

Journeys of the Heart

Margaret Mahy Lecture - by Sherryl Jordan

17th March 2001

One of the startling things about being a writer is that people suddenly assume you're an expert in literature; that you are university educated, and extremely widely-read. In fact, I'm none of the above; I'm simply a dreamer who happens to be paid for my dreaming. Being asked to give a lecture like this is, therefore, rather daunting. It's also humbling, and surprising, and a great joy. Humbling, because, in being awarded this medal, I walk in the glorious company of Margaret Mahy and the other writers, illustrators, critics, and publishers who have been honoured on this special day. There's almost a sense of disbelief about this, for I cannot forget the long years of spectacular failure as an author. To stand here now, giving this lecture, is as astonishing as it is joyful. I've worked hard to be a writer, and this award means much.

I use the word "work" in connection with writing, but this also is an astonishment to me – that what I have done for sheer love and ecstasy, is also my work. There are not many of us whose work is also our passion – though I suspect that, in the world of books for young readers, most of us are working at what we love, whether we teach reading, work in libraries, publish literature, or write or illustrate it. One of the great pleasures of writing for young people is the sense of fellowship and genuine support between writers and illustrators. Perhaps it's something to do with the fact that we work for children, the most brutally honest and insightful and straightforward human beings of all. You can't work for them, and pretend to be what you're not. This creates a beautiful openness between people connected with children's literature – an openness I cherish, whether I find it in fellow-writers, illustrators, editors, or the teachers who inspire the love of reading. I feel very much a part of a huge team, and although writing is necessarily a lonely business, I never truly feel alone. A day such as today

when we all celebrate our love of literature, is really a day when we celebrate the work we all do.

I said I didn't have a university education, and I'm certainly not an academic, not even a trained teacher. I'm not trained for anything, actually; I trained for two years and two days as a nurse, in my late teens, and left before I graduated. I had various jobs after that, including being a receptionist for a dentist, and a hair-implanter for a small business that made models for a wax museum. There were several other jobs, none of which were connected with writing – but all of which, to some degree, shaped my view of the world, and eventually influenced the kinds of things I wrote. Nursing, especially, shaped the writing of *Secret Sacrament* about the healer, Gabriel. I'm only telling you this so you won't expect a profound lecture about literature; I can't deliver that. But I can tell you what it's like for me being a writer, and how I come to write the novels that are mine. And if that throws some of you into a panic, please rest assured that I'm not going to talk about the writing of *Winter of Fire*, or *Rocco*, or any of the other books you've heard me speak about before, or have read of in a dozen different articles. But please bear in mind that it's actually very difficult being a public speaker, because the more talks you give, the harder it is to say something no one has already heard. However, one big thing in your favour is that I've been unwell for the past three years, and have given only one talk during that time; so, if I stick to this time period, hopefully you'll hear something new!

Fortunately, a writer's work and earnings go on even after the writer stops. I could be dead, and still earn money, and exciting things could still happen with my novels. So even though, from late 1998 to 2000, I could barely write an e-mail, let alone a novel, all sorts of things were going on where my writing career was concerned. My novel *The Raging Quiet*, which I had completed a year before my illness, was published; the novel I had begun and was forced to abandon because of illness, called *The Hunting of the Last Dragon*, was destroyed; *Secret Sacrament* was accepted by HarperCollins in the States, was rewritten, and has just been released; and *The Hunting of the Last Dragon* has been resurrected, finally completed, and accepted for publication. I have been offered the most

sublime writing opportunity of my life, and have two more books, yet unwritten, being contracted with HarperCollins. And last but not least, I've been awarded the Margaret Mahy Lecture and Medal, which has led to this second talk in three years.

Talking about it quickly like that makes it all sound very easy. Smooth-going, even. But no book is created easily, and life's road is seldom smooth. And it's that life's road that gets written into novels, even though those novels might be called fantasy. One of my favourite quotes is from the writer Molly Hunter, who said:

"The child that was myself was born with a little talent, and I have worked hard, hard, hard, to shape it. Yet even this could not have made me a writer, for there is no book can tell anything worth saying unless life itself has first said it to the person who conceived that book. A philosophy has to be hammered out, a mind shaped, a spirit tempered. This is true for all of the craft. It is the basic process which must happen before literature can be created. It is also the final situation in which the artist is fully fledged; and because of the responsibilities involved, these truths apply most sharply to the writer who aspires to create literature for children ... There must be a person behind that book."

