

# Storylines Margaret Mahy Medal Lecture 2026

Tim Tipene



## Choosing to Fly

Pūkorokoro te pūkorokoro te pūkorokoro te pū...

Kō te tangi nā te manu, kō te karanga te manu kua karangatanga puta noa i te motu...

A kāti ra kei runga. Tī hei wā mauri ora

Te mea tuatahi

Me mihi ki te Atua, nana te timatanga me te whakamutunga o nga mea katoa. He honore ki tona ingoa tapu

Te mea tuarua

E nga mate, haere. Haere ki to tatou matua I te rangi, haere, haere, haere atu ra

Te mea tuatoru

Te whare e tu nei, tēnā koe

Me mihi ano hoki ki nga kanohi ora, koutou nga rangatira, me nga manuhiri, me nga kaimahi kua tae mai nei, e huihui nei iraro I nga karanga o Waituhi Tāmaki o Aotearoa. Tēnā ra tatou katoa.

Ki te kai kōrero, tēnā koe

Otira, ki a tatou katoa, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā ra koutou katoa

Chur...

It is an honour and a privilege to be standing here in te whare o Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, to receive the Storylines Margaret Mahy Medal.

In preparation for today, I read the lectures of all the previous winners, apart from Betty Gilderdale and Jack Lasenby, whose presentations are currently not available on the Storylines website.

I acknowledge Margaret, the other authors, illustrators and publishers who have led the way.

Toku toa, he toa rangatira

My bravery is inherited from the chiefs

The collection of Margaret Mahy lectures are a valuable resource and an historical treasure, certain to be appreciated and valued by generations to come. I commend Storylines for making this taonga openly available online.

The tauparapara at the beginning of my mihi, Pūkorokoro, is the same tauparapara I used at the memorial service for Margaret in the Auckland Town Hall back in 2012. At the time, however, it was new to me and I didn't do it justice. Something that I sought to rectify for Margaret today.

When I received the phone call from Michelle Chan regarding the Margaret Mahy Medal, I simply assumed that Storylines was wanting my involvement in acknowledging this year's recipient. When Michelle proceeded to inform me that in fact, I was the 2026 recipient, I was dumbstruck.

I began to ponder Michelle's credentials. How long had she been involved in Storylines? Had she phoned the correct person? Surely this had to be a mistake. This couldn't be right.

I mean, I know I'm a good writer, I've had awards for books, and awards for running Warrior Kids, but I've never been acknowledged like this by the literary world before. 'Are you there, Tim?' Michelle asked, checking if I was still on the line.

'Yeah, yeah, I'm here,' I replied.

'Congratulations, Tim,' said Michelle.

When I got off the phone I told my wife, Ping, about the strange call. Around that time, we had been bombarded with phone scams, and Ping's first instinct was that someone was trying to scam me.

'Don't give them your bank account details or any other information,' she stressed.

The next day, Michelle sent through an email confirming the award, and a request for information, including my bank account details for the prize money.

Ping and I checked it out thoroughly.

'This looks real, dear,' I said.

I walked around in a daze for the next two weeks. The news proved to be transformative.

*'Well, that takes the wind out of my sails,' I thought. 'I can no longer whine about not being noticed as an author anymore.'*

Life has not always been easy for me, and when it came to writing, I had put a lot of energy into complaining about it not being fair, and about my work being overlooked. And now, here, today, I am being acknowledged, and through none other than the great Margaret Mahy, and New Zealand's most prestigious honour for children's and young adult authors, illustrators and publishers.

What a strange new head space to be in. This is going to take some getting used to.

I have had a range of different thoughts since finding out. One I've delighted in is of my old school teachers and their reactions. Some of them would have been utterly flabbergasted with news that I had won such an award.

'Him? Him? Surely not!'

Others will be proud, and rightly so, because they know that they had a part to play in it.

For the last couple of months, and at the very time that I was preparing and writing this lecture, the end of our street in Ranui, West Auckland, was invaded with diggers, trucks and many other types of machinery, barraging our home with constant reverberating roars, tremors, and chaotic and unsettling disruption. We have lost 4 different sets of neighbours, who will be replaced with an estimated 11 new ones. The housing NZ whare across the road to the left, was trucked away in the night to make way for two new homes, while on another property along from that on the right, the house was lifted and turned about to create room for another two. The two sections directly on one side of us will be building up. Two or three stories? Only time will tell.

Normally in our street it is drug dealers, gangs, police, who are often armed and with their helicopter, frequent parties and domestic battles that we live with. While always entertaining, this makes writing quite a challenge. So, know that today's lecture came through much trial and tribulations.

Mind you, there's nothing like an unsettling upheaval to spur one on.

I have shared a great deal about my life over the years, which can be found in videos of my school talks and interviews online, as well as in media articles and in my books, *White Moko*, from 2020, and *Mrs Battleship*, from 2019, both published by OneTree House. So, my lecture today will be more about my interaction with books as a youngster, and aspects of my path to becoming a writer that I haven't shared before.

