

Joy Cowley

Influences



THE 1993 MARGARET MAHY AWARD LECTURE

Joy Cowley, OBE, is one of our most prolific writers for young people. She has written novels and short stories for adults but her work for children is vast - picture books, short stories, novels and plays for adults to act for children, as well as more than 350 early readers and books for children with reading difficulties or with English as their second language.

In 1990 she was awarded the Commemoration Medal for services to New Zealand; in 1982 her first children's novel *The Silent One* was winner of the Children's Book of the Year Award; and in 1992 *Bow Down Shadrach* won the AIM Book of the Year Award.

Joy Cowley, with other established writers like Margaret Mahy and Ron Bacon, was at the forefront of the wave of authors producing real books with high interest level for teachers to use with young children. She spends a part of each year lecturing, running workshops and talking in schools and teacher colleges in other countries such as the United States where New Zealand methods are closely followed.

She believes the two crimes in early reading are giving children books that are dull and books that are difficult.

Joy Cowley lives in a remote bay in the Marlborough Sounds. She is married to Terry Coles and has two sons, two daughters and thirteen grandchildren and 11 cats.

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New Zealand Children's Book Foundation
Te Maataa Pukapuka Tamariki O Aotearoa

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The 1993 Margaret Mahy Award Lecture
presented by
Joy Cowley
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In the light of other writers' experience it would be easy for me to have a fatalistic attitude to my own writing and to say that this was my destiny. The stereotypical ingredients are there: the active imagination, the background of family poverty and violence and an escape from it into the world of books. The formula is familiar but I don't believe in pre-destination. Nor do I believe that there is any such thing as a 'bad' childhood experience. All experience carries the potential for good and the more traumatic an experience, the greater its transcendental potential. So this is a story of a childhood rich in living. Like all accounts of early years, it is also a story of influences. Daily I carry with me the people who have shaped what I am and however I regarded their influence at the time, I now value all as gift and would not be without any of it. In its telling, this story carries special thanks to adults everywhere who put down their burdens of busy-ness to make time to enjoy the company of a child. There can be no greater gift to a child, no greater investment in the future.

I was the eldest of a family of five - four girls and then, much later, a boy. Our parents suffered chronic impairment. Dad was a Scot from Ayr, who came out on the *Tainui* with his family in 1926. Partly blind, profoundly deaf and with a heart condition which kept him an invalid for most of his life, he seemed to us a frail man who might at any moment roll off the edge of the bed into a black well of death. Each time he had yet another bout of rheumatic fever we would be brought to the side of his bed to receive his last words. 'Look after ye're sisters. Be a good girl for ye're mither.' We all lived in preparation for his departure and yet when death finally came it took him by surprise, in the middle of a mouthful of breakfast after an early morning spent in the garden planting celery.

For all his sickness Dad had an outgoing personality, and I remember him as a lively and loving man, with a quick impatient mind. The frustrations wrought by his handicaps built up and regularly exploded, sometimes with shattering effect. Mum, though physically strong, suffered from schizophrenia which worsened as she grew older. While we understood our father's illness and could predict his mood swings, our mother's sickness went unrecognised. We didn't understand her obsessions or her sudden wild fury and we were mostly afraid of her. Our home was often a battleground but through it all, our parent's love for each other survived. It was a romantic Hollywood type of love, passionate, possessive, self-absorbed, ill-suited to the challenges of sickness, poverty and five children.

Dad had been born into the middle of six children. They were all very close and all noisy. My Scottish grandparents' house rocked with activity, people making things, doing things, playing instruments and singing, and always arguing with each other. Argument didn't necessarily mean conflict. It was a form of exercise which would cease as abruptly as it had begun. Laughter was equally loud.

Even when they were sharing some confidence, this family shouted. Maybe my father's deafness had created the habit. Whatever, their house was never still.

When I was about four years of age I was sitting in the wash-house next to the kitchen in my grandparents' house, playing with the shoe polish tins and brushes. In the kitchen my grandmother was cooking lunch and I could hear the comfortable sounds of her singing punctuated with the rattle of pots and dishes. 'Oh, ye'll tak' the high road and I'll tak' the low, and I'll be in Scotland afore y...!' My grandfather came past the wash-house door, heading her way. He was walking stealthily on his toes and when he saw me, he put his fingers

to his lips. A few seconds later the song in the kitchen was interrupted by a scream and a loud clatter. My grandfather ran back past the washhouse door, laughing, his hands over his head. Grandma ran after him, waving a saucepan and yelling, 'Ye dirr-ty beast! Ye dirr-ty beast!' At the age of four I assumed that Granddad had walked into the kitchen with dirty shoes and I was puzzled at the strength of Grandma's reaction.

