

Creeks and Kitchens

*Margaret Mahy Lecture – by Maurice Gee
23rd of March 2002*



I have an inability to generalise and theorise, which I call novelists' disease. So this talk will be anecdotal, autobiographical, discursive, particular, and sometimes confessional. You will find that annoying little pronoun 'I' hopping about like a flea. I apologise in advance.

I use a number of commonplace metaphors about the writing of stories - the stream one follows, with a new world opening up at every turning; the ship that makes a voyage of discovery; the mountain one climbs, with great pain, to see the wonderful view from the top; the whole one digs to find the treasure buried deep in the ground. These reveal the central truth, that what stories do is discover and uncover, but I like most about them is that they are active even, dynamic. They underline what all writers know: storytelling is an energetic trade, even though one sits in a chair all day, putting words on a page.

I've also got a couple of words, common words, but far from commonplace, that have a special potency because of where they come from. I'm sure we all have these, from deep in our past, from our childhood. These words are almost always nouns. There's a kind of magic in naming. When humans developed speech and fitted a particular sound to a physical thing it must have been an action of great power - the bringing of objects under the control of the mind. It can still be like that - and I think poets know it better than prose writers. The simple naming of things in poems can be hugely powerful – tree, rock, hand, eye. When properly used these become the first tree, the first rock, the only hand, the only eye. And then of course, these nouns can take on all sorts of private associations and for the individual becoming hugely suggestive, so that a word that makes one person cry will make another laugh.

My special nouns are 'creek' and 'kitchen'. Two very ordinary words but for me they are the most suggestive in the language and at certain times, when I'm properly receptive, they can start me on all sorts of journeys. Creek and kitchen are the poles that I moved between for most of my childhood.

I grew up west of Auckland, in Henderson, which is a suburb now, part of the great Auckland sprawl. But in the 1930s and 40s it was a country town, cut off by farms from the city. There was a railway station, a boarding house, a blacksmith shop, a grocer, a butcher, a baker, and not much more. Four churches, a little brick jam factory, lots of orchards, Corban's winery, and some smaller Dalmatian ones, producing mostly sherry and port, which was sold, after 1941, to US servicemen who came out west in jeeps. That was Henderson. But, most importantly for me, it had a creek, and on that creek I seem to have spent most of my boyhood. Today, if I close my eyes, I can recreate it pool by pool for a couple of miles of its length. It was one of those slow moving deep green creeks with bottomless pools. I never dive deep and when I swam across I went fast, frightened of what might be lurking down on the bottom. We fished for eels, we sailed tin canoes, we explored. One day I saw a man die there, lying on a blanket while his girlfriend knelt beside him and cried. He had dived into shallow water and broken his neck. No one else was there, just me, aged 9 and the girl and the man. Everyone else had gone for help. So - the creek was a place for games and adventure, but it was also the dangerous place, where people might die.

But then I could run home, up past the swamp, through the abandoned orchard, past the draught horses in their paddock, along our street, and come to that other place, kitchen. And there was mum lifting the lid of the pot to stir the stew, feeding another piece of tea tree into the stove, turning Dad's work socks on the drying rack - and that was the safe place, that was where harm could never come.

When someone says the word 'kitchen' I get an instant flash of that room, with its black stove and drying rack, its brown lino, its worn mat and wooden table, the Philco radio on the mantelpiece. And 'creek' works in a similar way. These are things that can start me writing, they have memory attached to them and, in a more shadowy way, values and meanings. They're part of an emotional and moral universe, they're stopping places and they're starting places. They underline for me the essential duality that every writer must know: familiarity/ mystery, safety/ danger, dark/ light, good/ evil. So here are two words, bits of language that, for me, are enormously powerful and suggestive.

Now I mentioned my mother stirring the stew, but please don't think kitchen tasks were all that she could do. I can remember getting out of bed late at night and creeping out to the kitchen and finding her sitting in a chair with her feet in the oven to get the last warmth from the stove,

writing a poem or story in an exercise book. It wouldn't surprise me to learn that hundreds of New Zealand woman behaved like that, after their husbands and children had gone to bed.