I could have started my lecture without a mihi, but for me, that would come with consequences. After all, my name is Tim Tipene, Tim Waitai-Tipene. My grandfather was William (Tim) Waitai-Tipene. In his time, however, he simply went by Tim Tipene, and even though I was named Timothy at birth, and that he was my adopted grandfather, I am known as his namesake.

I represent my whānau. I represent the tribes Ngāti Kurī, Te Uri-o-Hau and Ngāti Whātua. If I don't get it right, I will be told so, openly by my elders. There is praise for what I have achieved, but I am also held to account.

This could happen anywhere and at any time. I could be on a marae, in a school or giving a public talk like this one today. An elder could stand up and mihi to me, and if you were to see a seriousness come over him or her, there is a chance that I'm being challenged or corrected. Usually, the words and their delivery are gentle, like a trickle of water, sometimes they've been a well-aimed, sharp prod, and there have been instances where they have been full of thunder and have cut deep.

Many outside the culture don't see this, or understand it when it is taking place in front of them.

Much of my whānau were not speakers of te reo Māori, and when I was first learning here in Auckland as a young man, I was taught the Waikato dialect, something that caused a lot of coughing in the audience whenever I spoke up north.

'Ti hei mauri ora!' I would cry,

A cousin corrected me.

'Hey, Tim, we say, 'Ti hei **wa** mauri ora'.

Wanting to make sure that I was using the correct dialect of my iwi, I made corrections to my reo.

It wasn't long, however, before a newly learned pakeha woman took it upon herself to tell me that I was saying it wrong.

'It's, ti hei mauri ora. Get it right.'

Much of my life has been a comedy.

There are times I will not whaikōrero.

Being the odd one out has also been a theme of my existence, and even though, kaumatua, kuia and whānau pushed me into the role of speaker, there have been others who have been opposed to it. While it was easy to accept a blonde-haired, blue-eyed boy on the marae, it is often not the case for a white man.

'You're the whitest Māori I've ever seen,' is a comment I hear frequently from staff when visiting schools.

In a post that went viral on a couple of social media platforms in 2021, I wrote...

*Who am I? Māori or white?*

*I was born white. Around the age of two I was taken into a Māori family, my mother married into the family and I was formally adopted by them. My surname on my birth certificate was even changed to the Māori name, Tipene. (On a note: I was actually issued a new birth certificate where my biological surname was completely removed), I was brought up Māori, and I am the namesake of my Māori grandfather.*

*When it comes to filling out forms I always tick both, Māori and NZ European. Yet my identity has been an issue for others. On the one hand I am regarded as a Māori author, an indigenous voice. Elders have pushed me into chairperson and secretary roles for whānau committee and marae. I have been pushed into being a speaker for my family, and last year, (2020), I was even put into the position of Kaumatua in training for my marae.*

*On the other hand, I have been accused on my own marae of being a white man who is trying to be Māori, and told that I have no business holding Māori positions, even though I never asked for any of it.*

*I don't enjoy marae politics.*

*In my book, White Moko, I tell of incidents of where I've been challenged for having the name Tipene. I guess these challenges are just a sign of the times, especially when there is so much cultural appropriation going on in the world.*

*I have been told that I'm too white, and then that my heart is too brown. Not Māori enough, not white enough. What I do know is that I am a Tipene. Tim Tipene.*

This post received thousands of comments in support from Māori, many of whom could identify with how I was feeling from within their own lives.

The exclusion, and, at times, straight out rejection brought me isolation.

These days, whenever I am asked, what are you? Māori or pakeha? What do you identify as? I reply that I was adopted into a Māori family and brought up in two cultures. Recently, someone referred to me as a white Māori.

Truth is, I dwell somewhere in between, neither here or there, but both, somehow. Not in, but not out either.

At the time of this social media post, I was coming to the conclusion that the best way for me to serve and to represent my people, my tūpuna, whānau and iwi, was not as a speaker, nor as a committee member. But rather to utilise that very isolation that had formed me into a writer, and to let my work, my books, speak for themselves.

My whānau are proud to see my name, the shared name of my grandfather, on the front of my books.

The issues around my identity are the reason why I have never applied for funding for writing. I'm well aware that publishers have sought funds for the production of some of my books, but not me.

I didn't want to be accused of being a white man exploiting my Māori heritage.

One time, a fellow Māori creator encouraged me to do it, telling me that I was more than entitled to apply for funding. After much humming and haring, I decided to phone Creative NZ.

I told them my name and asked them to send out an application pack.

'What's this for?' I was asked by a monotone voice.

'I'm a writer,' I said.

'Have you had anything published?'

By this stage the number of my titles released were in the double digits.

'Yes,' I said.

I could hear tapping on a keyboard.

'And what did you say your name was again?' the monotone voice asked.

'Tim Tipene.'

'Please hold the line.'

Tutting, I shook my head.

*'I knew this was a bad idea,'* I thought. *'A complete waste of time.'*

Rejection and setbacks have long been a constant in my life.