Mum's family was mainly of Scandinavian descent, a quiet gentle people who called each other 'dear' and 'darling' and seemed to sit a lot, talking, drinking cups of tea, reading the Bible. My Swedish grandmother had a sweetness to her which we could almost taste. She hugged us, called us her 'precious', using the adjective as a noun, and talked about Jesus as though he lived next door.

Grandpa, her husband, was a big man who didn't much like small children, and I didn't come to know him until I was much older. Early childhood visits to my mother's family, were visits to a feminine world of hugs and kisses, soft voices and the perfume of Mum's two beautiful younger sisters, Phoebe and Beulah, who actually wore red nail polish, although Nanna would shake her head and say painting nails was worldly.

The eight in my mother's family were mainly fair: blondes or redheads with green or hazel eyes. But my mother and her oldest sister were dark and looked different from the others. When I was young I was told it was because our grandfather's mother was Spanish. We discover now this wasn't true. We are almost certain that our great-grandmother was Maori - which explains for me a lot of the information stored in my chromosomes.

Neither of my parent's families valued books. Dad's people were always too busy for reading. Mum's family considered that the only book to read was the Bible. Books were not a part of my pre-school years but drawing was,

and that was more bane than blessing for the adults around me. The writer's compulsion to capture and possess the world, found early expression in scribbles on any clean surface. Pencil drawings on brown wrapping paper, clear walls, furniture, rows of tiny faces on the newspaper which was our tablecloth, figures in licked indelible pencil on the sheets and pillowcases... I couldn't help myself. A blank surface triggered automatic behaviour. A coin or a fingernail would scratch back new paint. A stick drew pictures in sand. A piece of broken brick made giant families on a pavement of concrete path. The word graffiti is new. The reaction to it is old. My obsession received more punishment than reward.

Much of my pre-school years was spent between grandparents' houses, with the strongest early influence coming from my two grandmothers: one a short plump Scotswoman who was seldom quiet or still, who was always knitting, sewing, playing an accordion, dancing, arguing, always rushing at life; the other, a gentle, passive Swedish woman who cried at sad stories and saw the world as something to be suffered on the way to heaven. I felt secure and loved, with them both. Nanna was warm with hugs and kisses. Grandma was exciting and fun. There was an exquisite sense of well-being curled up in Nanna's lap and feeling the movement of the hairs in the mole on her cheek as she called me her 'precious' and her 'treasure'. Then there was going to the afternoon picture show with Grandma who carried into the darkness, brown paper-bags containing pig's trotters, doughnuts, custard squares, chocolate frogs filled with peppermint cream. I didn't understand the films and remember only a blue and white light flickering high up in front. Going to the pictures was a wonderful secret and sticky meal which my Grandma shared with me in the darkness, and always with the understanding, 'Ye'll no tell ye mither.'

When I was four and a half, the third girl in our family was born. My Scottish grandmother, aware of my parent's difficulties, wanted to officially adopt me, and because she was someone who didn't readily take 'no' for an answer, there was some friction between her and my mother. The effect of this was to greatly reduce the time spent with grandparents. Almost overnight, the security and status I had enjoyed, was gone and I had to learn to fit in with my own parents whose expectations of life and children were very different.

My parents moved house often in those early days. When I turned five we were living in a farm cottage in the Oharia valley at the back of Johnsonville. It was a while before we could move back into the city so that I could start school, and here there was a new change which required even greater adjustment. School. A large room of children I'd never seen before and a teacher who had her hair done in a bun at the back of her neck, just like my Swedish Nanna, and who looked about the same age. In fact she was nothing like my experience of grandmothers. There were no nice names, no fun, no comfort. She shouted at us and pulled our hair to make us sit up straight. She also had a long wooden ruler and when we didn't know our words, we got whacked round the legs.

Now, I had been eager to begin school. Everyone had told me that when I started school I'd learn to read. But that didn't happen. All we got were letters, black marks on paper, white dusty lines on the green chalkboard. They weren't pictures. They didn't mean anything. Oh, I didn't mind the sound games - hissing sssss for snake, or blowing imaginary smoke-rings with p-p-p-p-p for pipe, but the rest wasn't much fun. Indeed, it was nightmare. I seemed to be the slowest in the class.