I agree with Molly Hunter: no author can write anything well unless they've lived it. That's why I've called this lecture *Journeys of the Heart*; because it's those inner journeys, those life experiences, that influence novels more than anything else. That isn't to say that a novel has a lesson or moral in it – heaven forbid! – but each book must be born out of my own journey, out of the shaping of my mind, the sometimes painful tempering of my spirit, the philosophy hammered out within my own heart. If there isn't that strong thread of truth in a book, then that book is worth nothing. Leo Tolstoy said the same thing, in a more direct way, when he said, "One ought to write only when one leaves a piece of one's flesh in the inkpot each time one dips one's pen." It's almost enough to put one off being an author!

Apart from pieces of flesh, many things contribute to stories, and each book is the result of a thousand different seeds sown throughout the whole life of a writer. Some of those seeds we are aware of, such as the books that influenced us, that shaped our minds and hammered out our philosophies.

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Many books influenced me when I was a child, and a few were instrumental in the way my life has gone. I especially loved fairy tales, the world of fantasy, and I adored the *Cole's Funny Picture Books*. But I think the book that influenced me most was, surprisingly, a child's encyclopaedia I was given when only eight years old. I still have it. Across the inside cover and the first page was a full-colour spread showing a village in Medieval England. I think I spent more time looking at that picture than I did reading anything inside the book, for to me it was a window opening onto another world. There was something wonderfully familiar and extremely powerful in that picture of ancient village life. It fascinated me, overwhelmed me with a sense not only of images, but also with a strange memory of smells, sounds, and a whole existence that I seemed to have lost. I felt homesick, longing for something more real to me than the present home in which I lived. This was the beginning of my deep love for medieval times - especially the life of ordinary village folk - a love that has influenced most of my writings.

I made my first book when I was four years old. Because I had not learned to read or write, I made a book of pictures about a mermaid. I still vividly remember my sense of satisfaction and wonder, as I held in my hands the world I had created. In my early years at school I wrote several novels, some of them 50 or 60 pages long. At intermediate school my principal sent some of my stories to New Zealand publishers. So it was at an early age that I came to believe that stories were not worth anything unless they were actually published. However, many years were to pass, many novels to be written, before my work was to have that kind of worth. For 30 years publishing remained a painfully elusive phenomenon. I was 40 years old when I signed my first publishing contract for a novel. That was for my 13th novel, called *Rocco*. It was, of course, called my "powerful first novel". It's strange, how the world never wants to know about a person's failures - it's only ever interested in success. But those first twelve novels weren't wholly failures. They were my apprenticeship. The rejection letters for those, in which editors pointed out my shortcomings as a writer, were my training ground.

Sometimes seemingly insignificant things became vital themes in stories. Many threads in *The Raging Quiet* came from my own experiences, some of

them many years past by the time the book was written. I suppose that particular book really began 30 years ago, when Lee and I were first married. We went to a movie in which one of the main characters was a teacher of the deaf. I still vividly remember the scene of her standing in the classroom in front of the blackboard, using sign language to communicate with her class. It was the first time I had ever seen sign language, and I was overwhelmed with excitement and astonishment, as if I were being powerfully reminded of something I had always known and loved.

About eight years after that experience, when our daughter, Kym, started school, I started part-time work as a teacher aide. During one morning at work, one of the teachers told me that her husband was the principal of a school looking for a teacher aide, and was offering more hours than I was presently working. Would I be interested? I thanked her, but said I was perfectly happy where I was. Then she added, casually, "Oh well, you wouldn't want that other job, anyway; it's with profoundly deaf children. You'd have to learn sign language." By that afternoon the job with the deaf children was mine.

As part of my training in sign language I went to Kelston School for the Deaf, for a weekend course. During my first evening at the school, which was a boarding school then, I was taken by the supervisor to meet some of the students. I remember a tall young man who came rushing up to me in great excitement to show me a chrysalis he had in his hand. He was trying to talk, and signing furiously. I understood nothing he said, though I couldn't help responding to his excitement and his eagerness to share his treasure. When he had gone the supervisor explained that he had only recently come to the school. She told me that for most of his life he had been in a mental institution, considered insane, his deafness undiagnosed. The information appalled me; I thought that such misunderstanding and mistreatment had finished with the dark ages. That misunderstood young man and his unhappy former life stayed in my heart, and many years later, when I wrote *The Raging Quiet*, he had much to do with my portrayal of the character Raven, also deaf, and also tragically misunderstood.

