



Storylines Margaret Mahy Lecture 2022

‘Feeling My Way’

Diana Noonan, Storylines Margaret Mahy Medal winner 2022

Dame Wendy Pye, Margaret Mahy Awards committee, Storylines team, and guests,
tēnā koutou.

What an honour it is to be invited here today, and what a joy to be part of a celebration that has at its heart the memory of dear Margaret – Margaret Mahy. I was fortunate to have met Margaret at the very beginning of what would turn out to be my writing career. It was shortly after my first book had been published, and Margaret and I were visiting Dunedin where, together, we were to address a gathering of school students in the Dunedin Town Hall.

I had not long been living in the Catlins, in a modest home which the media liked to describe, rather dramatically, I felt, as a derelict fishing cottage with one cold water tap and a long drop lavatory. It was a description that Margaret was obviously aware of, because when we met, she lost no time in asking me how that lavatory was faring, and if I found it satisfactory. She then went on to describe to me, in quite technical detail, how her own septic arrangements were managed in Governor’s Bay.

I’m not sure how many of you are aware that Margaret held a penchant for plumbing. However, if you weren’t, then her cautionary tale, ‘The Great White Man-Eating Shark’, is surely a give-away. In it, Mr Dorsey, the plumber, is demonstrating to his young son, Courtney, how to stand on his head in the water, “something,” writes Margaret, “that a plumber sometimes has to do”.

Margaret’s enthusiasm for plumbing was in further evidence when I was sitting next to her at dinner, one evening, at the conclusion of a writers’ festival. The guest speaker on that occasion (I think it may have been Jenny Patrick) had recently been engaged in plumbing her own home, and her address followed that theme. What’s more, she had brought along some visual aids to help explain the intricacies of the job. The moment the speaker held up an elbow pipe, Margaret’s back stiffened, visibly, and she sat bolt upright in her chair, and was immediately fixated on what was coming next. Once or twice, I saw her hand twitch, as if she might be about to ask a question or offer a correction on a technical point, but to her credit, she managed to desist.

Anyway, following on from that first time I met Margaret in the Dunedin Town Hall, she would always track me down at writing gatherings for an update on my own plumbing situation. A few years later, an Arts Council grant enabled my husband and me to install a septic tank on our property, and to build a bathroom with a flush lavatory. And

thereafter, whenever Margaret and I ran into each other, I sensed a certain disappointment in her that our conversations were now restricted to down pipes and the storage capacity of water tanks.

I want to share with you one other recollection of Margaret, because I think it illustrates her great kindness, and how she was forever trying to put others, especially new writers, at their ease. It was following another literary function in Dunedin, and it occurred when I was driving Margaret to the airport on my own way home. My husband, Keith, was with me. Margaret, who had insisted on travelling in the back seat, was sitting beside our son Max, who was about eight years old at the time. With us was our pet white rat, Nibble Nose. (It can be difficult to find a pet sitter for a rat so she usually travelled with us.) Nibble was quietly hammocking in the sleeve of Max's jumper. When Margaret saw her nose poking out of Max's cuff, and her whiskers twitching, she was entranced, and asked if she could hold her. Max duly extracted the rat from his sleeve, and passed her to Margaret. A short time later, in a state of alarm, Max advised that we should stop the car immediately. Nibble Nose, he said, was peeing down Margaret's arm. I was horrified, but before I could pull the car over, Margaret announced, in a steady and reassuring voice, that there was nothing at all to be concerned about. She had, she said, found some tissues in her bag and, what's more, she advised, "We should all give thanks for the incident, as excretion was one of the seven signs of life."

And now, onto what is, rather terrifyingly referred to as the '40 minute lecture'.

Having been raised a Catholic, I thought it essential that I begin today, by making a confession. And it is this: With the possible exception of knitting, to which I am deeply devoted, and gardening, which is my way of life, I am not inclined to study in order to learn. Whether it's a musical instrument, a sport, or drawing, I would go so far as to say that I am lazy in this regard. You will not find me picking up a violin for an hour a day, year after year, until I have learned to play it, or attending an art class until I can draw to satisfy myself. I am even incompetent when it comes to several essential life skills, such as changing a tyre, because I will not practise.