'Oh, Tim!' the voice cried, on their return. 'I didn't realise that it was you! We know you, we know of your work! You have never applied for funding from creative NZ, why have you never applied?'

I was sent a huge booklet, but rather than risk being accused of ripping off my Māori heritage, I tossed it aside.

*'Better to use the time and energy to write another story,'* I told myself.

A publisher informed me many years ago, that as a Māori author I am in a niche market, in other words don't expect too many sales.

In a University of Auckland Public Lecture given at the Auckland Writers Festival in 2017, novelist, Tina Makereti, presented research collated by author, Janis Freegard, which demonstrated that Māori authored fiction accounted for only 4% of all locally published literature. In 2019 this had gone up to 7%, and, as reported by 'The Big Ideas', Damien Levi, only this month, in 2024, Māori authors were responsible for 15.2% of all the fiction published in Aotearoa. While there was break down in the numbers for gender, there wasn't for the categories of children and adult fiction.

It is promising to see the growth over the last few years, it also shows though, how hard it is to get published. And without funding, I've yet to see any lucrative advantages of being a Māori author, and how I could be a so-called white man, who is making money off of, or exploiting my Māori whakapapa.

On the other side of this, there have been times where I have been booked well in advance for an author event, only to show up and have the organiser say to me, 'Now, Tim, I'm not familiar with any of your work. What have you done?'

These are the occasions when Māori and Pacifica writers know that they are simply there to tick a box.

None of this is to complain, but rather to explain my position as a writer.

No matter the path, whether it's within Maoridom, Martial Arts, the Social Service sector or writing, there are always challenges and obstacles to overcome, and, sadly, one will also come across detractors, haters and would be gatekeepers.

Like many children in NZ, I endured a turbulent and violent home, facing daily abuse that left me with lifelong scars. As the outcome of a violent act, from a biological father, who is a convicted sex offender with crimes against women and children, I was not a wanted child.

Being the only one in my household who didn't have dark hair and dark eyes, further added to me being the odd one out, and gave my immediate family more cause to single me out, scapegoat and exclude me.

The trauma I lived with, jeopardised my ability to learn and achieve at school, putting me behind. It was hard to concentrate on maths when I wasn't sure if I would be alive the next day, and that threat was very real.

From early on, I ended up in special classes for reading and maths, and even had to see a speech therapist in the staffroom to learn how to pronounce 'th' words correctly.

Living under such duress, it is no surprise that I had issues with my health. Two eye operations that required stays in Auckland Hospital, set me back further, with long periods away from school, and that was on top of the already frequent absences that came with being in a roller-coaster family. The teacher sent readers home, however I wasn't to strain my eyes and could only look at them for a short period of time each day.

One of the scariest ideas my teachers ever came up with at school, was for either of my parents to sit with me at home and help me navigate a reader. Mum and Dad did not have the patience for such a task, and any attempt on their part at active parenting never lasted long, however, that short space of time where they gave it a go, killed any desire in me to want to read. I was thumped for any mistake, thumped with a closed fist. Trembling, I would make more mistakes, and when, on a couple of occasions, I wet myself out of fear, that was an even graver mistake.

This led to me avoiding books at all costs around other people. A belief was fixed firmly in my head that I wasn't clever, and that I couldn't read. However, I was drawn to books, especially when no one else was around and there was no pressure to perform.

In my house there was a small selection of books when I was young. They were stored in a cupboard at the end of a dark hallway, out of sight. A cupboard that was out of bounds due to there being photos in there that Mum didn't want any one pulling out. The books included a tattered copy of '*Dogs Dogs Dogs Dogs Dogs Dogs*', (Yes, that was the title), by Paul Hamlyn London, 1963, '*Born Free*' by Joy Adamson, 1960, '*The Stars and Superstars of Black Music*' by Jeremy Pascal, 1977, and the '*Dominion Breweries Sporting Records of New Zealand*', compiled by Sydney Todd, 1976.

Whenever I got the chance, and knowing the risk, I would sit on the floor and look through these books.

My struggles with reading were the inspiration for my 2023 picture book, '*The Book that Wouldn't Read*', illustrated by Nicoletta Benella and published by Oratia Books. Even my picture book from last year, '*How Many Times?*', also with Nicoletta and

Oratia, featured mischievous words and sentences that attempted to entangle two children and their family. There's a theme there.

To say my mum was wild would be an understatement. Whatever Mum set her mind too, she had to be the best. She was a high achiever, determined and driven. Her partying and excessive life style all came to an end though, the day the doctor told her that she had cancer. Overnight our lives were turned upside down. Mum needed saving, she needed God, and so, with that same determination and drive, she took us to her childhood church. Whatever Mum wanted, Mum got.

Now this particular church, you will probably be familiar with, for all the wrong reasons. Only last year the mainstream media referred to it as, the two by twos, a secretive fundamentalist Christian sect, a cult, the Church With No Name, also known as, the truth and the way, but of course, outside the accounts of historical abuse and strict doctrine, there is always more to the story.

