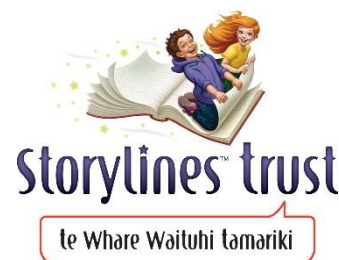


A changing landscape of 'good' books

Storylines Betty Gilderdale Award 2021

Lecture by Sarah Forster



Hello, tēnā koutou, talofa lava, kia orana, fa'akalofa lahi atu, bula vinaka, malo e lelei, and warm Pacific greetings to you all. I'm honoured to be the recipient of the 2021 Betty Gilderdale Award, and stand here in awe of those who come before me.

This is the first lecture in Betty's name since she passed away in July last year, so thank you to Storylines Children's Literature Trust for naming this award for her so we can remember her for her fine contribution to our children's literature. She and Alan were some of the first people to welcome me to my first Scholastic NZ pre-awards party for the NZ Children's Book Awards, and I was grateful to them for that warm welcome to a community I love.

Before I begin my lecture, I just want to thank my husband Gary, sons Dan and Alex, my parents Sue and Robin Hughes, my two former managers Noel Murphy and Lincoln Gould, and my friends, particularly Jane Arthur, my co-founder of The Sapling.

I'm here today to speak to you about my love of children's books, how I've seen the landscape of children's books change – and how what makes a good children's book has changed.

It's easy to say that good storytelling stands the test of time – but when we realise that this storytelling in words or images is hurtful and gratuitous to anybody in our society, as recently happened with several of Dr Seuss' titles, we can't be afraid to pull them from publishing lines and say 'not for my kids'. We can't nurture our classics, come what may.

I also want to talk about the way in which our values as a society have changed what we view as good, while reflecting on my own life in books.

Here in Aotearoa, many Pākehā like myself are on a journey of realisation that not everyone is treated the same, in our media, our lives, or our literature.

I strongly believe that all children and young people, no matter their race, religion, country of origin, skin colour, gender, or who they have a crush on, should see themselves reflected in a book.

My biography and early reading

But first, a little bit about myself. I am an 'elder millennial', and an only child. I whakapapa back to Welsh Hughes's and Thompsons, Irish Sweeneys, Scottish Alford's, and English Hamptons. Both of my parents and most of my grandparents were born in Aotearoa. My

first relations came here in the 1870s on the barque Cordelia, and settled on the lands of Ngāi Tahu, in Dunedin.

I was born in Southland, but spent no time there – instead moving between Collie, Western Australia, and Westport, twice, before moving back to Westport and soon after that, going to boarding school in Christchurch. My dad was a coal mine manager, my mum later became an Enrolled nurse, working in resthomes.

Just to satisfy those who are from Christchurch and were wondering: I attended Catholic Cathedral College, and lived at the former Sacred Heart Girls' hostel on Moorhouse Ave.

While moving back and forth, I found my home in books.

I grew up reading constantly. I read everything I could get my hands on. I was obsessed. I read the shampoo bottles, I read cereal packets – I'm pretty sure that idea came from Beezus and Ramona – I read road signs. When I was 13, my parents took me to the UK, where we did a lot of driving on very crowded roads – I read whatever book I'd picked up from the B & B we happened to be staying in.

My parents inform me that the views were great!

My earliest author obsession, like millions before me, was Enid Blyton. It was fortunate for my parents that she was extremely prolific, because I was consuming one - two of her books a day from a very early age.

As this lecture is about what makes a good children's book, let's ask whether we can still say her books are good. Can we? They were beloved for a reason, but they wouldn't be written with the cultural norms of the 1920s–60s now, if they were written for our 2022 audiences.

If I reviewed one now, as an adult reviewer of children's books, Enid or her publisher would probably write an irritated email to me.

I read *The Faraway Tree* to my older boy, but when I did so, I edited on the fly, removing racist and sexist tropes. The boys spent a lot more time looking after the food and a lot less time deciding where to go next in Get-what-you-want-land. It didn't matter to Dan; he still followed the story and enjoyed the camaraderie of the children, and the luscious descriptions of the food.