The Raging Quiet is one of the most joyful books I have written, and – though perhaps I shouldn't say it – the easiest. The story of *The Raging*

Quiet was the first true inspiration I experienced. It came to me in a few moments, long ago in 1986, when I was sitting having a cup of coffee and thinking how much I would like to write a book set in medieval times. Without my bidding, totally surprising me, an image came into my mind. It was a picture of two people, a girl of about 14, and a little boy of about 7. I knew who they were; it was as if I saw, in a single moment, the story of their lives. The little boy was deaf, and the village folk, not realising his deafness, but believing him to be possessed, whipped him to get his devils out. The girl was the only person who realised he couldn't hear, and she made up a sign language to communicate with him. But the villagers, seeing the strange hand-signs, accused the girl of witch-craft. I intended naming the girl Gwendolen and the boy Gidie. However, there was a major problem with writing this story. As it was set in medieval times, I needed to do a great deal of research. At that time, in 1986, I had written only the 12 unpublished novels, all rejected many times by publishers and finally abandoned, and I didn't want to waste time researching yet another book that would only join the long line of failures. So I decided to write instead a book set in primitive times, but in the future, after a nuclear war. That way I could still have my medieval-like society, but rely on imagination instead of research. That book was *Rocco*. It was followed by *The Juniper Game*, then ten other novels, eight of which were published. Gwendolen and Gidie hovered in the background, their story unwritten but not forgotten. 10 years later, in 1996, during a time of meditation, there leapt into my mind another powerful image, again of two people. They were standing on a hill at twilight, near an ancient upright stone, and they were facing one another, touching their hands together, palm to palm. They were both dark-haired, similar in age and appearance, with an intensity of character that was overwhelming. What struck me most about them was the bond of unity between them, as powerful and real as a physical force. It was as if they knew each other's thoughts, each other's hearts. I knew they were the characters for my next book; but I didn't know their story.

The next morning I woke early, excited, thinking of the two people I'd seen ... and suddenly I knew who they were. They were Gwendolen and Gidie grown up, their story transformed. I re-named them Mamie and Raven, and

called this new version of their story *The Raging Quiet*. By happy coincidence, Lee and I were planning a trip to the UK later that year, so I could at last do the research necessary for this long-delayed medieval novel. However, being thoroughly inspired, I couldn't wait until I'd been to the UK; I wrote the first draft before I went. After all, I already had a knowledge of sign language, the experience of working with the deaf, and a fair knowledge of medieval life. My own life had long contained the necessary threads for this story.

The Raging Quiet was glorious to write, and supremely joyful. As with all my books, writing it was like living inside a movie in 3-D. I lived every scene, felt everything Marnie and Raven experienced, heard every conversation. Although I obviously knew what the plot was, the main events that would happen, and who all the characters were, the book (as they all do) took on a life of its own. I didn't sit there and think, "I will now write the scene where Raven begins to understand human speech." Scenes would happen of their own accord, events flow from one to the other, characters surprise me, conversations happen. I love it when a book is like that – when the characters spring to life and speak for themselves, tell their own story, and I'm only the one who records it. And that's what writing a book is like; recording something that is happening all around. The moment I sit in front of my computer and bring up the file of the book I'm working on, it's like putting on a magic cloak that instantly transports me to the world of the book. I'm not conscious of the room I'm in, of myself, of anything else that is going on around me. I'm gone beyond - gone to where my heart is. Usually somewhere in the past.

It's a very intense experience, writing a novel, and one not easy to come out of. Often there's a feeling of displacement, of being lost somewhere between the worlds. And when the book's finished, the characters don't always go away. Usually the next book arrives ahead of time, while I'm still finishing a novel. At that stage there's often a time of intense frustration and indecision, as the excitement of the new vision overwhelms me and tempts me to abandon the old book and get into the new one. I manage to restrain myself, and to finish what I begin - though nearly always I'm ready to start the new work the moment the "old" book is sent to my agent. But because

the "old" characters don't go, I have a ceremony in my studio, in which I imagine a door or a gateway, and stand there in front of it with my characters, my friends. Our farewell is often emotional, for I've lived their lives with them. Then, in imagination, I see them out through the door or the gateway, and close it behind them. Very often I have the feeling that they go on existing in another dimension. Perhaps they do - and that dimension, the world of story, is where the readers meet them, and set them free to live again.