But having said that, I *am* disciplined (to a fault, I suspect) when it comes to completing any task I set myself. (How else could I ever sit at a desk long enough to complete a novel?) It is just that my self-set tasks will always involve something that I enjoy and which I am already reasonably proficient at.

So, when it comes to writing, I have enormous admiration for the many people I have met whose aim it has been to become an author, and who, in order to achieve this, have read widely, attended writing courses and workshops, and often written several manuscripts before one was finally accepted for publication. I can tell you, quite categorically, that if *my* first manuscript, *The Silent People*, had not been accepted by

John McIndoe in 1989, I would never, ever, have written another thing. Having to study writing and polish my skills in anticipation of being published, would have simply come into the 'too hard' basket.

And this is where I must ask your forgiveness, especially as I note this lecture is to be filed on the Storylines website as a 'resource'. *Because* writing has always been a pleasure to me, and writing, reasonably competently, at least, has always come quite naturally, I actually have no idea how to teach it, and few, if any, tips on how others should go about it.

I have, I suppose, learned quite a lot about the *mechanics* of writing over the last 37 years, but I doubt that this alone will help anyone become an author. The fact is, I write because I feel things very strongly; whether it's the neon glow of flowers hovering over a garden in late afternoon light, or the whisper of the sea seeping through my bedroom window at night. I write novels and picture books purely for my own benefit, as a way of processing these feelings; so that when I am at the keyboard, I am forever *feeling* my way forward, creeping ahead, a word at a time, across the page as my feelings dictate; stopping occasionally to shed a tear or to hammer the keyboard in fury at what a character might have to endure. And I doubt that this 'feeling one's way' is something that can be taught – or if it can be, I don't know how to do it.

Over the years, I *have* fallen completely in love with grammar and punctuation as a means to serve my ends, but I cannot even teach *that* because I really don't understand how it works. I certainly don't have an adequate language to teach it to anyone else. It is simply a *feeling* for grammar that enables me to reduce myself (and, presumably, at times, my readers) to tears with a one-word sentence or an unexpected full stop. And it is only feeling that enables me to pile phrase upon phrase upon phrase until a satisfying crescendo is reached. The best I can offer by way of a teaching point is that it is always wise to break as many grammatical rules as possible. But only very occasionally.

Thank goodness then, for our son, Max, who is now a doctor of linguistics. Because when he began studying *his* discipline, I was at last able to ask someone I trusted to explain to me how what I seemed to do instinctively, achieved my ends. After all, working in the dark, even if it succeeds, isn't much fun. So I want to thank you, Max, for your patience in helping me make linguistic sense of the way I write, and for giving me a language with which I can begin to talk about it. Thank you for enjoying punctuation as much as I do; for joining me in celebrating the delicious placement of a full stop, and for sharing my outrage at yet another appalling attempt to abolish the Oxford comma. Thank you for helping me understand the potential of the semicolon, and for always being on the other end of WhatsApp, no matter in what Godforsaken part of the world you might be, to discuss the merits of the dash.

Where the strength of feeling that informs my writing comes from is something I have often asked myself, and over the years, I have traced it, at least in part, back to my early childhood. At a time when it wasn't common, I lived in a single parent household, my father having run off to marry his mistress shortly after I began school. Although there were always books in my home (*Blackberry Farm*, *Andy Pandy* and *Milly Molly Mandy* featured prominently), the domestic duties of a solo mother with a young family, whose task it was to live off the most meagre of incomes, afforded little opportunity for reading aloud to her children. However, there was always poetry and literature in the *air*.

It was delivered spontaneously as my mother recited aloud to my siblings and I verse and passages learned at school, while she cooked dinner or made jam or towed her ancient Electrolux around the house. So, at about the same time that I learned to read, I could also quote chunks from Wordsworth's 'Ode to the Intimations of Immortality', 'The Daffodils', 'The Ancient Mariner', Shakespeare, and 'Hiawatha'.