Even if I had to explain what 'lashings of cream' meant.

After Enid Blyton, I read hundreds of the heavily-marketed children's books of my era. For me these included the *Baby-Sitters Club* books and the *Sweet Valley* series, as well as a series some my age will remember, called *The Gymnasts*. I also read Trixie Belden, and was obsessed for a time with Archie comics.

[It's slightly bewildering to me that some of these children's books have been made into adult or older-teen only series on streaming TV...]

My first memory of reading a book I knew was by a Kiwi was *The Door in the Air and Other Stories*, by Margaret Mahy.

Other books that beguiled me included *Alanna* by Tamora Pierce, *Anne of Green Gables*, and, perhaps a little later, the *Alex* series, by Tessa Duder. They all provided me with a piece of myself that I recognised, alongside a good dose of wish-fulfilment. *Alanna* has magic and mad skills in a fight; *Anne* lived her life by her intelligence and imagination; *Alex* has sporting skills I would have quite liked.

All three, while non-traditionally female, also had boys falling for them, which may have been slightly important to me at the time! There were mirrors in all of these characters for me – and all children deserve that feeling of recognition.

Publishing course and Read NZ

As many of the authors in the audience today will remember, I began my involvement in New Zealand children's books at New Zealand Book Council, which is now called Read NZ.

I got this job because I was studying for my Diploma in Publishing at Whitireia Polytechnic. Through the same channels, I also volunteered for the first time on the Wellington Storylines festival committee.

My first big project at the Book Council was coordinating a 26-author tour around 26 regions of Aotearoa, for the New Zealand Post Children's Book Awards tour. My previous job had been as a PA to the CEO of an airport company, so fortunately I already had the diplomacy skills required to negotiate with authors and coordinators to find the right fit.

For the first time that year I read every book I could get my hands on by the finalists. I remember being utterly blown away by Bernard Beckett's *Genesis*. Kyle Mewburn's *Kiss! Kiss! Yuck! Yuck!* was familiar and hilarious (though it does relate to an alarming lack of bodily autonomy from the child), and I loved Ben Galbraith's *The Three Fishing Brothers Gruff*.

Through my Storylines committee membership, I met the legendary Barbara Murison, along with Fifi Colston, Maureen Crisp, Kathryn Carmody, and others, when I helped to plan, set up, and run a room at the Storylines Family Day at the Wellington Town Hall.

Our visiting international author that year was Shaun Tan, whose books showed me, as well as many others, that picture books could be for adults as well as children. And, importantly, that they could say something about our world that people may not want to hear.

Storylines also gave me the opportunity to meet Tessa Duder. I recall one year sitting on the sidelines before the family day blowing up balloons beside her, considering my adult self from my child self's perspective and just shaking my head in amazement.

My first full-time year at the Book Council was 2008, as Writers in Schools administrator. This also happened to be the first time that Gecko Press had been able to enter the book

awards, with their first New Zealand-authored book, *Snake and Lizard*, by legends Joy Cowley and Gavin Bishop (which promptly won the overall Children's Book Awards).

I knew Gavin's earlier Māori myths and legends from my Westport school library, and Joy Cowley was someone I recalled from School Journals, particularly for Greedy Cat. Between them and Maurice Gee, whose *Halfmen of O* series I once devoured, suddenly I was in the territory of working with people I adored, and a career in books beckoned!

Good books and Gecko Press

I just want to go on a little side mission to fangirl over Gecko Press and the positive impact they have had on the New Zealand children's book industry. And how they introduced another type of good to New Zealand children's Books – good design.

Julia Marshall began Gecko Press in 2005, and brought to the New Zealand publishing industry a focus on beautiful design, both for covers and internal illustrations, that previously hadn't been prominent. This was influenced by Julia's time in Europe, and by her experiences buying English-publication rights at the Frankfurt Book Fair.

It was helped by Luke & Vida Kelly – Vida had begun as a book designer and publisher in the UK, and she and Luke Kelly moved here around the time Gecko set up.