But back to that first draft of *The Raging Quiet*: when it was finished, and needing only corrections once I had done all my final research, Lee and I went to England. For the first time I stood in churches many centuries old. I smelled peat fires, and saw the rugged coastlines and the thatched cottages such as Mamie had lived in. I'll never forget one particular cottage I stood in, in Ireland. It was in a village set up exactly as villages really were hundreds of years ago. A bed was made up with blankets and furs on the floor. Sacks of grain and vegetables hung from the rough roof beams, and a peat fire was burning. The tiny windows let in little light; they were set deep in the thick walls, and the whitewashed stones were yellow with age and smoke. The floor was made of smooth stones, and there was no furniture. I don't know how long I stood there, lost between worlds. Or maybe I was found. But when Lee took my hand and told me it was time to go, I almost wept. "But this is my home!" I wanted to cry out. "This is my home!"

Back in my other home two months later, I sat in front of my computer and read the book again... And wondered why I ever spent all that money going to the UK. Everything I had imagined was absolutely true, accurate and real in every detail. I altered only one thing: originally, the floor in Mamie's cottage was dirt; this was changed to stone. I gave the book one final polish, and it was done. The book had taken only three months to write. However, when you take into consideration all my life's experiences that went into it, it is more correct to say that the book took three months and a lifetime. I think this is true of all novels, and certainly something to be remembered when one is told how long it takes to write a book - or to do a painting, or to compose a piece of music, or do anything creative that is unique to ourselves - for in every thing that we create we pour not only the passion of the moment, but all that we have lived.

Who knows what goes into stories, or where they come from? Madeleine L'Engle said: "I do not control, own, or dominate my stories. I serve them, and for me they are truth. When I am writing, so often I am given what I need. All I have to do is recognise it. I listen to what happens, and then set it down." I think she's right - that stories do have their own integrity, their own life, and we only serve them, recording them as faithfully and as truthfully as we know how. But each story can be written only when we are fully fledged to write it - only when life has taught us all that is necessary for that particular story, and we have been given all that we need. Sometimes a novel can be begun, maybe even half finished, before the writer is actually qualified to write it - before the hammering and tempering and shaping is finished - and the author has lived through that vital experience that alone flects her to give true power to what she writes.

Talking of hammering and shaping: perhaps I should say a word here about revision. I write first drafts very quickly, but each story is revised seventy or eighty times. By that, I mean I read it through that many times, and each time it is altered, improved, polished, until I am certain, with all of my being, that it's as fine as I can make it. All this is before the editor reads it, of course! Then the polishing starts all over again, and sometimes even major re-writing is necessary. It's not onerous work, this revision; it's intensely satisfying. And always, deep within the story itself, is that thread of truth, that life's experience, that gives the whole thing strength and passion and authenticity.

The *Hunting of the Last Dragon* was a book that came very much from my own experiences, though I didn't know, when I first began it, what lay ahead for me, or what would eventually lie at the heart of the book and make it real. The first version was written in 1997, when I was unfledged, totally unqualified. I called that first story *The Quester*, and sent it to my agent in New York. The story was about a young man, Jude, whose family and village had been totally destroyed by fire. Accompanied by a Chinese girl, Iing-Wei, Jude set out to hunt the cause of the fire - a dragon. I thought the story was rather clever, but had written it without leaving any flesh in the inkpot, or even weeping at the end - a sure sign that there's something less than honest about a story. I suspected the story had no passion, no soul. But it

had something. My agent agreed about the rather vague something, and made several astute comments and suggestions for minor changes. I thought about what she said, and decided to rewrite the entire book.

I began the rewritten version early in 1998. The rewrite was actually called *The Ashen Shore*, but the publishers prefer *The Hunting of the Last Dragon*. The new title's growing on me. The style of this story was different from anything I'd written before: it was in the form of a tale dictated by Jude to a monk who was a scribe at the monastery where Jude and Jing-Wei were guests. During the dictation, which took place over several weeks, Jude often digressed from his story, making comments and observations about life at the monastery, and these were dutifully recorded by the monk. It's like a story within a story. But more important than the plot or style was what was being hammered out in my own heart during the writing.