Eventually I'd have to guess a word and likely as not I'd get it wrong. Whack! I'd try again. Whack!

Those early school days were not all fear-ridden. The classroom was full of wonderful drawing materials which we didn't have at home, blackboards, big sheets of paper, crayons, coloured chalk, jars of thick paint. And drawing was extended into modelling with plasticene, cutting coloured paper, threading large wooden beads. As well, I discovered for the first time in my life, the fun of the playground and friendship with children my own age. School would have been enjoyable, but for that teacher and her letters and ruler. Some of the children called her Mrs Hitler. I knew that wasn't her real name, but something to do with the war. There was war everywhere in those days. It leaked out of the radio with: 'This is the BBC London calling,' it filled up the centre of the *Free Lance* and *Weekly News* with pictures of dead and missing soldiers and was coiled along the beaches in rolls of barbed wire. War was all about blackouts and ration books and me saying that my aunties had taken me to the zoo when all the time we went to visit American soldiers in funny little houses. At school the boys drew pictures of planes like ducks dropping eggs in flight, and chanted, 'Heil Hitler, yah, yah, yah! What a naughty little man you are! You eat your porridge with a knife and fork. Heil Hitler, yah, yah, yah!' I thought this was funny to say but I didn't know what it had to do with our teacher.

I was one of three children still on Book One of Whitcombe and Tombes *Progressive Readers*. The others were all on Book Two or Book Three. Each morning I would wait with an ache in my stomach, for the Book One group to be called to the front of the class where the teacher sat, her ruler tapping the chair leg. Then it would be my turn and the awfulness made me feel I was going to vomit. I wanted so much to give

a right answer but I hadn't the faintest idea what the words were. Whack! went the ruler, and I would start to cry. Whack again to make me stop bawling and try again. One morning something happened. No, I didn't vomit. As the ruler descended, I wet my pants. I stood there, with everyone looking, as the hot urine ran down my legs, soaked my socks and shoes and then made a puddle on the wooden floor. I don't remember what the teacher said, but it was angry. She grabbed me by the hair, forced me down and rubbed my face in the puddle as though I were a kitten. Then she sent one of the bigger boys out to get the sawdust bucket.

I don't remember what happened after that. Nor can I recall how or when I learned to read. But I do know when I became a reader. I was in Standard I in a different school and with a different teacher who was handing out 'real' books. These were not reading texts with lists of words and sounds. They had exciting stories with pictures on every page. One of them was put on my desk. My first real book! It was the story of a duckling called PING and I read it, there and then, from cover to cover. I was so excited by the story I forgot I was a poor reader. I was immediately lost on the Yangtze River, far away from the classroom and my fear of words. That book was a doorway into another world and I had entered joyfully, meeting my own expectation that I would find excitement and adventure. When the story ended, I promptly returned to the first page and began again, making a new discovery. The story was exactly the same with the second reading! It hadn't changed as spoken stories did. I had discovered the constancy of print!

It seemed to me that after PING, everything changed and I became instantly, an avid and accomplished reader. I know it didn't happen like that. The instant change was in my attitude to reading. It was no longer an exercise without meaning. I had found that reading accessed story. As

often as I picked up a book, I could take that journey to other worlds and have safe adventures.

My appetite for story and my fascination with it, became limitless. When I was nine, my father took me to join the local library. The children's section was very small but a kindly librarian directed my rapacious appetite to certain authors in the adult section, Alexander Dumas, Jules Verne, Victor Hugo, the Bronte sisters, Dickens, Fennimore Cooper, R.M. Ballantyne, Mark Twain, R.L. Stevenson, Oscar Wilde. My parents who had been pleased with my progress, were now alarmed and my Scottish grandmother warned that so much reading would make me soft in the head.

I can still recall the smell of that small Otaki public library: sunwarmed wood, old books and dust combining to make an incense which I breathed in through my heart to my imagination. The library was all things to me, a sanctuary, a mine of treasure, a house of maps to secret lives in secret worlds. The library became my other home.

In my parents' house there were certain restrictions, mainly because reading got in the way of household duties, and books had to go underground. Well, under something, be it a tea-towel on the kitchen bench while I peeled the potatoes, or under the blankets at night read by a torch stolen from the kitchen. My father used to complain about the quality of Eveready batteries and once wrote to the manufacturer demanding a refund!