Let me talk a little about family life and stories and reading. I must have heard the old folk and fairy tales because I was familiar with them from an early age and I probably took some pleasure from them, although I can't remember it. What I remember better is spoken tales and these were not made-up, these were real. Family duties took all the time and energy my mother needed to turn herself into a really good writer. She wrote stories for a magazine called *The Mirror*, until the editor told her she must put in more romance and happier endings. And later in her life, Frank Sargeson included one of her stories in a New Zealand anthology he compiled. But when my brothers and I were young she turned her creative energy into recreative, to the telling of fireside stories about her life as a girl in Christchurch and California. She told us about growing up at the tail end of a family of fourteen children, with a father who was always in trouble for his unorthodox religious and political beliefs. She told us how, at the age of seven, she hid her dolls' tea set in the willows by the river the night before the family sailed for America - and about being poor in California, in a suburb where other people had swimming pools and the children took chicken legs and bunches of grapes to school for lunch. She told us about her fear of the striped snakes that wrestled under the leaves in the gutters of the new land, and how one of her brothers learnt to catch them and hold them up by the tail. Then the family sailed back home to New Zealand late in 1917, and her father set off on an anti-war lecture tour and was jailed for seditious utterance.

Then Dad chimed in, telling us how he helped build all the bridges on the road between Te Puke and Katikati, how he dived all day at the wharf for a sunken barge load of Jarra, and went off to the town hall that night and knocked his opponent out in the first round. Mum told us about the depression, and about a moonlight flit, with babies wrapped in blankets, from a tin shed where they could not pay the rent, about reaching Henderson, where they lived in a ramshackle two-roomed house, and she did her cooking outside, on a brick fireplace cut into the bank and covered with a sheet of corrugated iron; and Dad again, riding his bike, with his tool on the handlebars, after timber trucks in the hope of getting a day's work on the jobs where they had unloaded. The drivers slowed down to let him keep up, my parents mythologised themselves for me, and the mythologised a historical time. I saw the depression as a hairy beast devouring people dash a hairy beast that in a different shape is around today. So these stories were immensely satisfying and much

more memorable than the books I read. They turned out to be valuable and another way, providing me with material, with images, with starting places, for the whole of my writing life. Does that sort of thing still go on - the family story - or has television pushed it out of the way?

There was verse too - spoken verse people would recite. An old lady down the road needed little encouragement to do her party piece, a poem called *Danson Wine*, in which, with great artistry, she got progressively drunker. And Dad knew a number of comic poems. The one I remember best began: 'When caveman Og went out to woo, he took his brontosaurus too.....'. It must have been a bit improper because mum always stopped him after a few lines.

Her contribution was a long poem for children that she wrote herself. It's called *Mihi and the last of the Moas*, with the subtitle, 'the adventures of Mihi, a little Māori boy, with the very last of the moas.' This poem thrilled my brothers and me, we were so delighted at mum's cleverness in writing it. I could recite large chunks when I was eight or nine, but today I can only come up with the first four lines:

*To begin where it started one warm summer night,
New Zealand was Maoriland then,
No white man had come with his muskets and drum,
To fight with the brown-skinned men.*

My mother found a publisher for this poem after many years, in 1943. Here's the book, with the jacket illustration painted by her. The light on the stick is made by friendly glow-worms. She waited anxiously for reviews and at last one came, in the *Listener*. It was one line, reading 'The printers have done their work well.' I still haven't forgotten the *Listener* for that piece of cruelty. And her snooty schoolteacher brother threw aside the copy she gave him, with the comment "Doggerel". But I learned from this poem, the first I can remember hearing, that words can rhyme, that language can have rhythm, and that a story can be carried along and made more enjoyable by them. I learned from Mihi that language was alive.