Halfway through writing the book, in the middle of 1998, I was diagnosed with ME, or chronic fatigue/immune dysfunction syndrome. Many people assume this is simply tiredness, so I'll digress for a few moments and explain what it's like, so you can understand why it is such a huge thing for people to come to terms with, and why my own life has altered so drastically. Having chronic fatigue syndrome means waking up every morning for months on end feeling as if someone has given you a drug to paralyse you. You can barely move; even having a shower leaves you exhausted, shaking, and nauseated. You feel severely hung-over or jet-lagged, without the pleasure of getting that way; are unable to think of your own address or the names of people you've known all your life; you get words mixed up, or can't remember them at all. You can't concentrate long enough to read a paragraph, let alone a book, because you forget who the characters are from one page to the next, and keeping track of a plot is impossible. Even doing basic tasks like following a simple recipe is like sitting an exam in nuclear physics. Writing a brief e-mail can take a week, and even then words are muddled and the most important parts of the message forgotten altogether. Of course writing a novel is out of the question. And because the illness is basically a dysfunction of the immune system, the slightest cold or 'flu, or even a reaction to paint fumes or medicines, can increase the severity of symptoms for months. Social life becomes non-existent, and you become

isolated as you are forced to cancel appointments, give up work, and abandon one treasured activity after the other. Life becomes like a slow journey through a strange bleak wilderness, a landscape burned bare, where there are only the remnants of the life you once knew.

For over a year I lived like that, and all the time I had the half-written *Last Dragon* waiting to be finished. Needing to know as much as I could about my weird condition, I went to a support group of other people also with CFS, and heard every one of them say they no longer read novels because they couldn't concentrate long enough. Most of them had been ill for many years, and were still unable to work or study or even drive a car. I discovered that if I was lucky I might be over the illness in two or three years, and that the only treatment known to relieve symptoms was rest. I realised, to my horror, that I was only at the beginning of what could be a very long and hard journey. The wilderness stretched before me, and there seemed no end to it. In a state of despair, I made a major decision about my unfinished novel, *The Hunting of the Last Dragon*: I decided it was without soul and inferior to everything else I had ever written; and I wiped it from my computer. I deleted it even from the deleted files, from the recycle bin, and from my back-up discs, and burned every page I'd ever printed out. Then, panic-stricken in case I had destroyed something good, I staggered back to bed, exhausted. This was in October 1998.

Looking back, I realise why I made such a drastic move. I had not been able to bear the thought that I might never be able to write again, might never be able to finish *The Hunting of the Last Dragon*; it was easier to choose not to write – easier to choose to destroy a book than to be forced to abandon it. But the letting go of that half-finished novel left me strangely cleansed. Freed from the desperation to write, to claw back the life I had lost, I accepted where I was and the way I was. Any of you who have endured a chronic illness will know that one of its gifts is liberation, a true letting go of all the things we think are important, and a turning to that which is truly essential. There's a kind of wild joy in that letting go, a relief, in which we get down to the real business of what life is.

Don't worry – this isn't going to turn into a lecture on philosophy! I'm just explaining about the birth, death, and resurrection of a book, and how

a book – even a fantasy about hunting a dragon – can be profoundly woven from the events in the life of the writer, from a journey of the heart. In the months following the letting go of my passion for writing, I worked out what I believed to be a reason for things: I came to accept that maybe my old life as an author was over. Maybe, spiritually, a sacrifice was being required: the death of the thing that I had loved perhaps too much... my writing. As I came to truly accept my illness, with its losses and griefs, a strange joy came to me – the utter and absolute certainty that, despite the fact that nearly everything precious in my life had been withdrawn, I was still loved by God. And not merely loved, but treasured. I realised that, in the stupendous safety of that love, I could be content, even joyful, regardless of whatever else was happening in my life – regardless even of circumstances which meant I might never write again.

And then I saw an interview on TV with Brad Pitt. (I'm not really going from the sublime to the ridiculous; there is a purpose here! Besides, there's nothing ridiculous about Brad Pitt.) After the interview, the audience was permitted to ask the actor questions. One woman asked: "If you fell in love with someone and she wanted you to give up acting, would you do it?"

Brad Pitt thought about this for a moment, then replied with words something along these lines: "If someone really loved me, they wouldn't ask me to give up acting. If you truly love someone, you don't ask them to sacrifice what is vital to them; you want them to be happy, to be the best they can be, to live to their fullest potential. That's what love is."

I listened to those words, absolutely astounded. I knew what Brad Pitt meant - I'd known all my life that that was the meaning of real love; and yet for some reason his words haunted me. Days later, I was still thinking about them. And then I realised why – why they made such an impact, why they kept coming back, hammering on my heart: "If you truly love someone, you don't ask them to sacrifice what is vital to them." And if God loved me as I knew He did, then there was no way He would ever require that I give up writing. It was like a revelation! I knew, in that moment, that I would write again; that one day the illness would be over (at least "over" enough to allow me to write again, however slowly), and that when I did write again, it would be something new, something stronger and finer than

anything I had ever written before. I knew, with all of my being, that the illness was but a preparation, a training, for what I would write in the future – books I could never write without these months and years of grief and fear and ecstasy and relinquishment.

