

2025 Storylines Betty Gilderdale Award Lecture by Bob Docherty

Presented on 16 November 2025 at Aranui Library, Aranui, Christchurch.



FROM PAGE TO IMAGINATION: A LIFE SHAPED BY CHILDRENS BOOKS

When I was informed that I had been awarded the Storylines Betty Gilderdale award, I was stunned. It never occurred to me that I was in the running for it. The first thing I did was look up all previous winners, and it is an honour to join their ranks.

I have always loved reading and to be given the chance to influence children was to me a privilege. I was also delighted when I knew that the presentation was to be made in the Aranui Library because Aranui is probably the most multi lingual suburb in Christchurch with English, Māori and Pasifika languages all featuring.

One of the highlights of my 35 year involvement in children's literature has been the rise of bilingual picture books and early readers that give children vocabulary, and appreciation of their native language and the values of their own culture. I was moved by the respect for old people shown in the books.

When I came into Children's literature with the National Library in 1990 the big issues were, boys and reading, how to teach reading, was phonics the best way? And the impact of technology. I think they are all still around. As I learned the ropes and read widely in Children's literature a truism struck me that is still true today.

A child that doesn't read is no better off than a child who can't read.

I concerned myself with finding what the factors for a good reading culture were and I isolated four. Firstly there was the home.

If the parents or care givers were readers and respected reading then children would too.

Secondly the teacher in school. Teachers who read novels to the class and created reading time for children were very influential.

Thirdly libraries and librarians. They hold the key to the collections and the way they present their libraries as an invitation to read is vital.

Fourthly an on-line resource of information about books including levels of reading subject matter and reviews, is also vital.

My intention is to show how these factors influenced me as a young reader and how my life experience directed me in a career dedicated to children and young adult literature.



I would also like to make some observations and I stress the word observations, about reading, about children's reading abilities, their likes and dislikes both from when I started and now. Here we go.

Once upon a time a small boy named Robert Docherty was born in war torn Scotland. Housing was in short supply, rationing was in place but books were everywhere. Both my mother and father were avid readers and before the age of five my mother had taught me to read. I didn't realise how lucky I was. My father myself and my younger brother emigrated to New Zealand by ship and landed at Lyttelton in 1952. My mother had to wait for another ship because she was pregnant and for a while my reading stagnated until she arrived 6 months later. I was enrolled at Lyttelton Main school and on my first day I was sent home with a book which I read completely. The teacher was amazed and she liked me probably because of my Scottish accent, and every day I took a book home like the Janet and John books.

"John's got big black waterproof gumboots, John's got a big black waterproof hat. John's got big black waterproof macintosh, and that said John is that".

Chicken lickin and the sky falling on his head worried me but I wanted to know goose loose and duck luck.

I read everything I could get my hands on but the great aha moment arrived when I was in Standard 3. An eccentric male teacher called Laurie Ford read the *Hobbit* to my class. I was mesmerised. I went to the library attached to the school and asked the librarian for similar books. She gave me *The Chronicles of Narnia* and it blew my mind. I like fantasy but that was soon replaced when the teacher in the following year read us Robinson Crusoe. I told my father and he got me *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Coral Island*, *Gullivers Travels*. I was on my way. At home books were the main presents at birthdays and Xmas and I got into *The famous Five* and *Secret Seven* and *Biggles*.

High school beckoned and I went to an all-boys school which had strict discipline and teachers who had no qualms about swinging the cane. My English teacher in year 9, Gordon Ogilvie, an author who wrote about early Canterbury, gave me another aha moment when the class read George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. It contained two of my favourite sayings "*all animals are created equal but some are more equal than others*" and "*four legs good, two legs bad*". Reading wasn't popular amongst the boys and we basically were allowed to read what we liked.

I got into Alistair McClean, a bit of Dickens which I found hard to read and similar books. Then University beckoned. I studied History and English and was introduced to Jane Austin who I liked, *Catcher in the Rye*, and Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* which stunned me.