Binge drinking, drugs and partying ceased in my house. Some might think that that could only be a good thing, but in a volatile home it is right to be sceptical of any change, especially when the parents start cutting ties with family and friends, and turn inwards.

A requirement of the church was that we said goodbye to worldly influences. This meant that the television and the record playing stereo had to go.

In order to get rid of the TV, Mum used bribery with us kids.

'You get to choose,' she said, knowing full well that there was only ever one choice, and that that was for her to decide. 'A TV or... a Sulphur-crested Cockatoo?'

My older brother, younger sister and I all looked at one another with the same bewildered gaze.

'What on earth is a sulphur-crested Cockatoo?'

'It's a big white parrot,' Mum informed us excitedly. 'With a yellow crest.'

It was obvious that Mum wanted a Cockatoo, and in order to keep the peace we had to follow along obediently with her enthusiasm. She had fond memories of '*Hector*', the Cockatoo who lived in the rooftop tearooms of the old farmers building on Hobson Street here in town, and she wanted a *Hector* of her own, who she would call *Roger*.

'He will talk like Hector,' she said.

We brought the parrot home on a Saturday afternoon. It seemed a weird trade, a Cockatoo for a television, especially since all that Roger did was flap his wings aggressively and squawk harshly at us whenever we went near him. There was no talking, no 'hello' or 'Roger want a cracker'.

Having little knowledge of parrots, my parents made Roger a perch in the lounge and expected him to sit there without much fuss.

The following morning, we went off to church. When we returned, we discovered that Roger had completely demolished a wooden chair. It was at this point, that Mum and

Dad realised that there was a bit more to keeping a Cockatoo with a powerful beak and destructive tendencies.

The whānau, with their Māori ways, along with their Anglican and Rātana beliefs, were also a price for the new church. Dad, my stepfather, had already had a falling out there with his family, and Mum had other plans for our future, so it was goodbye to the whānau. I wouldn't see them again for many years. I was devastated. Up to that point in my young life, the whānau had been my biggest support. My lifeline. This extract from *White Moko* demonstrates what they meant to me. Here, I have just woken from my first eye operation in hospital at the age of 5...

*'When I woke, I couldn't open my eyes, yet I could tell that I was completely surrounded by family. I could feel them close to me and hear their voices. Their hands were on me.*

*It wasn't Mum or Nanny or anyone else from my birth family. Nor was it Dad. None of them were there.*

*It was whānau. It was Nana, Aunty Nan Cleaver and my uncles. I tried to open my eyes to see them all, but couldn't. Panicking, I pulled at the bandages wrapped firmly around my head. Uncle Blake stopped me, and Nana and the others got me to calm down.*

*'You're okay, Timmy,' Nana said. 'Your eyes need to rest, boy. Just leave the bandage.'*

*I wanted so badly to see them all, but their voices and touching were the only reassurance I could get.*

*They had brought me chocolates, sweets and fruit, yet it was their love and connection that mattered most. I hadn't woken alone in the dark. My whānau had been there for me with their voices, their touch and their presence. I knew that I was alive because they affirmed my existence. They showed me that I mattered.'*

Now, a few years later, I was being told that they were worldly. Mum and Dad informed us kids, of how bad and backwards our Māori family were, in order to help sell and justify the break away.

These changes for the church, brought space. Large chasms of emptiness and silence that needed to be filled.

At home with my family, I had long lived in two worlds, one very real, filled with the horror of daily abuse and violence, and the other, an imaginary realm. A place where I was loved and wanted, and where those that hurt me were clearly seen and held accountable for their actions. This fantasy world was where I retreated to whenever life was unbearable and uncertain.

With the introduction of the church, this only increased.

Free from the distraction of television, and often left to my own devices, I could breathe.

The hills had always been alive to me before, but now they moved. Trees spoke, the breeze whispered. Everywhere I went in nature there was a connection, a knowing that I was a small part of something bigger, a part of life.

My favourite activity in the classroom was creative writing, where we were given a length of time to write freely, without topic or any sort of prescribed parameters. It was all that I wanted to do, and was the perfect outlet for not only my imagination, but also my trauma. Creative writing soothed me, and it validated my fantasy world, giving me permission to express it.

There was nothing better than a fresh page, an open field through which I could run and dance, and make my mark. Where mountains could rise, seas could churn and life could flourish. Just the smell of the page alone could stir me. This was freedom and escape from the rage, unaddressed trauma and crippling chaos that governed my parents and my homelife.

My spelling and grammar were lacking terribly, but not my enthusiasm. I could happily sit and write all day. Not even the lines on the page could restrict my creativity.

'I could drive a truck between the spaces of your words, Timothy,' Mrs Battersby would say.

Whenever I gained a new word for my vocabulary, it would become a feature of my writing. Overuse is how my teachers put it.

'Come up with another word, Timothy.'

I valued the dictionary, but would always have to ask a neighbouring student to recite the alphabet for me, as this was something I wouldn't master until I was an adult. It was hard to find a word in any dictionary when I didn't know where its first letter placed in the alphabet, and that's if I had the correct first letter.