I felt as if doors had been flung open in my mind. I knew there'd be no miraculous overnight healing; there might still be a long way to go on this particular heart's journey, and I had no right to ask for special dispensation – in fact, release from the tempering of the spirit might result in that spirit's being less than what it might have been – but it was enough to know that one day I would be through the wilderness. Something I read in the Book of Isaiah came to mean a great deal to me: I read the words, "Encourage the exhausted, and strengthen the feeble, Say to those with anxious heart, fear not... For the scorched land will become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water... " My wilderness, my life burned clean, would one day be transfigured, my world renewed. Almost as if to confirm this, I had an amazing idea for a junior novel, to be called *The Robber's Child*. This new story blazed in my mind like a movie, so vivid and clear it gave me joy just to think of it. During the long afternoons of rest, I planned how I would write the new story, and remembered how Jude dictated his tale to the monk, in the destroyed *Hunting of the Last Dragon*. I wondered whether the same style would suit *The Robber's Child*. I remembered that I was quite pleased with the bits where Jude talked directly to the monk, and wished I could remember exactly what he'd said. Then I wished I could refer to the story again, and began regretting that I'd deleted it from the computer. Just in case I still had a copy somewhere, I checked all the deleted files, the computer recycle bin, even the rubbish basket in my studio, in the remote chance that a fragment of the manuscript remained. But there was nothing. It was completely gone. Then I remembered that sometimes during the writing of a novel I put a floppy disk of the new work in the car glove box, just in case the house burned down while I was out. Frantically I checked the car... and found *The Hunting of the Last Dragon*, along with several other forgotten disks of novels published long ago. Ecstatic, I went upstairs to my computer, to see if the style of Jude's story could be adapted for *The Robber's Child*. As I read the old story, a kind of astonishment came

over me. It wasn't so bad at all! And the story reminded me incredibly of my own life; of my own heart's journey through lands burned bare, just as the countryside in Jude's world was burned bare by the dragon. I began to see that now I could write Jude's story with the passion that had been missing before – because now I, too, knew the meaning of fear and loss and unwanted change. I had faced the very thing I feared most in life - the damaging of my mind and subsequent loss of my ability to create novels. I, too, had faced my dragon.

Realising that there was yet hope for the story, I saved it onto the hard drive, and left it for a while. On better days I tried to continue writing *The Hunting of the Last Dragon*, but concentration was hard. And the book had been abandoned for over a year, so it was difficult to pick up the threads, the tension, the emotions of the characters. Normally even a single day's interruption to writing is unbearable; a year was disastrous. I remember trying to write a scene with three characters, where only five things needed to happen to drive the plot forward. The scene was simple, only a page or two long and should have been written in half an hour. Ten times, and over several weeks, I wrote that scene sometimes forgetting two or more of the five things that were necessary, sometimes going off on a totally irrelevant tangent, sometimes forgetting one of the three people involved, always setting a mood opposite to the one I intended. It was maddening. I felt as if I were trying to do a weaving, but my hands couldn't manage the whole fabric; I could see only a thin strip down the middle, and kept losing threads. I felt like a horse with blinkers on, a person with half a brain. It was so frustrating I turned the computer off and didn't touch it again for months.

Then, late in 1999, my novel, *Secret Sacrament*, was accepted by HarperCollins in the States. *Secret Sacrament* was, in terms of my life, an "old" book. It had been conceived six years earlier, in October 1993, during my writing fellowship in Iowa, in the United States. I can't describe how important this fellowship was to me. It was one of those extraordinary gifts that comes just once in a lifetime. It arrived when I was burnt-out by long years of labouring alone in my studio, and was deeply disillusioned after a particularly disappointing publishing experience. I had made the decision to give up writing, and was looking for another job. When I was told I had

been awarded the Iowa Fellowship, I felt almost guilty saying I'd take it. I suppose there was a vague hope that the writer in me might be resurrected, though I was still determined that when I came home again I'd continue looking for other work. Oddly enough, the day after I committed myself to going to Iowa, I was offered work – a job I would have loved, too. It was work with a profoundly deaf student in a local college. If that job offer had been made only 24 hours earlier, my writing career would have ended. As it was, I went to Iowa.

Iowa renewed the writer in me. I was enriched and inspired, and my love of writing was totally restored. I didn't actually do much writing there, but gave something like sixty public talks in schools, libraries, and universities, and took seminars and writing workshops. Also, while in the States I met an agent who later opened the world market to my work. I can't say how grateful I am to the then Arts Council of New Zealand for awarding me that fellowship. It was a turning-point in my life.