At school I developed a split focus, reading a book on my lap under the desk, with ears alert for the teacher's questions. As far as I was concerned, time without a book was time ill spent.

In my twelfth year, a family friend gave me her old bicycle and I rode to school with a book open on the handlebars. The inevitable happened.

One morning, in the middle of an engrossing story, I peddled into the back of a parked van. The bike and I both suffered some physical damage but that was not the end of the matter. The law became involved. At a general school assembly I appeared between the headmaster and a traffic officer, as an example of irresponsible road behaviour. My classmates were initially impressed but they soon lost interest when they realised that I wasn't going to prison. As for the headmaster's threats of what would happen if I did it again, they were a waste of breath. My parents couldn't afford to have the bike repaired and I resumed walking to school - with a book in my hands.

At this stage we were living in Foxton. I was in Standard 5 and at another turning point. If I became a reader in Standard 1, I became a writer in Standard 5, quite simply because a teacher told me I was good and I believed him.

If we pause here for a moment to reflect on our schooling, we may discover that we excelled at certain subjects not so much through natural ability but because we had a good relationship with our teacher. In the same way we may find that difficulty with a subject had a lot more to do with a difficult classroom situation than with our lack of skill. It's a sobering realisation, and one which places a huge responsibility on the teaching profession. I've put it to many people, including large groups of teachers and each time seen a hall of nodding heads. The influence of our teachers is much greater than we realise.

Well, here I was in Standard 5 and I had a teacher who seemed to actually like children. He saw them as people. He worked on the principle of praising achievement rather than punishing error, and the effect he had on a large unruly class was dramatic. Big 14-year-old boys with nicotine-stained fingers became enthusiastic about poetry. 'Oh young

Lochinvar has come out of the west, Through all the wide border his steed was the best,' or 'There was an ancient mariner and he stoppeth one of three. By thy long grey beard and glittering eye, wherefore stoppest thou me?' In the afternoons, as reward for the day, we were read books in serial form: R.M. Ballantyne's *Coral Island* and Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*. Shy children who were marginal readers became addicted to the thrill of story and wrote their own, page after page. The whole class came alive.

My imagination exploded that year. There is no other word for it. The long rambling stories inspired by my favourite authors were not labelled 'untidy' or 'erratic'. They got stamped 'good work' or even 'excellent'. My drawing was no longer an aberration. I was introduced to watercolour paints. I learned about washes and perspective. And I discovered poetry. I realised that people could arrange words in such a way that when you read them you went cold all over and vibrated like a violin. 'And ice mast-high came floating by, as green as emerald,' or 'In the harbours in the Islands of the Seven Seas, are the tiny white houses and the orange trees.'

That year I borrowed a class copy of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury of Verse* and began to learn poems so that I would always have them in my head. Most of those memorised are still with me. I also began to write verse, most of it hugely sentimental. For example:

'The Swagger's Song'

Trampin' down the dusty 'ighway,
Tramp, tramp, then tramp some more,
Feet ever movin; swag on me back,
Just keep on walkin' is me law.

I always foller that same ol' rule
Though it don't get me nowhere.
Sky above me, earth beneath.
Can't says I ever care.

Might stop at an 'ouse for a meal or two
But as for me bed,
It's just a hedge by the dusty road
With earth to piller me 'ead.

Don't have no money to spend,
Don't want to scrimp and save.
The yellow gorse, the wattle flowers
Is all the gold I have.

Never care 'bout being rich.
Can't says I ever will.
Been a swaggie all me life
And am a swaggie still.

In that it is easy to find an 11-year-old strongly influenced by the poem 'Meg Merrilees'.

In this same year and inspired by the same teacher, I began writing and drawing for the Children's Page of the Wellington *Southern Cross* newspaper. They had a reward system whereby a contributor accumulated 50 points and received a book prize. The books were classics: *Treasure Island*, *Oliver Twist*, *Wuthering Heights*. I now had the beginnings of my

own library. The first book to arrive was *Treasure Island*. It was beautifully bound but I was disappointed that it had no inscription on the inside leaf. How would people know it was a prize? To this day that old copy of *Treasure Island* has the endpaper inscribed in a childish scrawl: 'This book is awarded to Joy Summers for her excellent original work in the *Southern Cross* Children's Page.' I showed it off to my teacher who looked at the inscription and managed to say all the right things without a twitch.