Our first school readers were the *Milly-Molly-Mandy* books - stories about a little girl living in an English village, going to the village school, walking home past thatched cottages and through English lanes where bluebells and primroses flowered on the banks. The pleasure I got from them was less from story than from being able to read. And lying around at home was something else English - a tattered old *Chums* annual

dating from the years of the First World War. I read it from cover to cover, following the serials. One was about a tank crew. You could see where they had gone - I quote – ‘from the trail of squashed Germans’. Another called *With Haig on the Somme*, was the story of soldier brothers. ‘Don't worry’, said one to the other, returning from a bayonet attack, ‘this is not my blood, it's German gore’. I read these bits out to my mother, with that dreadful glee children can take in such things -and remember her horrified response, a lesson that stays with me still. That powerful word ‘gore’ that retains a resonance. But my favourite book, the one that really hangs on, was a collection of Robin Hood stories. I must have read it a dozen times, and was thrilled every time. Story, heroic action, comradeship, those were the things. And robbing from the rich to give to the poor, that really appealed to a boy growing up in a family leaning strenuously to the left. I find it impossible even now to be critical of this stuff. Robin Hood and Little John and Mutch the Miller's Son are good friends still (not Friar tuck so much - we weren't really in favour of religion in my family). So this was more than story, this was an underpinning, a confirmation, a firming up of things. I'm sure that was part of the book's attraction.

I won a Temperance Essay prize and took my winner's chit to the Presbyterian Bookroom in Auckland, where I disappointed the lady in charge by choosing an adventure book about knights in armour rather than the one about missionaries she wanted me to take. No great books came into my life, no *Alice in Wonderland*, no *Water Babies*. The library at Henderson School was a dozen books locked in a cupboard. You had to ask the teacher for the key. (I'll digress to say that when one of our daughters was eight or nine and not enjoying reading very much, we gave her *Alice in Wonderland*. She was a conscientious child and worked her way through it. She announced the end of every chapter and when she reached the end of the book she went away and got a ruler and measured it and told us it was three centimetres thick. A few weeks later a school friend lent her Enid Blyton's *The Naughtiest Girl in the School*, and she was away on a reading career that has never stopped).

At secondary school a proper library was thrown open to me at last and I embarked on a great orgy of reading, all of it for story and adventure, not for improvement. I read books by Rafael Sabbatini and Jeffrey Farnol and Conan Doyle and P.C. Wren. I read *Tarzan* books and *Scarlet Pimpernel* books. But what I really preferred was Westerns, and Zane Grey above all. I had a competition with a classmate in my third form year to see who could read most Zane Greys, and reached a total of 45.

He's actually quite a bad writer. I tried to read one of his novels recently and couldn't manage more than half a dozen pages. All the same Zane Grey knew a thing or two. He knew the country of prairies and sagebrush and dry gulches. He knew about work, about herding cattle. And he seemed to know about being hunted. I like to believe that I learned from him that we are essentially alone, that we are in some sense fugitive. Perhaps this is hindsight - but maybe Grey confirmed for me something I'd already begun to find for myself. Certainly what I remember best from those 45 novels is the picture of the sweat-stained man on the dusty horse, galloping into the badlands with the posse at his heels. I've always been grateful to Zane Grey for that. (But at 14 I was even more grateful for the thoroughly enjoyable endings, where the hero faced the villain and beat him to the draw and got the girl). Bad novels yes, formulaic novels, but in the formula something that may be seen as truth - within a narrow focused admittedly.

Now the focus widens. I reach the great reading experience of my life. I made friends with an old man living down the street and would visit him on a Sunday afternoon to play a game of draughts. At the end of it, as a way of thanking me, he would lend me a book. But he had no 'rubbish'. He only had 'good books'. One day he put *Oliver Twist*, into my hands; and so, at sixteen, I entered that huge and violent and tragic and heroic and comic and swarming world of the imagination, the Dickens world, and I haven't come out of it since. I swallowed all the novels in one barbaric gulp - *Pickwick Papers* to *Edwin Drood* - and I think I can truly say that my life was changed.