I found this quote on Gecko Books' website from John McIntyre, and I think this was true: 'There is a robust nature to the books Gecko Press has published, a strength, a quirkiness, and a depth that we have lacked.'

Over the subsequent 17 years, Aotearoa's publishers have had to upgrade their design to compete in the same market with Gecko – who themselves uphold the incredible design standards seen internationally. That meant dropping old-fashioned borders and domineering logos, getting covers spot on, and getting the details absolutely right, to give their young readers the best reading experience.

In introducing *Death, Duck and the Tulip* to our local audience, Gecko encouraged publishing about serious subjects – like death. The wonderful *Old Hu-Hu* by Kyle Mewburn, published by Scholastic NZ, also tackled this topic, winning the top prize in the Children's Book Awards one year.

They also introduced publishing for a toddler audience in board book format, with *The Noisy Book* and, later, *Here Comes the Wolf*. That wasn't to say board books didn't exist prior to this from New Zealand publishers – it is only that they were usually cut-back picture books.

It's still rare in New Zealand publishing to see a board book published without having sold thousands of a picture book, largely I suspect due to the cost involved – it needs to be a surer thing. Gecko always had a global view of the market that most Aotearoa-based publishers cannot afford to assume.

Taking good books into the wild

In my early career, I had the utter pleasure of taking authors on tour at least twice a year, and arranging dozens a year. When I started at the Book Council, this was for *The Sky is the Limit When You Read* tours, organised alongside the wonderful regional national library schools coordinators. These tours deliberately targeted remote and low-decile regions around Aotearoa with author visits.

As Fifi Colston can tell you, my first solo tour with three authors was to the West Coast. I took her, Kyle Mewburn, and Des Hunt to schools from Buller to South Westland, with the help of the local national library expert.

At that time, I was not an experienced driver, and poor Fifi was quite shaken when I nearly got us both killed at Kumara Junction by not looking right before I entered it. She, rightly, took over driving my dad's ute, which was much too big for either of us.

Over the seven years I visited South Auckland, Southland, Palmerston North, Taranaki, North Canterbury, the Franklin District, and Hamilton, helping our wonderful authors get out in the community and seeing young children fall in love with their books. I also met a number of wonderful school librarians and continue to be in awe of their knowledge and skill at matching the right person with the right books.

I knew from my experiences in schools that New Zealand's books weren't always first choice for our librarians, or our children. I could also see that there was no print journalism being dedicated to the great children's book writers that I knew and loved. And I could see how the Book Council, as the agency that promoted our own books and authors, could fill that gap.

The New Zealand Book Council magazine *Booknotes* had previously included children's book reviews as a central insert. These had disappeared before I began there in 2007, and I instigated a standalone PDF publication called *The School Library* in 2009, hiring Crissi Blair to do the reviews.

I knew that reviewing was an excellent tool for book purchasing, as well as helping young readers choose their next read.

This was a great time for rhyming picture books. Kyle Mewburn with *Duck's Stuck*, Diana Neild with *Piggity Wiggity Jiggity Jig*, Juliette MacIver with her *Marmaduke Duck* series, Sally Sutton with *Roadworks*, and Elena De Roo with *Rain Train*.

It was also a great time for YA fiction, with Fleur Beale, David Hill, Anna Mackenzie, Mandy Hager, Tania Roxborough, Bernard Beckett, Ted Dawe, and Maurice Gee competing in that category of the book awards.

There were several great three-book young adult series then also, including the *Salt* trilogy, the *Sea-wreck* trilogy, the *Banquo* trilogy, the *Juno* trilogy, and the *Blood of the Lamb* trilogy.

The only thing missing was a view that was not rooted in a comfortable, privileged, Pākehā world.

While there certainly were Māori authors, with a few exceptions, like Gavin, and Patricia Grace, Kātarina Mataira (in te reo), Robyn Kahukiwa, Melanie Drewery and Tim Tipene, many weren't being recognised. They weren't being publicised by mainstream awards and media.

I can look at a New Zealand Post Book Awards line-up from 2009 and see no Māori authors, no Pasifika authors, no Asian authors.

