, and Rosie at last all alone and standing on a chair, in her hat with feathers and her high beds, singing her song uninterrupted, 'all the way to the end'.

These were the days when discarded curtains and bedspreads invariably found their way into young hands, cast-off hats and shoes and umbrellas turned into props for plays, and magic shows in the basement were features of family life. Play, beginning on the floor in babyhood, flowed on through childhood to that point in early adolescence when youngsters began to look outwards towards the real world - and even then, might be constantly dragged back by younger siblings and friends for guest appearances in the child world. In those forgotten days, games of huts or explorers or shops or outlaws might last for a week or more in the holidays. Mothers, late in the evening, could be heard shouting exasperated pleas which ultimately turned into angry threats, to induce their children in 'Come inside! It's *dark!*' To which 'It's not dark!' was the regular response, because it could not get dark - it must not! with the fun at full flow

I believe that the spirits and the bodies of these grubby, irreverent children were being well nourished by their self-directed rehearsals of what might lie ahead. I cringe to think of the impoverished backdrops against which many modern children, however well-equipped in a physical sense, prepare themselves for life.

There is, of course, a faction which will always say, 'Things haven't really changed. Society has always compared its young unfavourably with earlier generations.' I would like to be able to agree, but I cannot.

I think that history will show that a new social era began in the middle years of the twentieth century, and that it brought with it more fundamental change than had been seen since the onset of the Industrial Revolution. A profound aspect of this change lies in society's attitude to its children; the world is so complex, goes the reasoning, that children must not be sheltered; they must be prepared. That the very 'sheltering' which is abandoned in this cause might well have been one of the most effective fortifiers, one of the surest preparations for life, is not to be considered.

The same stern urge surely drives those well-meaning adults who ask in bookshops and libraries for a children's story on death or sibling rivalry, or a broken family (or leg) or sexual abuse or being overweight, or any one of a hundred afflictions - as if books were pills with specific ingredients which one may prescribe for emotional and intellectual ills. 'Better a good book on the wrong subject than a poor book on the right subject' I once said to an earnestly enquiring parent; but I don't think she knew what I was talking about.

Jill Paton Walsh puts it deftly: 'Though I think it is possible to learn from works of fiction,' she says, 'I don't think it's possible to teach from them... one does not rush to give *Anna Karenina* to friends who are committing adultery. Such impertinence is limited to dealings with children.'

We cannot set the clock back; these changes spring from ocean swells which we cannot hope to resist. But within our own orbit, we can surely work to promote those things which we know will strengthen children to face the new conditions of life they will encounter. And so I suggest that the best thing we can do for children in the last decade of the twentieth

century is to at least try to reinstate childhood - that time of openness, of endless interaction with what is, and of unremitting speculation about what *might be*. That period of tireless rehearsal of life as it *will* be, of bursts of unexplained energy and unexpected languor; those days when all the nerve ends seem to be stretched towards what is out there; when 'why?' and 'how?' and 'if...' are the most overused words in the language.

This, of course, requires us to look at ways and means. High-flown ideals are all very well, but of no use at all unless they inspire us to action which is likely to achieve a result.

It is self-evident that any programme will involve parents first of all, with teachers and librarians supporting (always) and leading (sometimes). For parents are the people with the real power. Real changes must be made in children's homes to be effective. One simply cannot legislate for that loving enlightenment which would have parents talking to their children, listening to them, playing with them, reading to them. We must reach parents, tell them, convince them. I do not believe they will fail to listen, if our message is urgent enough, our suggested remedies practical and positive enough. And our strongest message must be that books will make the difference.

And here, I wonder if even those of us whose lives are devoted to the use of, the propagation of, books and reading, fully understand the infinite value of the written word in people's lives. Even we, in these days of electric magic, may see books and reading as a private, rather self-indulgent passion of our own. Our very love of books, our sure knowledge that we personally rely upon them for sustenance which is not only intellectual, but emotional for enjoyment and relaxation as well as stimulation, may blind us to the true significance of the book in the total pattern of civilisation.

We are inclined to think of 'the book' and 'the computer' as two separate sometimes competing entities.