When I returned home I began work on a new novel, *Secret Sacrament*. This book took two years to write, and went through several drafts. During that time my mother became seriously ill, and died; and the main character in the story, Gabriel, became not only a healer in the book I was writing, but a friend in whose company I found solace and strength. His story, like previous books, was given at the perfect time, at the perfect point in my life. It was published in 1996 in New Zealand.

When the book was accepted three years later by HarperCollins in the States, the editor there, Toni Markiet, said she would publish the book exactly as it was, if that was what I wanted. "However," she said, "I have some ideas for changes. Are you prepared to hear them?" I was, since she was being so reasonable, and her ideas blew me away. Toni knew the book as well as I knew it myself. Every time she mentioned an alteration that might improve the novel, I thought, "Yes! Yes! Why didn't I think of that?" And that is the heart of fine editing - discussion, empathy with the author, respect for the story, and a deep understanding of the book's characters and spirit. All these things Toni had. So, over eight months, I worked on *Secret Sacrament* again. It was the perfect work at that time, more than a year into my illness, when concentration was still difficult, but I was beginning to be

able to think clearly again. The book was already there, the world created, and the characters were like old friends. Slipping under Gabriel's skin and into his world again was like slipping on familiar and beloved clothes. But because I still found concentration hard and exhausting, and could work only for half an hour a day, it wasn't easy to hold all the threads of the story. I could make only one change at a time, painstakingly reading the book over and over again, making sure that every altered thread was altered consistently, every removed thread removed completely, every new scene woven in flawlessly. But despite my difficulties, the new scenes worked well, flowing into the existing text as though they had always belonged there. For eight months I worked again on *Secret Sacrament*. It's a very different story now, altered in major ways, but far, far better. I believe that Toni's insight and wisdom has lifted the book to where it was always meant to be. And for the second time in my life Gabriel, the healer, became a comfort and strength to me. By the time I had finished walking again in his company, I felt a great deal stronger, able to concentrate longer, and was ready to begin writing again on something new.

And so, early last year, I returned to *The Hunting of the Last Dragon*.. And, over several months, finished it, writing into Jude's character the paralysing power of fear, and the glorious, terrifying moment of facing that fear – a moment concerned not so much with overcoming, but with relinquishment. This time, the story had soul. But I was plagued by doubts. By now, *The Raging Quiet* had done very well in the States; had been reprinted in hardback five times; had been on several best books lists; and the ALA had voted it one of the Top 10 Best Books for Young Adults. This was a hard act to follow – especially with a book that had been devilishly difficult to write. I was sure that the year-long interruption from illness, and the difficulties in finishing the book, had destroyed the flow and force of the story. And another fear haunted me - that if *The Hunting of the Last Dragon* was never accepted for publication, it would be an unbearable confirmation that I had, indeed, lost my ability to write novels. Anguished, I printed out a copy and asked my friend, Jean Bennett, to read it and give me her opinion. With her usual insight, Jean made suggestions for a few changes – and told me she loved the book. Her encouragement gave me

the strength to revise the book one more time, and finally to send it to my agent. She sent the manuscript directly to Toni at HarperCollins.

Just four days later, I had this e-mail: "The new book is WONDERFUL! It's just fabulous and I couldn't be happier. I am officially accepting it. The cheque is on its way ... "

You can imagine my joy, and my huge relief. I am incredibly blessed to have found an editor who is so eager to see everything I write, so swift to respond. What counts most is her bubbling enthusiasm. I wish I could say that this is common among editors, but it isn't. It grieves me to say this, but in my experience with some publishers here in New Zealand, there has been, in the last few years, a sad lack of enthusiasm and a reluctance to see new work. I'm not the only writer to notice this; I have spoken to many writer friends, who have also felt discouraged. And even when new manuscripts are welcomed, they may be kept for many months, sometimes even years, with no contract, only the assurance of interest. I realise there are stupendous difficulties publishing in a small market such as ours, and I appreciate the fact that publishers need the overseas co-editions, and arranging these takes time, if it's possible at all. But where's the enthusiasm, the encouragement, the swift responses, the boldness to make a decision and stand by it with zeal? We have wonderful writers here in New Zealand – we celebrate all of them here today – but the road is not easy for any of us, and an encouraging word, an excited response to a new manuscript, is vital if our creative spirit is to survive.