While the Pikihuia Awards began in 1995 to recognise new Māori authors, it was in 2010 that the Māori Literature Trust began investing in Māori writers by running Te Papa Tupu, a programme specifically for Māori writers. A few years later, the number of Māori writers who were being published started to rise sharply.

And yet – despite the efforts of Huia Publishers and other Māori-led small publishers – the white castle, as Lani Wendt Young says in her incredible lecture for Read NZ, still existed.

Booksellers NZ and judging the Book Awards

At this point, I had for some years been innovating new programmes at the Book Council – Speed Date an Author, Writers in Schools Residencies – and had been to the US on a Winston Churchill Fellowship to 826 Valencia somewhere in the midst of this. But when I returned from maternity leave after having Alex, I was asked to focus on 'core business' – running Writers in Schools.

I still love and believe in that programme, but I knew I didn't want to do it forever.

So I jumped ship, just lucky there was another ship passing by to catch me in the form of a job at Booksellers NZ as their web editor halfway through 2013.

As luck would have it, my predecessor Emma McCleary had set up a fantastic blog prior to my arrival, so it was there that I started my own career in book reviewing and interviewing authors.

My first long-form interview for the Booksellers blog was an interview featuring Julia Marshall and Paul Beavis.

I wanted to know how a first-time author/illustrator got published by Gecko Press, who at the time were known for focusing on publishing known authors. It was a fascinating discussion, and it was the first time I'd conducted anything like a traditional media interview!

It also gave me food for thought.

Booksellers NZ was at the time the administrator of both New Zealand Book Awards, and every week I also put together 'The Read' newsletter for booksellers. I was quite aware of

what was being published, and what was selling. Suffice to say what I thought should be selling, often didn't. But one thing that did, was series books.

Can a book sell in the bajillions without being, strictly speaking, good? Absolutely – just check out any book by David Walliams – but sometimes the market strikes magic, as in the case of the *13-Storey Treehouse*, and *Weirdo*.

New Zealand publishers don't often invest in series books for 8–12 year olds, but in this period there were a few, with *Dinosaur Trouble* and *Dragon Knight* being published. There was also the Frankie Potts series from Juliet Jacka. This was a good thing, but unfortunately a blip.

Since then, there have been too few series that go beyond two books published by New Zealand authors locally, other than *Miniwings* and *Flying Furballs*, and multi-author series like *Kiwis at War* and *My Story*. This is a real pity for middle-grade readers, who love to have human characters to follow through screeds of books to kick-start their habit as lifelong readers.

My eldest son, now 11, confirmed his status as a lifelong reader by reading each of the *Wings of Fire* series—after the *Tom Gates*, and *Treehouse* books. We need these series—and how good would it be for us to be able to buy these series by local authors?

I remember the envy from well-established authors here when Stacy Gregg had a seven-book series picked up for good money by a publisher in the UK. She wrote those books, and then more, and the initial *Pony Club* series is now a TV show called *Mystic*.

This is a really good example of a publisher recognising talent and how it could transfer to sales, and investing properly in an author. There are many more of these internationally, but not so much locally.

I know the publishing industry here is small, I know that a publishing and sales run of 3,000 is considered great – but what if our publishers aimed to publish books with international partnerships already in place? I know, it's a tough sell when we are competing against behemoths like the inevitable James Patterson and friends – but just imagine!

Preview of Reviews, The Spinoff, then The Sapling

At Booksellers, I began a weekly newsletter called *Preview of Reviews*, which simultaneously served as interesting data points for my suspicion that children's books got no attention in mass media, while being super-handly for bookshops, who needed to know what was reviewed in *The Listener*, the blogs, and the Sunday papers, in that coming weekend.

The new books page on the block at that time was *The Spinoff*, under Steve Braunias. By that time, I'd reviewed loads of children's books, as well as attending festivals, live-blogging these, so I had the guts to ask 'can I be your children's book person?'. And he said yes.

I think it's fair to say Steve has never really been passionate about children's books, but his influence on my writing was appreciated, with the exception of the 'controversial' article

titles. And he gave me the confidence in my own skills to be primed to move on to my own space.