Apart from entertaining me, what did Dickens do? I don't want to inflate it, but I can say that he widened my view of human nature and human possibility, on the dark side and on the light side. He put me into a moral universe. He taught me about good and evil. He broadened my sympathies and enlarged my understanding in all sorts of ways, he gave my imagination or stretching greater than any it had had before or has had since. I think he got me ready to be a writer myself.

And, over many years, and through a hard apprenticeship, I became one.

I'm going to jump ahead now, leave out my adult novels, and pick the story up in my early 40s, when I began to think about writing for children. I turned towards it for several reasons. It was 1974 and it seemed to me that if I didn't soon make the attempt to become a professional full-time

writer my chance would be lost. I'd published a dozen short stories and three novels but I knew I had many more inside me – stories of all sorts.

I was living in Mewburn Avenue, over beyond Mt Eden Road, and working here, at what was then called Auckland Teachers' College, in the library. My wife and I worked out what we called our five year plan - which was when our youngest daughter turned five I'd give up work, we'd shift to Nelson, live as cheaply as we could with her working part time and I would write. In the meantime I would try to widen my range and try to be more commercial. That meant doing television scripts. It also meant writing for children. I had the belief, based on no research, that children's writers earned more than adult writers. My wife reminds me that I also wanted to see if I could write a book in three months.

All this sounds cynical and dubious. In fact, I had another ambition. I wanted to write something my two young daughters would enjoy reading when they were older.

My problem was I didn't have any ideas. I wanted to get away from the explorations of guilt and delving into psyches I'd been doing in my writing for adults. I wanted, for a time, to write horizontally rather than vertically - do open-cast mining, if I can put it another way, rather than deep-shaft mining. For that reason, I decided to write what I call fantasy/adventure - put the emphasis on movement, develop narrative pace, tell a story as story pure and simple. I wanted settings New Zealand children would recognise, with New Zealand the most important place in the world, as it is for the children who live here. I wanted to put Auckland's volcanic cones and the North Shore beaches. And I would have children with red hair because that's what my redheaded daughters asked me for. But, as I said, I had no good ideas.

Then two things fitted together. A woman I worked with gave me Alan Garner's *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* to read (she only read children's novels, she told me, because adult novels were so unpleasant), and I thought I would like to attempt what Garner manages so brilliantly in that book: place the child characters in dreadful danger from some supernatural or monstrous thing, while leaving them in their natural everyday world with no way of making adults see the danger. It's a situation that generates enormous tension, and generates story endlessly.

Shortly after reading that book. I was walking up to work on a grey misty morning and saw Mount Eden sink down and hide itself behind the

houses. Then, at the end of the street, it suddenly sprang up and loomed over me, and I thought I wonder what was hiding under there. So I had my idea.

I started *Under the Mountain* that night - and finished it in three months. A sad thing then: nobody wanted to publish it. I sent it round – back it came, time after time so I put it away. Margarita and I lost patience and turned our five year plan into a three year one. We left for Nelson, where I built a little room under the house we bought above the Maitai River and sat down to write *Plumb*, which I'd been saving myself up for, storing energy for. I forgot about writing for children and didn't look at *Under the Mountain* again until *Plumb* was finished. I saw then that it had possibilities, did some repair work and showed it to Chris Cole Catley. Chris offered to publish it, but then, very generously stood aside when Oxford University Press showed interest (I think they'd seen it before and turned it down). Bridget Williams was the editor. She said yes, but there were things I must do. I'll tell you about only one of them. The story began with the red-headed twins, Rachel and Theo, walking in a Takapuna Street. Suddenly they hear a mysterious voice in their heads. It comes from a strange old man on the other side of the street and it says, Follow me children. So they follow him, under a strange compulsion. He reaches his house, opens the door, and they go in. The door closes.

No, no, no, Bridget said. You can't have children following a strange man home and going into his house, it's dangerous. That was my first practical lesson in writing for children. I had to put in a prologue, establishing the old man as benign and having Rachel and Theo recognise him from an earlier encounter, when they were lost in the bush and he saved them. So I learned that children readers are vulnerable in ways that adults are not.