With no television at home there was plenty of time to write, to play in my fantasy world and to look at books.

A copy of the Golden Press '*Children's Bible*' from 1963 now joined '*The Stars and Superstars of Black Music*' and the '*Dominion Breweries Sporting Records of New Zealand*' at home.

A book full of pictures was far less daunting than those without, and I would slowly make my way through the children's bible, studying each page. I would look for key words that I knew in the text to help me understand what was happening.

Over time my siblings and I were gifted various books, and so the collection in the home grew. Reading now became an acceptable thing to do.

I managed to score, *The Album of Sharks*, by Tom McGowen, illustrated by Rod Ruth, 1977, and a book about dogs, the title of which I haven't been able to locate. A typical boy, I loved facts, and there was nothing better than looking through non-fiction books. As someone who spent a lot of time on the water fishing, first with the

whānau and then with Mum's well to do relatives, I got quite good at being able to identify different species of sharks. It was the same with breeds of dogs. When my older brother insulted me one day, I promptly spun about and called him a Labrador. A newly acquired word. My brother's jaw dropped, and he ran off to tell Mum. The two of them were shortly standing in front of me. 'What did you call your brother?' Mum scowled. 'A Labrador,' I said, wondering what all the fuss was about. They recoiled on hearing the word again. 'Where did you get that word from?' Mum asked, pointedly. 'It's a breed of dog,' I told them. Having no knowledge of the breed, they continued to watch me with suspicion. 'You can look it up,' I said. 'In a book.' I could see that they wanted me punished, but were too confused over the crime. Years later Mum would go out her way to purchase a Labrador/German Shepherd cross.

Mum would sometimes read for pleasure. There were afternoons when she would stretch out on the couch with a coffee and her face in a book. Apparently, what she read was far more sophisticated than the Mills and Boons that her sister opted for, well, so she said.

Mum tried reading aloud to us kids at one point. *Bad jelly the witch*, by Spike Milligan, 1973. Mum got to Binklebonk in the tree before giving up. Thankfully, I got to hear the rest of the story on a small transistor radio, via the Children's story time on 1ZB, one Sunday morning. Thank you, Merv Smith, for bringing wonderful stories into my home. I didn't get to listen much, but when I did, it was welcomed warmth. The only other time I was read to as a kid was in the classroom at school. Thank you, teachers.

Dad would read the newspaper, Bestbets before a trip to the TAB, and the bible. However, much of my access to literature actually came through Dad. It came from the other end. From where books, new and old, go to die.

Dad became a shift worker at a pulp and paper factory for Forest Products in Auckland's Penrose. His place of work was a towering, grey monster that billowed smoke from industrial chimneys, the guts of which was storeys high metal machinery, bordered with stairways, platforms and ladders. Only shouts and the occasional flashing siren could be heard over the incessant, grinding roar and clunking of the beast.

On the ground floor, a pair of wheeled dozers would speed about over the concrete, loading a conveyor belt with large bales made up of paper, books, magazines, comics and the likes. The conveyor would make a gradual, long ascend to the very top to feed the insatiable machine. This is where Dad came in. He oversaw the running of the hydropulper, an enormous vat with a 4-metre diameter, wherein blades churned and pureed the paper, books, magazines and comics. Looking in from above, as I got to, it looked like porridge being stirred and reeked of wet paper.

Mostly, Dad watched from the safety a control room, checking gauges, flicking switches and pushing blinking, beeping buttons. Whenever the conveyor got jammed, however, he would have to free it up. This sometimes involved him leaning out over the active pulper from an open platform, clutching a nearby safety rail with one hand, while trying to pry the blockage free with a long stick in the other. Occasionally, the workers there spoke about a man, a friend and colleague, who had fallen into the pulper some years back. All they found was his watch.

Wanting to impress her wealthy relatives, who also attended the same two-by-two church and didn't have a television, Mum would have Dad grab some of the books, magazines and comics for them. This was strictly forbidden under Dad's working conditions. None of the reading material that arrived at the pulp and paper factory was supposed to escape and live to see another day, but whatever Mum wanted, she got.

A box of books, comics and magazines began turning up every now and then in our lounge. It became a telltale sign that we were about to see our older cousins. Of course, what they took never came back, but usually, we got to read them first, or when we visited. As time went on though, me and my siblings got good at sneaking any that we wanted to keep for ourselves.

I read *Great Expectations*, *Don Quixote*, *Ivanhoe*, *Robin Hood*, a *Christmas Carol*, all thanks to, *Classics Illustrated*, an American comic book series featuring adaptations of literary classics aimed at reluctant readers.

When I told others that I had read these classics, they responded with...

'Did you actually read the words, or just look at the pictures?'

Well, okay, the reading part did come much later.

Once again, I would start by looking for key words. Such was the case with *Great Expectations*. It was low on action, however the illustrations kept drawing me in. I wanted to know what was going on. What was happening to the characters, and so... I read. It was a struggle as there were a lot of words that I didn't know.

However, these were some of the comics that I kept for myself, and kept returning to.