I was now writing two kinds of prose and verse, the serious stuff for myself and light-hearted entertainment for the Children's Page, since this was usually the kind of material published. Here is a 'serious poem', a 12-year-old's view of some domestic problem. I no longer remember what caused the passionate cry.

I dreamed a dream and it was vain
As leaves strewn by the wind.
I dreamed a dream but once again
My foolish heart was blind.
Youth is blind it does not see
Beyond its wild desires.
I turn to face reality.
Hope flees. My dream, expires.

I continued to write this kind of poetry inspired by Palgrave's *Golden Treasury of Verse* but the rhyme I sent to the Children's Page were usually influenced by A.A. Milne or Edward Lear and sometimes took the shape of cautionary tales. The long poem about the boy called Willie who stole money from his mother's purse and spent it on lollies, was largely auto-

biographical, as was the ending. 'Willie stammered for words. He could find no excuse. And twas then that Mum's hairbrush came into use.'

Money, or the lack of it, was always a problem in our house. The invalid's pension never went far enough and our poor Mum was not a good manager. My sister Joan and I found ways of helping out and in return received a portion of what we earned, as pocket money. We gathered lupin seed, pine cones, mushrooms and blackberries in season, and sold them. My Scottish Grandma had taught me to crochet and I made lacy shawls which sold in the local bookshop. We went to the Foxton dump and gathered old sacks, bottles, copper, lead, aluminium, and brought it home to be sold as scrap. Some of the sacks, boiled up in the copper, became extra blankets for us on cold nights. Then I discovered a new way to make money. I was now in Standard 6 and found that many of my classmates found kissing very interesting. I drew pictures of men and women kissing, Hollywood style, and sold them for a penny each. Business was good - until some parent complained to the headmaster.

My sisters and I thought that kissing was stupid. When I was about eight my mother had told me that I must never never allow a boy to kiss me. 'Kissing boys is dirty!' she explained.

In my Standard 6 class there was a 14-year-old girl who suddenly left school and the town. Whispers went about the playground that she was going to have a baby and that her own father had got her pregnant.

To Joan and I this was clearly something very shocking but also incomprehensible. We were confused by conflicting information. We had always been told by our parents that angels brought the babies to the maternity home and yet our friends had insisted that babies grew inside mothers. We had watched Mum get fat before our sister Barbara came. We were sure it was a baby. But then Mum told us the angels were getting

ready to bring the baby down and sure enough, she picked it up at the maternity hospital the way she did before with our sister Heather. There was something wrong somewhere.

There came a day when I had to know. I asked her point blank. She took a deep breath and said yes, babies did grow inside their mother.

I asked her, 'How do they get in there?'

She looked as though she had a pain somewhere and for a while didn't answer.

Then she said, 'Well, you know what boys and girls do that's dirty.'

I nodded. Of course, I knew. It was kissing.

Mum said quickly, 'Well, that makes babies,' and she rushed away to do something in the kitchen.

I was numb with shock. Kissing made babies, and the girl at school had got a baby from her father! I told Joan who immediately saw the implications. After that, when we said goodnight to Dad, we hugged him and turned away our heads.

There was another large gap in my sexual knowledge which wasn't filled until I was nine. I didn't know the difference between girls and boys. At school boys had short hair and wore trousers. Girls had long hair and dresses or skirts. But what about babies? They all had short hair and all wore long dresses. I once asked my mother how the nurses knew which were the boy babies and which were the girls. 'Don't be rude!' she said.

Then, when I was nine and at an aunt's house, I found a children's encyclopaedia which had sepia-coloured photos of Greek statues. Oh! What was that! Instinct told me I had discovered something very interesting! It also told me that this discovery wasn't to be shared. The book

went under the mattress and was taken out frequently. I didn't realise my aunt knew until I heard her tell my mother what a good reader I had become. 'She's had her nose in an encyclopaedia all holidays.'

Four years later I stayed with another aunt in Auckland and visited the Auckland Museum. The most interesting exhibit was a nude bronze cherub halfway up the stairs. I must have walked those stairs about 20 times, waiting until no one was looking so that I could lean over and tweak the little bronze penis.