I also got into Hemmingway and Evelyn Waugh and emerged with a B.A. degree and was completely fed up with academia. I took a series of labouring jobs bought a boat ticket to Australia, worked my butt off and thence by boat to UK. For the next 6 years I travelled through all the Continents of the world and then back to NZ in 1975 to meet my future wife, buy a house and raise a son and a daughter. I always read when travelling and one of my fondest memories was sailing down the Amazon in a boat, 35 degrees outside and 95% humidity reading *Dr Zhivago* and the Russian winter. I also read Freud. My fathers' influence.

My career took me into the National Film Library and my passion became 16mm film. I climbed the greasy pole and became manager in both Auckland and Christchurch before technology and a zealous Government put me back into children's literature. 16mm film was replaced by video cassette tape which could be shelved with books, so the Film Library was merged with the National library of NZ Services to schools and I became a reference Librarian. I knew practically nothing about the fiction and picture book collections but I soon learned. It was a privilege in the presence of great books. I studied for a post graduate degree in Library and Information Studies at Victoria University for two years at distance. For my optional paper I took Children's literature. I loved it.

My children had given me some titles they were reading for school, including *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier, *the Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton, *See Ya Simon* by David Hill and Maurice Gee's *Under The Mountain*. I became a great fan of Maurice Gee and once at The NZ Post Book Awards where his book *The Fat Man* took top honours he confronted criticism about the violence in the book by retorting "the kids win don't they?" Maurice Gee had great faith in children and I think this is an essential quality if you are to write and promote books for and about children. I was inspired and never looked back.

For me now children's lit was a passionate pursuit. I wanted to make a difference.

Fate helped me again when the National Library decided to change the way it selected books for its schools collection. The emphasis was on the school curriculum books were selected by different selectors by curriculum area. I was given Language and a budget of almost a million dollars to select fiction and picture books for the schools collections. I relished the chance and selected from reviewing journals like *Magpies* and the *School Library Journal*. I read like a madman, reading every picture book and up to three novels a week.

What I discovered was what a fabulous bunch of NZ writers we had. Joy Cowley, Margaret Mahy, William Taylor, Jack Lazenby whose *Because we were the Travellers* blew me away. I read Tessa Duder Patricia Grace, Fleur Beale, as well as Roald Dahl, Michael Morpurgo, Jaqueline Wilson and many others.

I started to compile reading lists for each age level and begun to attend conferences such as The teachers of English conference, the LIANZ Conference and I became a regular speaker with my session titled *Bob's Books*.

Getting into schools was the next step and I began to get invitations from schools to talk about reading with children with desired outcome of getting them enthused about reading. I was particularly earmarked by Boys schools to get reluctant boys to read but I was available to talk to all levels from Juniors through Middle school to intermediate school and of course High schools particularly years 9 and 10. I visited every Boy's High School in the South island and many in the North Island.

Going into a school classroom requires nous. There is always someone who wants to tip you off your perch. I took the attitude that I was representing reading and I had to be smart and witty so I had books that got their attention early and I kept a good book in reserve in case the kids drifted off. I never let them go and I never told the ending of a story. I learned to raise and lower my voice to get control and effect.

I wanted kids to read the books and always stressed the benefits of reading such as stimulating ideas and imagination, increasing vocabulary, increasing talking skills and having fun. To high school boys I also said that my experience told me that girls liked boys who could converse with them and books gave them the wear with all to do so. But I did realise that not all boys are the same. In general I considered that boys wanted a quick fix with literature. Instant gratification. Short books. Short stories were also popular with them.

Girls on the other hand were in it for the long haul. They liked long novels and they liked relationship stuff but it is just an observation not a fact. Overall I did met some stunning boy and girl readers but girls as a group were better readers.

Whether that is true today I am not sure but my impression is that girls have become more like boys in their reading habits. I put this down to on-line use and social media. It seems to have has affected everybody the same way.