*The Cay*, by Theodore Taylor, 1969, was the first novel I read from beginning to end. I was form 2, year 8. Twelve years old, in Mr Uttings Class at Kaukapakapa Primary. I chose the book from the school library.

It took a while for me to get through it, but there was no pressure other than to keep at it during the daily allotted reading time. The only real issue occurred when I read of a character dying. I remember swallowing and looking around the classroom, hoping that no one would notice the storm of emotion I was feeling within. All I wanted to do was sob.

I had to hide my elation too, when I had finished *The Cay*, because, although reading my first novel was a triumph for me, it was obvious that the majority of the kids in my class had no problem with reading whatsoever. Mr Utting had me stand and give a review of the novel to the class. For once, I was confident in doing so, because I had come to know the material so well.

I was horrified to learn that there was no allotted time for reading or for creative writing at high school. That turned me off the place. I think it is something that high schools should have. It would be interesting to map the outcomes of a trial.

In my case though, where there's a will, there's always a way.

Math teachers, appalled at my lack of basic mathematical knowledge, directed me to sit at the back of their classrooms. They told me to do whatever I wanted, just don't disrupt their lesson. I wrote. Stories and songs..., and poems for all the girls I liked.

I was still finding spelling and grammar a challenge however.

In a social studies class in year 10, the teacher had us take it in turns to read aloud from a text book. Knowing that my turn was coming up, I scanned ahead in the text, searching for any words that I didn't recognise or would have trouble with. There was one that stood out. I had come across it in books before.

I decided just to go for it.

'l... dee... ott,' I read.

A boy cracked up laughing from the other side of the room.

'Idiot,' the teacher said, correcting me.

Being a second year fifth former, in other words, having to repeat year 11, I was allowed to choose two year 12 subjects. I chose drama and journalism. My later class consisted of me sitting at the back, as I typically did in every other subject, and watching the teacher gossip and joke around with the popular kids at the front. They were his stars.

However, I was living with the belief that I was writer, a good writer, because Ms Foote in year 9 had told me so. There wasn't much I was good at, but martial arts and writing were my things.

So, when it came to a journalism exam, I rocked up full of confidence. Individually, we had to take news bits, write articles about them and arrange those articles to form the front page of a newspaper, all within an allotted time period. I was the only one who finished before the deadline.

The teacher couldn't believe it.

'Are you sure you're done?' he frowned, his gaze going to his favoured students and back to me.

'Yep,' I said.

'I hope so for your sake,' he muttered, his doubt evident on his face.

He was surprised when I got a good mark and passed the exam. I wasn't.

The situation at home was escalating, and as a teen, I was growing more aware of the reality, and of how precarious my position in the family actually was. Now, free of cancer, Mum no longer required God and the two-by-two church, and had moved on. Alcohol and other substances were back with a vengeance, as well as the television, stereo and all-night parties where the music ran on an endless, repetitive loop.

Also, increasingly over the years, there were times where Mum and Dad simply didn't come home, each off, partying with their own separate group of friends. It was common for us kids not to see our parents for days. None of us came out of our

childhood unscathed. At the age of 13, my sister was sent home from school one morning after turning up drunk.

The fact that my sister blamed herself for this incident and others like it, as the act of a rebellious teen, and continued to blame herself up until only recently, is a testament to the lack of responsibility on the part of our parents.

I confided in my school with what was happening at home. Spoke to teachers, a counsellor and a DP, and when my words didn't have any effect, I acted out. Shortly after being expelled, I was kicked out of home, sent to become a builder with Mum's wealthy relatives. It wasn't what I wanted, and it didn't last long.

I became transient, finding different places to live and going through a long line of failed jobs and relationships.

This time of my life is reflected in my 2008 picture book, *Rewa finds his Wings*. A Raupo children's book, illustrated by Jo Thapa and published by the Penguin group. In the story, Rewa works at a job he doesn't enjoy; he often imagines being a bird and flying away. His worried mother sends him to a tohunga, a wise man. The tohunga grants Rewa his wish, but warns Rewa not to be a bird for too long or he might not be able to turn back into a person.

Rewa becomes a piwaiwaka, (a fantail), but once he returns as a person, he begs the tohunga to change him into a bird again. The tohunga grants Rewa his wish many times over, until the day Rewa stays a bird for a bit too long.

How could I work at any job, when a blank, white page was my open sky? A sky that beckoned me to fly and soar with my imagination.

My childhood set me up to be a writer. The isolation, from the exclusion and the rejection, from being the odd one out and being different, became a necessity in the labour of bringing stories to life.

The psychological damage, PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, inept social skills, and mistrust of others all prohibited me from taking a so-called normal path. Time and space were required to heal, and the introspection and the need to understand in order to overcome my past, strengthened my ability to write and capture characters, and allowed me, in time, to develop Warrior Kids, my self-control and social skills programme for children and teens.

The fantasy world that I had retreated into as a youngster not only continued to feed me, but also helped me to conceptualize what I had been through, and to find meaning and purpose.