When my sisters and I were young we viewed our parents as we did the weather. We enjoyed the sunshine and took shelter as best we could from the storms which were frequent. The table would be turned over, windows broken, furniture smashed. Neighbours would call the police and a weary constable would pedal his bicycle yet again, to the Summers' house. But our parents' preoccupation with each other also gave us a freedom we might not have had in another family and we became resourceful at an early age, building a world where parents had no entry. This, of course, was the world of story which my sisters and I inhabited almost every evening. I was the story-teller. I regurgitated my reading in varied forms, usually as long serials which continued night after night. Joan, Heather and I would curl up in the one bed, filling the darkness with children of our own age who had extraordinary adventures from which they always emerged triumphant and unscathed. In the darkness girls like us swung on vines over jungle temples filled with giant pythons or they battled sharks and alligators with pocket knives. Bombs exploded. We escaped. Evil kings and queens locked us in dungeons. We found hidden trapdoors. These storytelling sessions went on for about five years and in them we remade our days.

If we found affirmation in these stories, support also came to us through our church community where kindly folk placed an umbrella over our parents' poverty. There were frequent gifts from people not much better off than ourselves, boxes of good used clothing or windfall apples, potatoes, shortbread or seed cake and occasionally the great treasure of a bag of old Readers Digests or *Captain Marvel* comics.

The church we attended was the Foxton Presbyterian, an old wooden building which always smelled of polish and flowers. We went two or three times on a Sunday, to Sunday School, morning service and then again on a Sunday evening. My fondness for church, like my passion for books, was considered unhealthy by my Scottish grandma who was no doubt always alert for signs of her daughter-in-law's illness in the children. For my part I don't know why I became so concerned with religion. It seemed to satisfy a need in the way a glass of cold water satisfied on a hot day, and there were no words to describe it. It was like poetry. I absorbed it and felt good inside.

I did have difficulty though, with God - or at least with the God my mother talked about. Jesus I could understand but God was like the subject of sex, fascinating, dreadful, mysterious and full of contradictions. My feelings about God were a mixture of attraction and fear - the same feelings that I had for my parents, although I didn't make that connection at the time. Another problem in my young religious beliefs was the way people talked about the devil. I couldn't bear to think of anyone being so hated and I used to pray secretly, hoping Mum would never find out, that God would love the devil and be nice to him.

We were expected to read the Bible right through every year. Some years I could just make it by skipping all the laws and the begat bits. Much of it I found dull but there were parts which were as alive as

Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* and these I read, reread and memorised - whole psalms and chapters from the St John Gospel. I could stand on Foxtton Beach in a nor'wester and recite: 'The wind bloweth where it listeth and thou hearest the sound thereof but knowest not whence it cometh or whither it goeth: so it is with everyone that is born of the Spirit.' I wouldn't know what the passage meant but would feel my skin turn cold and experience the wind blowing right through a great hole in my chest. That's how it was with poetry - and sometimes, that's how it was when I wrote stories.

For my secondary education I went daily from Foxtton to Palmerston North Girls' High School and here I discovered the group of strong women who were to be like a family of aunts for me over the next few years. Not all of them.

There were a couple of teachers who had difficulty with this clumsy untidy girl who didn't fit anywhere but there were others like my Standard 5 teacher who saw potential under the grime of poverty and who went out of their way to help me develop that potential.

The bus ride to Palmerston each day was a long one, leaving at 7.00am and arriving back at Foxtton at 5.00pm. This was my reading time, much of it spent on poetry. This was the space in which I engaged in my first love affair, a very real romance which lasted several years - with the poet John Keats. Even now, remembering that noise-filled bus on backcountry roads, brings back an ache under the ribs and a religious silence filled with the stillness of eternal words, 'My heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains my sense as though of hemlock I have drunk.'

There was almost no time for reading at home. My brother was born in my 3rd Form year. There were now five children. My parents' situation deteriorated. My father made a couple of suicide attempts. My mother believed that her mother-in-law was a witch who was casting evil spells

on all of us. We were always in debt. At weekends and holidays, Joan and I worked. We plucked chickens at a local poultry farm, did baby-sitting, housework, gardening. The so-called tomboy of the family, I had labouring jobs, cutting firewood, painting houses, helping to mix and lay concrete. I worked at the fish-and-chip grill room. I went from door to door selling anything which could be sold - lettuce seedlings, parsley, strings of flounder, blackberries. But at the end of my 5th Form year I had to break the news to my teachers that I would not be coming back to the 6th Form. My parents had said I must go out to work full-time.