I suggest to you that if, by some unimaginable sleight of gigantic hand all the millions of libraries in the world, and all the computers, were banished beyond retrieval and we were obliged to start all over again, we would have to start with books. And our loss would be irreversible.

'Modern man' as the scientists still call the species, has been around for 200,000 years; possibly several times that length of time. For a mere 5,000 of those years have we been writing - but think what we have achieved! Would we be able to raise another Shakespeare, another Blake, another Dickens? Could we count on the powers-that-be even to be aware of what we had lost? 'Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?' asked T.S. Eliot. 'Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?' Is anyone aware of the world's dire need for 'wisdom' any longer? Is wisdom merely an outworn, unfashionable concept, superseded by qualities with names which derive from the new technologies? Certainly, competence in this field seems currently to be what the world admires.

Those of us who work in the field of books and reading must remind ourselves constantly of the indisputable worth of literacy as the basis of both intelligence and culture. And we should recognise that we are among the most favoured countries in the world. New Zealand's early teaching methods have been imported over recent years into both America and England. Dr Marie Clay's Reading Recovery Programme has received international recognition, and certainly ensures a high standard of reading attainment for most children in the early years.

This is not my area of concern; for schools, while they can produce these results, cannot turn children into responsive, lifelong readers. Only homes can do that, and I believe that homes are failing children. Librarians testify to the reduction in numbers of 'real' readers, and comment on the 'new'

style of book, with fewer pages and larger print, the need for a sensational theme, before popularity can be won. It is clear that language is in decline. Does this matter?

If we look at the history of humankind, it is immediately apparent that the quality which sets the human being apart from all other species, is the capacity to use language.

One might call language the raw material of thought. Only humankind reflects, deduces, weighs possibilities, observes the myriad ways in which varies outcome and, most importantly, devises codes of conduct designed to safeguard individual right. We can do these things because we love language.

Extraordinary steps have been made in this century to produce electronic devices which have relieved humankind of much tedious and repetitive work. That they have also relieved many millions of people of the work which previously earned their living for them is also true. But it is fashionable to believe that progress is always good. We are conditioned to accept this outcome as inevitable.

What we must *not* accept is that computers have more to offer children than books for this is what many millions of parents, themselves denied a bookish early life, believed - that access to electronic apparatus will take their children to 'the top', wherever that nebulous place may be located.

Their children may be being sold down the river into ignorance or insensitivity or both, but the propaganda is so persuasive that it is unquestioned. That the heresy is even invading schools and libraries - as it is - could sound the death knell of culture as earlier generations have known it, unless such people as ourselves do something about it. *Not* to banish those computers and videos which have legitimate roles in our children's

lives, but to keep technology in its rightful place, supporting, not replacing, books and reading.

Make no mistake; modern children need story as never before. We know that narrative is part of the very fabric of our being; that good and true books allow us to slip into another's skin in a hundred different places and times, and still remain ourselves; the same, but never the same. We know that authors of skill and integrity involve children's emotions honestly, without manipulation invoke their sense of the ridiculous, the wonderful, the fearful, with artistry and responsibility. We have only to observe a committed young reader - on the floor, in a chair, up a tree - to know that here is a child who is gone from us for a while, but will return revitalised.

Peter Dickinson, an outstanding British author who retired several years after a lifetime of teaching children, said:

'... all our children need to be surrounded by rich print worlds which places special obligations of course, upon schools and public libraries. They share a particular responsibility to demonstrate, through their book provision, that the adult world deeply cherishes its children.'

To cherish our children...

This is the commitment I hope we will all take with us from this conference. To cherish children in the way of Margaret Mahy and Peter Dickinson, of Maurice Sendak and Joan Aiken, of Shirley Hughes and Susan Cooper, Cynthia Voigt, Alan Ahlberg, Tessa Duder, Joy Cowley, Penelope Lively and Nina Bawden... and all the other good and true authors we rely on for support.

We each must do it in our own way; but we *must* do it. Children must be cherished so that their true strengths may flower and burgeon, in a world of desperate need. That way lies hope.

**T**

HE Margaret Mahy Lecture is awarded annually by the New Zealand Children's Book Foundation (a division of the New Zealand Book Council) to a person who has made an especially significant contribution to children's literature, publishing and literacy in New Zealand. It was awarded in 1992 to Dorothy Butler.

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