Writing and the martial arts enabled me to live my truth and to make sense of my reality. Transforming and soaring in other worlds was my only option. I refused to follow and give in to the wretched song of the siren, suicide, that beckoned me constantly.

Like Rewa, I returned to my tohunga, my whānau, my iwi, my place, reconnecting with what I had lost.

I received an email a few years ago from a rather angry mother in Ireland. Her daughter had brought a copy of *Rewa find his Wings* home from school that afternoon, and the parent was appalled upon reading it. Her take on my picture book, was that it was advocating drug use, that the incidents where Rewa flew as a bird were him getting high, and that in the end he doesn't become a bird, he 'ODs'. I didn't bother to reply and explain the significance of transformation and shape shifting within te ao Māori, but I do hope the girl is okay and is choosing to follow her heart in life, like I did.

Previously, I have acknowledged school teachers who encouraged, supported and set me on the path of becoming a writer. This included, but not limited to, Laureen Clouston, previously Miss Foote, Yvonne Battersby, and Joan Leonard. Someone else to acknowledge is fellow recipient of the Margaret Mahy Medal, Jill Eggleton. I had gotten to meet Jill through a girlfriend as a young man, and knowing that she was an author, I sent her one of my stories some years later. I only did it because my new girlfriend had liked the story, and told me to do something with it, stating that I had nothing to lose.

Jill took the time to not only read what I had sent her, but also to edit it with a red pen. She told me to type the story up nicely, and to include her corrections.

Thankfully, I had scored an old typewriter from an inorganic collection on the side of the road. Computers were becoming mainstream then, and typewriters were out.

Great for me. I had a small collection of them at one point.

Jill also encouraged me to send the story to publishers.

'Don't sit on it, Tim,' she said, knowing full well that I might not ever do anything with it.

In 1996 that story, *The Wooden Fish*, featured in a school journal via Learning Media, and I became a published writer. In 1999, *The Wooden Fish*, came out as a picture book with illustrations by Jennifer Cooper, thanks to Reed Publishing. It went on to be a Storylines Notable Book in 2000.

Since I had done once, I was certain that I could do it again, and got busy writing manuscripts.

My grandmother and my mother had a great uncle talk to me at a family reunion. The event had been especially put on for him, during one of his short visits home from his work as a missionary in India.

'I see you had a story published,' Uncle started.

'Yeah,' I beamed proudly.

He didn't share in my enthusiasm.

'It's time to give up this writing nonsense,' he said. 'Best to get a real job.'

Uncle was a writer himself. He had written collections of poems and even some of the hymns that we had sung at our church.

This great uncle had even made me sit at a table one afternoon and read a bulking volume of his work when I was in my teens. His poems were graphic recollections of his days mustering in the south. The one I remembered most was when a new dog of his, had attacked a sheep. Having a taste for blood, the dog was deemed no

longer of any use and had to be put down. Without a rifle on hand, a fence post had to do.

When this revered, great uncle and missionary out doing god's work, had left the family reunion with my grandmother that day, my mum and aunties proceeded to sit in the lounge and talk and laugh uncomfortably, about his naughty nature. How he had never been one to keep his hands to himself when they were girls, and how he had sexually assaulted them.

These women knew full well that this elderly uncle had continued with this behaviour. Their own daughters had been exposed to him. And here they were now, laughing in sympathy for the poor young girls of India.

This great uncle and my family were not people that I was going to listen to regarding my future.

The stories of Māui-tikitiki-a-Taranga stood out from childhood, thanks to the likes of Peter Gossage and others. Māui taught me to be brave, to question the status quo and authority. To push at what is possible. To not be limited or held back, but to challenge and go forward.

I read my second novel in my early twenties. *Musashi*, by Eiji Yoshikawa, 1939. Translated into English by Charles S. Terry in 1981. A Japanese epic novel about the life and deeds of legendary swordsman, Miyamoto Musashi, and one of the best-selling book series in history.

Where *The Cay* was a 105 pages, *Musashi*, clocked in 970, yet I was so captured by the storytelling that I wished that the novel would never end.

It is a fictionalized and philosophical account of the life of one of the most renowned swordsman in Japan's history and author of *The Book of Five Rings*, in his quest for perfection in swordsmanship and in consciousness.

The book was life changing, speaking to me on so many levels.

It had me running and training in the middle of the night, clarifying my direction in martial arts, which ultimately led me to establishing my own path and the creation of Warrior Kids.

Then there was the writing, the craft of storytelling, the depth of characters. Eiji Yoshikawa was a master, and I was desperate to be his student. His work opened me up to other books and to further reading.

*Musashi* lit the flame for what would eventually become my 2004 teen novel, *Kura Toa Warrior School*, a book that was overlooked on its release, but refuses to go out of print.

To this day, *Musashi* is a treasured novel in our home. My son reads it annually, and you know that he's been reading it, when you find him out back, practising sword cutting techniques.

I believe books change lives.