There's an uncorrected mistake in the book - my wife told me to change it, but I wouldn't listen. It comes from a bit of moralising. It had seemed to me, on no good evidence - because I wasn't widely read in children's literature - that the children in adventure and fantasy stories win their victories too easily. They go through dreadful danger, emerge unscathed and unchanged, and presumably get on with their lives. I wanted to say that there's a price to pay - and the price and *Under the Mountain* is the death of Ricky, a likeable teenage boy. I've had many letters about the book over the years and time and again I find the children saying, Why does Ricky have to die? There's no answer except that the author decided it was lesson time. I'd overlooked completely that many children

would identify with Ricky. I know now that you can't have lessons as hard as his death suddenly appear in stories that proceed on a different set of assumptions - that's to say, the fantasy/ adventures set of assumptions. It's a breaking of the covenant that exists between writer and reader. If I were writing *Under the Mountain* today I'd save Ricky.

Four more fantasy novels followed. *The World Around the Corner* is for younger children, a gentler tale. I wrote it quickly and easily and with great enjoyment – and, digressing again, I'll use this occasion to correct a misunderstanding. About fifteen years ago, I made myself unpopular by saying (in fact, seeming to say) that writing for children is easier than writing for adults. One librarian was so incensed that she threatened not to stock my books any more. What I actually said, though, was that, for me, doing the sort of writing I was doing for children was easier than doing the sort of writing I had been doing for adults. I was not generalising, I was saying how things were for me. That interview came while I was in the middle of the *O* trilogy: *The Halfmen of O*, *The Priests of Ferris* and *Motherstone* - writing that was much easier than the *Plumb* trilogy for example, as well as being more enjoyable.

There are lessons in those books, if the child readers can find them - about the pollution and the degradation of the environment and of natural things, about the danger of nuclear weapons, about the abuse of political power, and so on, but I don't mind if they're not recognised, if the books simply give pleasure as stories. They're full of chase and narrow escape, of dizzy climbs up the sides of cliffs, of creeping in dark places, of daring rescues, of magic, of strange beings, of desert landscapes, forest landscapes, mountain landscapes. I loved writing them. But there's a danger in this sort of writing - the danger of over-invention, of making too much happen and too much that's strange. The anchoring of such stories is the challenge. They proceed by invention, they're anchored by imagination, the thing that produces recognition in the reader as his or her world connects with the invented world. That often comes in quiet moments, in what the characters think or feel, where the writer's language has to be exact and yet reverberative. Or it can come in something down to earth. For example, Jimmy Jaspers using his axeman skills, his A&P Show underhand-chop skills, to chop down the bridge: another narrow escape, but one, I'd suggest, that connects with a familiar world and employs more than invention.

It was while writing *The Halfman of O* that I had another listen about the unspoken agreement that exists between writer and child reader in books of that sort. The adult character, transported through to the world

of O with the children, Susan and Nick, is Jimmy Jaspers, a cunning, dirty, evil-natured, evil-spoken old man, who becomes, by semi-magical means, pretty much a good guy – although remaining cunning and dirty.

About halfway through, the story didn't need Jimmy anymore, so I thought I'd use him to get rid of the secondary villain. I had them fight on the edge of a cliff and they both fall over - end of Jimmy. I was reading each chapter to my daughter's as I finished it, and they screamed in unison, 'No, no, you can't kill Jimmy.' They were distressed. So I rewrote the chapter and saved him, and made my daughters happy again. They had, though I didn't know it at the time, done me a huge favour. I wouldn't have been able to write the two sequels without Jimmy Jaspers to help things along.

Now I'll finish by talking about the five children's novels I've written since those fantasy ones. While several of them can be described as thrillers, or even psychological thrillers, I don't think of them as being in that genre because there's a much fuller development of character in them, in the adult characters and the child alike. They're meant to involve on a deeper level.