What happened then, I do not know. But within a few days I was called to the office to talk with a couple of my teachers. They said they could arrange a regular part-time job for me, if my parents would agree. I would be the editor of the Children's Page of the *Palmerston North Daily Times*, work I could do after school. Of course, this meant that I would have to live in Palmerston North during the school week, but they could arrange board with the Baptist Minister and his wife who lived near the school. I would earn five pounds a week, two pounds for my board and three pounds for my parents.

As you may imagine, this was heady stuff for a 16-year-old. I became the NFC lady - NFC meaning News for Children - and I could run the page as I wished providing I got the copy to the print room by 5.00pm on a Friday. I had a small windowless office which smelled of printer's ink, and a typewriter on a table under a yellow light bulb. I was in heaven.

Every school afternoon of my 6th Form year, I played editor. What I was doing was an extension of the storytelling I did for my sisters. In the guise of a much-travelled middle-aged woman who had a badly behaved dog called Crackers, I wrote an editorial letter for each issue. Some weeks

Crackers took over the typewriter instead and told tales about me. Crackers and I were very popular. I organised writing and colouring-in competitions (my drawings, of course) and ran joke and riddle and 'believe it or not' columns. I published children's writing on a points system borrowed from my own days as contributor to the *Southern Cross*. I was not adverse to publishing my own work either, although conscience didn't allow me to add names or points to my writing.

Again, I was divided between two kinds of writing, the light-hearted stuff for the Children's Page and my own 'serious' work. Only one of my 6th Form poems has survived. It deals with the struggle I was experiencing in 'real' writing, that of the gap between inspiration and the words as they fell on paper. It is called 'Words':

Words are very difficult
To hold in the hand.
They leap up like electric fish
Or fall away, fine as sand,
Or else they melt on the palm
Like snowflakes made of air,
And when you open your fingers
You find there is nothing there.

Once I caught a word like a blossom
And held it for most of a day.
But when I looked at it that evening,
It had gone from gold to grey.
Its perfume had disappeared,
Its petals were limply spread.
I laid it on some paper,
Thinking that it was dead.

I looked again at the paper
In the early morning hours
And oh wonder! The page had sprouted
A whole bed of golden flowers!

At the end of the year I was offered full employment with the *Manawatu Daily Times*. My parents would not consider it. Journalists were a notorious lot - free-thinkers, communists, even atheists - and I had already been too much under their influence. No, I was to have a good steady job back in my home town. They apprenticed me to the local pharmacist, work that seemed remote from creative writing at the time. But pharmacy did teach me a certain discipline in thinking, which was to help me as a writer later on.

After I left school, I didn't write anything for four years - mainly because the influences had gone, the teachers who had encouraged me, the librarian who put aside special books, the reporters who sat on my desk and treated me as an equal. They weren't there. I had no one to write for. But that changed when I moved to Palmerston North and joined a writers' group. I went hesitantly to one of the meetings to honour a promise I had made to my 6th Form English teacher, that I would continue to write stories. But in the company of other writers I surprised myself with a volcanic eruption of creative energy. It was then I discovered that if I didn't have someone to write for, there was no inspiration. Writing was an act of love.

We were a small group - Dell Adsett, Stanley Roche, Alice Glenday, Kathleen Mayson, Wendy Simons, Neva Clarke, Dorothea Joblin. Again, our meetings were like the storytelling sessions of my childhood but moved into another gear. We sold stories to periodicals - the *Listener*,

mainly - but we wrote them for each other, sharing in them the parables of our lives.

Yet there is more to creative writing than communication. Here are some lines which I wrote after reading Margaret Mahy's book *Memory*. I've called this piece 'The Storyteller' and it describes how I feel about the stories I've received from that great army of authors who go right back to Kurt Flack and his book *Ping*.

The storyteller is a thief,
stealing stars at night
and hammering them into dishes
for bread and butter days.

The storyteller is a magician,
making doors that are never
either open or shut,
and windows you can put to your eye
to see over horizons.

The storyteller is a seamstress,
stitching the ordinary things of earth
to make wondrous garments
for long and difficult journies.

The storyteller is a liberator,
knocking down walls
with the thrust of a pen
and wrenching wide open
seed, egg, stone, brick, word,
to set truth free

There is nothing particular about being a writer. We all have stories to tell, are all storytellers. Each of us gives account of our lives in story form, directly or in the poet's parable, and in doing so we make personal growth, becoming gift to each other. Collectively, our story establishes future herstory and history and makes up the stuff of civilization.



THE 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 1993 to Joy Cowley.

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