Once Booksellers NZ ceased being administrator for the New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults, I was available as a judge. And I was delighted to be asked to be one for the 2017 awards, alongside Pamela Jones, Rachael King, Ben Brown, and Trish Brooking. Our ultimate winner that year was *Snark*, David Elliot's wonderful journey into the world of the Jabberwock.

It won the Russell Clark category for illustration, and it still stands out as an incredible achievement, one hard to overlook.

Simultaneously, something else happened. Jane Arthur sent a tweet into the ether, saying something along the lines of 'wouldn't it be great if we could have a festival of children's literature for adults, with international authors and the whole works'. I had heard of Jane, but didn't know her personally. Nonetheless, I tweeted back 'Yes! Let me know if you want my help.'

And after a lunch at Clark's Café in the sadly deceased central library, we came up with a plan, a budget, and a proposal for *The Sapling*, to put to Creative NZ. We started with a website, figuring we'd build our audience, and introduce ourselves to authors, before moving onto bigger things.

At the end of 2016, I was working fulltime at Booksellers NZ, judging the children's book awards, and starting *The Sapling*. My kids were 6 and 4.

The start of The Sapling

We started *The Sapling* because, as I said before, mainstream media didn't care about children's literature. But we did, and so did many people we knew. We got Jane's sister Tabitha to design our brand, then created a schedule that had about a dozen repeated features – interviews with authors, illustrators, reckonings, co-interviews, reviews, and Giselle's drawings included – to sit alongside one-off essays.

I was so excited to secure John McIntyre at the time, to write a 'Dear John' column for us, answering parents' questions about the next children's books for their children. I've never been so terrified as when I had to pitch up at the Children's Bookshop to ask – hoping he wouldn't tell me that Jane and I had no business setting up such a website!

As it happened, the first few months of *The Sapling* coincided with the death of two of our children's literature greats, first Barbara Murison, then John McIntyre himself. The impact of this in Wellington was of two tōtara falling.

In our first year of Te Wiki o te reo Māori, we hired Nadine Anne Hura to edit our coverage of Māori children's literature for that week. It was important to us to have someone curating it that actually came from a Māori perspective, rather than a white, middle-class perspective as we ourselves did (and as many wonderful people in the publishing and library

world do). In the subsequent years, we had Vini Olsen-Reeder and Kura Rutherford pick up this role.

Thanks to Nadine, to our third editor Thalia Kehoe Rowden, and to a network found online on the Brilliant & Amazing Mothers & Writers group, we continually and deliberately grew our writing and editing pool to become more representative of the world around us.

In early 2019, Jane left the editing group, so I invited Briar Lawry on as an editor. We then asked Simie Simpson to join, and she did. Then in 2020, I invited Nida Fiazi to come on board, as Thalia was ready to move on.

I could honestly talk forever about *The Sapling*, but let's talk about a few things that have happened in the industry while we have existed.

The rise of te reo Māori publishing

First, let's talk about the rise in the number of books published in te reo Māori, which began with bilingual board books with the likes of Reo Pēpi – soon being done in different ways by Te Papa Press, Penguin Random House, and other publishers.

At the beginning of 2018, I had a chat with a bookseller whose sister only read to her children in te reo. She was running out of books. At that time, along with board books, most of what we saw published in trade were picture book translations, mostly by Scholastic NZ and Huia Publishers; then Gecko Press, One Tree House, and Oratia Press joined.

2019 saw AUP begin their Kotahi Rau Pukapuka series, beginning with *Hari Pota ne te Whatu Manapou*. Huia Publishers started to set a faster pace, and added translations of classics like *Room on the Broom*, *He Wāhi te Puruma*, as well as upping the number of junior fiction titles translated into te reo Māori.

Just to fangirl over Huia Publishers for a little longer. They are publishing incredible work right now, particularly in the junior / middle-grade fiction space. Steph Matuku, Lauren Keenan, Shilo Kino, Ben Ngaia, Ataria Sharman... TK Roxborough with her Margaret Mahy Award-winning *Charlie Tangaroa and the Creature from the Sea*. It's great to see them capitalising on those authors coming out of Te Papa Tupu, alongside others.