Vampires and zombies were popular with both sexes, as was dystopian fiction. Boys liked the silly stuff and science fiction, girls the romance and life's problems.

With juniors I would start with a picture book that got them involved like *Poo Bum* by Stephanie Blake. With middle school I used a *Paul Jennings* or *Andy Griffiths* story and with intermediate classes I used Ella West's *Night Vision* or similar books. Junior High school was where kids could get away on you if they were not interested and this group always contained kids who hated reading.



I used thin books with boys and my favourite was Anne Cassidy's *Getting Away with it*. With girls I used another of Anne Cassidy's books *Moth Girls*. I always left books behind and used books from the schools own collection. Children have a strong sense of fairness and justice and one book I could use over all levels was R.J. Palacios' *Wonder*. The main Character August had a face that looked like it had melted on his head. He is bullied and has a hard row to hoe in life. It is unfair. But children loved the story.

After my sessions students would rush the stage to look at the books I had talked about and teachers gave me positive feedback.

The nineties' and the noughties when I was doing this were in my opinion a renaissance in children's writing. Early readers like *Captain Underpants* hooked kids into reading, middle school had Paul Jennings and Andy Griffiths to contend with and intermediate and high school had John Marsden's *Tomorrow When the War Began*, *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games* and the *Twilight series*. I recall a great session in a girl's college when I asked the girls, "who from Hermione Granger, Katniss Everdeen and Bella Swan was the best female role model?". Arguments were in favour of Hermione followed by Katniss with few choosing Bella Swan. Then a girl got up and emphatically said "*it is Katniss because she takes no shit*". End of story.

Life changed for me in 2009 when the National Library made a decision that on line services were the way of the future and I was made redundant. At the age of 62 and still with petrol in the tank I was out of a job. The National Library had a web page on which I had contributed book reviews and book lists and I thought this is what I must do, so with the help of a techie friend I set up a blog called *Bobsbooksnz*. I put a dozen or so book reviews on it and sent it off to the main book publishes of children's books in NZ and said I could do reviews of new releases and promote your books in NZ. I also informed schools of my plans and said I was available to come to schools to talk about books and reading. Fortunately both responded positively and I was on my way. I spoke in schools from Southland to Kaitia and talked to 1000's of school kids. I had a ball.

I started to receive books for reviewing and took the stance that I would not be a critic and would positively review books unless I saw no literary merit in them. I wanted kids to read them and my reviews enticed readers to do this. There were few titles I did not review.

With non-fiction works I compared the quality of information in the book with what you could find on web sites.



Books won hands down and still do. I kept this going for over 12 years when the travel got to me and I found that old age was a full time job. I still get books sent to me for review from individuals but I have to really like the book to do a review.

One of the tasks that I enjoyed during this period was being a judge and convener of judges in book awards like LIANZ and NZ Post which have merged these days into the NZ Children's and Young Adults Book Awards which I still follow avidly and always read the winners. It was an honour to be a judge and to read the great talented authors that we have in NZ. In this area as a country we box above our weight.

I said there was a fifth factor in creating a learning culture and that is individuals like myself and many others, and organisations like Storylines who keep children's literature in the spot light and ensure that children are aware of what they can read.

May this always be true.

Since I retired I have written a book on my early life and travels titled *Boomer. A memoir* and I still review the odd book. I recently read a new climate change novel by A.M. Dixon a Christchurch writer who has written a trilogy series titled *The Edge of Light*. I thoroughly enjoyed it.

It remains now to look at the future and surmise what lies ahead for the book. The arrival of AI and online services foretells many dangers ahead for human creativity and imagination. We would be a very poor species if we let this happen and I don't think it will.

Like Maurice Gee I have faith in the children and I don't think they will let it happen I am sure many parents think the same. I received a new picture book from America the other day called *The Grumpy Gnome* which I reviewed on my blog.

On the back was a notice that read; HUMAN MADE NO AI USED.

I hope this attitude lasts.

Thank you for the award, it is one of the proudest days of my life.