Our creative spirit is fed well today, as we celebrate literature. It's wonderful to be launching new books, celebrating new writers and established ones. It's great to have the Children's Literature Foundation, where the passion for books encourages not only writers and illustrators, but everyone who plays a part in bringing books to readers. Also playing an important part is the Writers in Schools Scheme, which must surely do more to inspire a love of books than any of us can imagine. When I was a child at school, the concept of a person being behind a book never occurred to us. Certainly we never met authors – maybe because there were actually very few New Zealand books available. Every teacher who instils a love of reading in a child's heart, is doing a great thing for literature. Every librarian

with the insight and wisdom to put the right book into the right hands; every editor with respect for and joy in an author's work; every publisher who takes a chance with a new manuscript; every writer, every illustrator – all are playing a vital part in bringing literature to young readers. And most important of all are the readers, without whom we all labour in vain.

In a way, a story doesn't even begin until it's in the hands of a reader. One of my favourite quotes is from Ursula Le Guin, who said: "The unread story is not a story; it is little black marks on wood pulp. The reader, reading it, makes it live: a live thing, a story."

And so the story, coloured already by the journey of the writer's heart, is overlaid yet again with the richness of the journey of the reader's heart. Because once the gift of little black marks is given, then it becomes the reader's experience, coloured by her life's history, her beliefs, her emotions, her hopes and fears. By the time the reader has finished with it, it may actually be a very different story from the one that left the writer's heart. But that's the way it goes. That's the risk we take when our dream becomes someone else's dream. The British author, Angela Carter, said – and I quote: "Reading a book is like re-writing it for yourself... You bring to a novel, anything you read, all your experience of the world. You bring your history and you read it in your own terms." There must be a lot of people out there re-writing my books for themselves – I've sold over half a million copies of my novels, world-wide.

I'm still making little black marks on wood pulp. At present I'm doing the revisions for HarperCollins US for *The Hunting of the Last Dragon*. Next month I'm a guest speaker at the International Reading Association Conference in New Orleans, and then going on to speak at schools in New York City. There's a lot of interest in the States in *Secret Sacrament*; it's had starred reviews, and already is doing very well.

And there's a sublime new project I'm working on with HarperCollins in New York, which I'm not at liberty yet to discuss. It involves two novels, more if I can manage them, and they are the kind of books I have longed for more than twenty years to write. I believe that my life – and especially the last three years, with their times of relinquishment and renewal and restoration – has been a preparation for this greatest and most joyful work, this highest dream come true.

I said in the beginning of this talk that there must be a person behind the book. But we mustn't forget that there are also people behind the person behind the book. There are two people in particular behind me, without whom I would not – could not – be a writer. They are my daughter, Kym, and my husband, Lee. Over the years Kym has been one of my best critics, with a wisdom and intuition that several times has prompted me to alter stories and reshape characters. Kym has a little son now, Kael, who reminds me every day that writing is not anything near the most joyous thing in the world. And there's Lee, who for many years supported me emotionally, financially, and in every way, while I wrote novel after rejected novel. Without him, I wouldn't be standing here now. With all my heart I thank him, and Kym, for being there, and especially for surrounding me with so much love and understanding and compassion during this last difficult heart's journey.

And there are all the friends who have supported me during the years. There's Jean Bennett especially, without whom I would never have had the courage to write *Winter of Fire*, and would not have sent away *Tanith* or *The Hunting of the Last Dragon*. Jean's gentle wisdom and loving insight have helped shape many of my novels – and seen me through many hard times. I'm grateful to Ray Richards, my agent for many years, and for a long time the only person in the publishing business who believed in me. I'm thankful to Scholastic, who published my first five novels, and who opened the doors to my work overseas.

Once, during a time of extreme doubt, Joy Cowley wrote me a letter which I still cherish, and which I still read sometimes for strength. There are all the readers who write to me, whose words assure me over and over again that I am doing the work I was born to do. There are writers, many of you here, whose work has inspired me and whose words have heartened me. There are the teachers who, through the Writers in Schools Scheme, invited me to talk with their students, and gave me the reward of seeing the joy in the faces of readers and fledgling writers. There are my parents who gave me encouragement and a typewriter when I was a child, so that I could pursue my dream to be an author. There are countless people down through the years, through all my life, who wove the threads and sowed the seeds that

made me a writer. And there are all of you here today, who share my passion for the written word.

This award today isn't just for me; it's also for all the people who have loved and supported me, and given me the freedom to be who I am - it's for the people behind the person behind the books.

Thank you.