While treasures in their own right, stories told verbally vanish like smoke from a fire, dissipating into the air, leaving us only with the memory of their scent. Such stories are easy to dismiss, like acts of abuse where the victim must prove what was done

to them with only their words. Words that are gaslit, and denied by the perpetrators desperate to save their own skin, and desperate for their sins to remain hidden, and words that are often unheard by society, where people are unwilling to believe in such heinous acts, and would rather see them purely as works of fiction, for their own sanity at least. It is safer and more pleasing to see the world in a positive light. Necessary even.

It is not so easy to dismiss a book.

They are physical, tangible. They exist. We can look them over, hold them, run our hands over the smooth pages, smell them, see the print and get lost in the images. Yet books bend reality. They take us beyond the confines of the world in which we dwell, opening up possibilities. Showing us that things can change, miracles can occur, and that we are not limited to what we know. That we can strive for better, for different. Books are proof that adversities can be overcome, and that love and truth can be found in the everyday. And books are not a onetime deal; we can keep going back to them.

It was predicted the I wouldn't be here. That I would follow in the footsteps of my biological father, become a monster and end up in prison, and that, by this stage, I would have been long dead. It is a path that some of my whanaunga have taken. But as a young man I chose different, I chose to fly.

To overcome my past and be a loving husband to Ping, a good father to Taiyang and Tahlia would have to be my greatest achievement. It means the world to me that they are here with me today, to share in this wonderful acknowledgement.

I did everything I could to ensure that my children were raised differently to how I was. The long shadow of the abuse and trauma reached far though, and I could be volatile at times, however I never lifted a hand against them. They have had a front row seat to the lingering effects of childhood trauma and abuse, and yet my son and daughter's lives have been very different from mine.

Books, fiction and non-fiction, have always been celebrated in our home, and we've never had enough space for the ones that we have, and those that we want. I read to my children daily, and, when of age, tried, unsuccessfully, to keep up with what they were reading as they tore through novel after novel. It would be of no surprise to know, that they were reaching their milestones at a much younger age than I had. Where I was a transient young man, going from job to job, relationship to relationship, my son and daughter are both now students at Auckland University, and outside of that, holding roles of responsibility in part time positions. This is not to show off, but to show a breaking of cycles.

A limitation on screens helped with this. I am thankful that a large chunk of my childhood, due to the church, was free of television, where I had the time and space to think and breath. It got to a point when I was a kid, where I would long for that seclusion, long to plunge deep beneath the surface, and submerge into the cool, crisp and invigorating worlds of my imagination. Worlds much like the one you will find in my Pipi and Pou series. Television just couldn't compete.

My son and daughter's childhoods were largely free of devices, only having access to them for one hour on weekends. Maintaining a distance from these mind-altering substances was not an easy task though, especially when schools are pushing the drug.

I'm not against devices. I believe that they have their place, but even us adults struggle to withstand the pull and addiction that they have over us. They are designed to hook us in, and we know this because the very developers who make these devices don't allow their children anywhere near them.

New Zealand was overly enthusiastic in the adoption of digital tools in the classroom. *Yet globally, using devices frequently to learn is uncommon, even in the wealthiest countries*, as pointed out by Julie Cullen and Dr Sam Marshin in an opinion piece for the NZ Herald in January, 2025, following the publication of a paper in the Waikato Journal of Education, researching the learning and health impacts of screen time in the classroom.

They wrote... *'Recent analysis of PISA data found that 'very intensive' device use in classrooms is not just linked to academic decline, it causes it.*

*There are a few important points here – this analysis involved data from countries with advanced policies for use of digital technologies in the classroom, such as Finland and Estonia.*

*The second point, which will possibly surprise many New Zealanders, is what was considered 'very intensive' use. This was students who used devices to learn from one to two times per week to almost every day – a rate that may sound low, not only to many high school students, but also to some primary.'*

I feel for the kids who are not only bombarded with devices at school, but also at home.

In a time where we can't trust what we see or hear on screen. Where those in positions of authority and influence can't be trusted. When groups are trying to control the narrative, and tell us what or how to think, and control what we can and cannot say, our children need the freedom of their own, unshackled minds. They need books, that give them the space to breath, to question, to dream and create, and to fly.

When the World Economic Forum, and tech companies are spouting that in the future, *'You'll own nothing, and you'll be happy'*, buying books is a great act of resistance.

A career in writing isn't easy. It is a lot of hard work, there is a lot of rejection, and my wife is still waiting for the money to show up, but writing is where I've chosen to spread my wings.

Thank you to Storylines for this wonderful honour, and to those who put my name forward, and the many believers who have supported my work over the years. Thank you to Ping, Taiyang and Tahlia for their love. Thank you to the publishers who have published my books, and most of all, thank you to the readers.

A long time ago, a man in his early twenties came to a public event where I was speaking in Te Awamutu. He stood up at the back of the packed room to say that he had recently finished reading his first novel. It was *Kura Toa Warrior School*.

No reira, apiti hono, tatai hono, tatou te hunga ora kia tatou

Apiti hono, tatai hono, tatou te hunga wairua e...

Tena koutou, tena koutou, mauri ora ki a koutou katoa