The first of them, *The Fire-raiser*, had a strange beginning. In 1978 I wrote a history of Nelson Central School for its centenary and while researching it I came across 2 interesting characters: a gifted headmaster, F.G. Gibbs, who was interested in absolutely everything - science, music, drama, history, sport, mountaineering, the list could go on - and who had a great talent for communicating these interests to children. For example, he kept an articulated skeleton in his cupboard and would bring it out for anatomy lessons. The second person was an arsonist who burned down a dozen or so buildings around Nelson and in the 1890s, including the new main building of the school whose history I was writing, the day before it was due to open. He claimed that he was making work for the unemployed. Shortly after completing the history, I was asked to write a five part television serial for children and I saw that I could use these two men (and the skeleton too), put them in opposition to each other, and add a number of children who would discover the fire-raiser's identity. I also decided to use the text of a primary school patriotic pageant from the First World War that I'd found in the library here and made a copy of, so I set the story at that time. When the scripts were written I turned them into a novel that came out as the serial was screened.

I don't think of *The Fire-raiser* as just a thriller because I became so interested in the children as I wrote. Nor did I make it a simple tale of black and white. The villain is more than a villain, he's thoroughly human, and in the end pathetic - rather like Herbert Muskie in *The Fat Man*. Later on, my interest in the children, in their relationships with each other, and my wondering about the effect their frightening adventures would have on them, led me to take them up a second time, with names changed, put them through their adventures again in an adult novel, and then go on to describe their lives up to the then present day – a novel called *Prowlers*, which remains my favourite among my adult novels. I found that there were things I had done in the children's novels that I couldn't do in the adult one, some to do with the sort of heroics allowable, some to the speed of events. I was really pleased though to know what became of those children as they grew up. Later on, I did the same sort of thing with *Hostel Girl* and *Ellie and the Shadow Man*. But I didn't do it to breakdown the barrier between children's fiction and adult fiction, as one reviewer suggested, I did it because I like the children I'd invented and wanted to find out what sort of adults they'd grow into.

This further development doesn't negate the requirement that the lives of children in fiction be treated as complete. This is what these kids have got - their lives up to that point. There can be no short-changing, and no superior understanding on display - lessons I think I had learned by the time I came to write the last five books.

Each has some element in it of either the adventure story or the thriller, yet each can be described as a 'proper' novel. The best I can do is return to that earlier metaphor: while writing them I was engaged, to some extent, in deep-shaft mining not the open-cast mining.

I've mentioned *The Fire-raiser*. The one that followed was *The Champion*. There are things in it from my own boyhood – creek and kitchen and mangrove swamp, poetry-writing mum, a little town with barber shop and billiard room, Yanks and Jeeps handing out packets of gum. What is new is the picture of a boy growing up, through friendship and loyalty and something like love. Here, for the first time in my children's fiction, is a fully rounded child character. It wasn't an easy book to write, but it was a deeply satisfying one.

So was *Orchard Street*. My town again, if not quite my childhood times. But definitely my street, and the people of my street: the man in the house opposite, who kept a huge cage full of budgies and built giant kites; the one next door to him who invented new flowers by wiring bits

of this one to bits of that; The radiant living woman who fed us nuts and raisin at her son's birthday party; the old man down the street (my Dickens man) who died from grief shortly after his little dog was run over by a car. There was also the Catholic school behind our house, where we used to hide in the pine trees and spy on those strange creatures, the nuns, as they walked on the gravel paths between the convent and the church. There was the local dance and adolescent love, and a police raid on the local bookmaker. (My father's two best friends were the local bookmakers.) There was the 1951 waterfront lockout. And there was the revolver stolen from the bank and put to sudden horrifying use.

I've heard people say it couldn't happen, boys guarding banks. Well, my young brother became a bank Junior in 1949, aged sixteen, and had to take his turn staying on the premises at night, with a loaded revolver in the bedside draw. At eighteen he was sent out to do the agencies, with a bag of money on the seat of the car and the revolver in the glove box. The chief teller used to take him down to the creek, tack a piece of cardboard on a tree and give him target practise. I think these bits of social history should be remembered. A bank Junior shot and killed his friend shortly after that, mistaking him for a burglar as he climbed in the window.