As far as picture books go, Huia was responsible for introducing Sacha Cotter and Josh Morgan to one another, and we all know how well that is going – it's going like *The Bomb*.

Other publishers are also publishing great middle-grade fiction, much of in set in fantasy worlds, but some, like *Tūi Tales*, set here in Aotearoa. Gecko Press is also notable for its gorgeous middle-grade stories, from Barbara Else, Eirlys Hunter, and Joy Cowley, and even branched out into graphic novels with Jonathan King.

How about the rest of the books? Non-fiction books got bigger and more beautiful, like *Aotearoa*, by Gavin Bishop. We've followed trends around biographical anthologies with *Kia Kaha*.

In picture books, illustrations that may have been monocultural became multicultural, with headscarves, positive recognition of disabilities, and even some Queer representation. Though not enough, by any stretch of the imagination. Publishers also reliably maintained a stream of books featuring native birds, many of them wonderful.

There were even a couple of huge international hits, with Dawn McMillan's bum books, and the donkey who shall not be named.

[pause]

Of course, publishers don't always get it right. I wasn't just being hyperbolic in my essay on Newsroom a couple of months ago when I said there is an ugly side to our children's publishing, caused, I think, in part by perspectives of those who are looking for commercial value rather than paying enough attention to the important things – ensuring our children grow up without accidentally being fed bigotry by the books they are reading.

As you know, this is by no means a New Zealand-only problem. But these are our young readers – we need to care for their minds.

We also need further commitment by larger publishers to prioritise diversity in hiring – and to invest in authors that are from under-represented communities.

While Penguin Random House is sponsoring a Māori/Pasifika intern and funding them to complete the Diploma in Publishing at Whitireia for the second year this year, this needs to go further.

And more than that – we need to see slower publishing, if it means being able to invest in talent. Or more publishing staff at major publishers.

Right now, our authors put manuscripts forward to some publishers and have to wait six months, just to be told they need more work. In this current market, especially with Amazon biting at their profits, publishers don't have the money to allow talented commissioning editors to pick up a manuscript and say 'this has promise'.

I'd love to see more editor-author partnerships, with publishers being able to afford to give authors money to live on while getting their stories match-fit, so the artists themselves don't need to fill out a dreaded Creative NZ application form.

All children need to see themselves

All children deserve to see themselves in a book. So let's talk about our other populations and whether we are there yet in terms of acknowledging the part they play in making our Aotearoa what it is.

Pasifika publishing here is currently ramping up. Little Island Books was the first imprint within New Zealand to specialise in stories from the islands. Then Reading Warrior, David Riley, began to publish non-fiction to fit into this space, seemingly three at a time!

And Lani Wendt Young began e-publishing Pasifika YA series *Telesā*, which recently celebrated 10 years, and continues to this day. At the picture book end of the scale, we also have Dahlia Malealu publishing picture books in gagana Samoa.

OneTree House charged out of the gates when they began, publishing in many of the languages that people in Aotearoa speak. They have also picked up Lani and Dahlia and publish print copies of many of their books here.

We still have a way to go until I would say we are being fair in our recognition of all cultures. We still need more Asian authors for children, to join Vasanti Unka, Swapna Haddow, Weng Wai Chan, Graci Kim, and the now-international Chloe Gong. And there is a big gap in the market where other religions might sit, as my co-editor at *The Sapling* Nida Fiazi has pointed out.

I'd love to see stories celebrating more than just our Christian-normative cultural institutions.

I would also love to see diversity beyond culture – kids in wheelchairs, kids who have crushes on those who are the same sex, with same-sex parents, who are neurodiverse – the growth of this is yet to be seen. I can name one or two books in each of those categories, but I know we will get there, and in a decade, our industry will be more representative than ever before.

Good books reflect the best parts of our world, and tackle the worst parts with skill. Good books are about storytelling, about world-building, about characters you are drawn to. About not talking down to children, about keeping pages turning, and growing young readers.

We need these books to reflect our cultural diversity. And they can come from anywhere and anybody. But us Pākehā – we owe it to the ancestors of this land to listen and grow.

Good books grow well-balanced humans.