I won't say anything about the most recent book, *Hostel Girl*, perhaps best described as a young adult thriller - except to say that the sittings are authentic - YWCA, hostel, private girls' school etc, in the Hutt Valley in the 1950s. I had my information from an impeccable source.

You'll have noticed I've left *The Fat Man* till last. I don't want to revive arguments. I continue to be happy with the book, proud of the book and I do want to say several things about it. First though I'll tell you where it came from. When I was about six years old, in the late 1930s, my mother took her three sons walking by the creek. We came round a bend and found a naked swagman standing waist-deep in a pool, washing himself with a bit of yellow soap. My mother turned us round and went back. But I've never forgotten the swagman's black stare, the way our eyes locked as he stood waiting to see what we would do. Another memory, a more troubling one: there was a fat boy in my standard five class. I don't know what his first name was, he was simply known amongst us as Fatty. One day a group of us found him looking through a hole in the wall of the girls' changing shed down at Falls Park. It was something we all wanted to do but hadn't had the courage for. So we got moralistic instead and roughed him up, bullied him, until an adult came along and stopped us. It's a memory that even today causes me deep

shame. Do you remember the episode of the fat boy and Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective*? It hits me like that.

I was looking round for a book to write and these two things came together. The man in the creek, the fat boy being bullied - and they worked on each other until there was a ground prepared from which a story might grow. I wrote the book with full commitment. It's fully imagined. I don't think you'll find a page in it that is merely invented. I knew that it might be judged as unpleasant and disturbing, but believed that this would be a misjudgement if the book was seen as a whole. I thought of it as being for older children, even a young adult book, and was surprised to find it entered into the junior section in the book awards. But even for the younger reader, and there have been many, it seems to provide a positive reading experience, and to find them not unready.

Before going on to that, I'll comment briefly about the charge of unpleasant language and unpleasant image that has been laid against the book. A woman down south asked in a letter to the paper why everything had to be so ugly. Why, she said is the man's hair pasted to his chest like slime? Why when he blows creek water from his mouth, why must it be like a draught horse peeing? My answer is, I lived by a creek for the whole of my boyhood and saw people swimming in it every day in summer and I know what wet black hair looks like on a white chest; and every day of my life back then I passed a paddock with two draught horses in it. The likenesses are not ones I invented at sixty, they're ones I saw for myself at six. I can only suppose that the letter writer was brought up differently and became just too 'nice' to see.

The book is imaginatively true, and not without hope. There are, though, hard things in it. Do you remember Graham Greene writing about his boyhood reading of *The Viper of Milan*? 'Why did it creep in and colour and explain the terrible living world of the stone stairs and there never quiet dormitory?' And later, about Visconti, the villain of that book, he says - 'I had watched him pass by many a time in his black Sunday suit smelling of mothballs'. For some children there will be colourings, explanations, recognitions of that kind in *The Fat Man*. But that is far from being the whole 'story' - and we must think of that 'story' which gives control by holding everything inside a structure. The terrible event does not exist in isolation but takes its place within the sequence of events that continues to move and grow, that continues to answer the question, 'what happens next?', and that is completed in a way that satisfies. The fat man, Herbert Muskie, is frightening alright, but he's

held in control, he's inside a story that carries on answering the question and reaches an end that should make the reader give a sigh of satisfaction and say, Yes that's right.

As for the boy, Colin Potter, a thing happens to him that happens to many, probably to most children. There's a poem by Dan Davin that he uses as an epigraph to his short story collection, *The Gorse Blooms Pale*. Two of the lines read: 'My father was a hero once, Now he is a man.' That happened to me – twice, in fact - with my jaw-punching father and my jailbird grandfather. It happens to Colin Potter in *The Fat Man*. His father stops being a hero and becomes a man. His mother too becomes more real, becomes fallible. I imagine that to ten, twelve, fifteen-year-old readers that can be very satisfying.

I thank you for this award. I'm delighted to receive it, even more so because it has Margaret Mahy's name attached to it.