The fact that I had little, if any, understanding of what the words *meant* only served to impart the *feeling* that they contained; feeling that was delivered through the sheer rhythm of the lines as my mother spoke them (rather well, I think) aloud. Still, today, I am often aware of a meaningless rhythm in my mind that stirs emotion. I suppose it could be called a tune, although it contains no notes. It certainly contains no words. Perhaps the best way it can be described is that it is like the swell of the sea and the crash of waves. It's this rhythm that is frequently the catalyst for a piece of writing as I search for words to illustrate the emotion it evokes.

Literature was also in the air when, at about the age of eleven, I began attending lessons in, what in those days, was called elocution. My teacher was an Oscar Wilde-esk woman called Sylvia Laurence. She lived in a dark and decaying Dunedin villa which was screened from the street by enormous rhododendrons.

Miss Laurence, who must have been in her late sixties when I first began taking lessons from her, had long, tangled hair, streaked with henna which she attempted to hold in place with hair pins that were forever falling out. She lived in a gentleman's oriental, satin, smoking robe, and swallowed fingers-full of Vicks Vaporub which she said was to clear her larynx. Despite an immeasurable degree of eccentricity, she was highly regarded in Dunedin as a teacher. Occasionally, when my mother had managed to find a part-time cleaning job, she would send me to my lessons with a rolled wad of notes which Miss Laurence would accept, with barely disguised excitement, and immediately thrust down her cleavage.

At my elocution lessons I once more found myself in a world of rhythm attached to words I didn't understand. Miss Laurence would drape me in one of her many silk shawls, and direct me to enter and exit in and out of her heavy velvet curtains, as if I was an actor on a stage, to deliver whatever poem she had chosen for me. Or it might be a soliloquy from Hamlet or a song from a drowning Ophelia. It didn't seem to matter to me—or her—that I hadn't a clue what I was reciting. I simply mimicked the pattern of

the words as she spoke them, enjoying the deliciously weighed balance of the lines, the pauses, the rush of emotion in a sentence that might go on for a paragraph. It was all completely intoxicating.

This is why I think we must not underestimate the importance of reading aloud to children. And I think it should happen as early possible (even while a baby is in the womb), and for as long as a child will allow themselves to be read to—and certainly long after they have learned to read, themselves. More importantly, it should not be restricted to literature especially written *for* children. We should never be afraid that meaning might be obscure. In fact, this can be a distinct advantage as it can allow a child to sink into the feeling and emotion of a piece without the distraction of story.

Of course, an appreciation for the rhythm of language, even combined with depth of feeling, is not, on its own, enough to build a story. There is also the need for drama or there would be no plot. And fortunately, drama was something that was not in short supply during my formative childhood years. In a single parent home, with no father to attend to household maintenance, and a consequently anxious mother, the natural elements could spell imagined disaster at any moment.

I would go to sleep at night, in a southerly gale, fully expecting the roof of our house to be gone in the morning. In a drought, there was always the chance that sparks from the steam train that passed below our house each night might set our entire hamlet alight, taking our home and with it! In summer, when the water tanks were running dry, and baths had to be limited, my siblings and I would debate the possibility of Social Welfare descending, and whipping away we unwashed children into its care.

Where the potential for drama was not imminent, my mother was skilled at introducing it. One evening, she roused my siblings and I from our beds at three in the morning, and bundled us, in great excitement, into our ailing car. Then, she drove us to the local railway station to watch what she told us, with great emphasis, was the last steam train – the last steam train *ever* – to pass through our village. Although, at the age of six, I didn't understand the significance of this, I did *feel* that something of enormous importance was about to happen. I felt it, especially, when the guard on duty that frosty night, lifted me up high in my pyjamas, so that I could raise the signal for that last steam train to roar past our station. Twenty-one years later, it was the remembered *feeling* of that night, the hugeness and the romance of it, that saw me write my first picture book, *The Last Steam Train* which was published, shortly after, by Scholastic New Zealand.

There was also drama in store whenever my mother took my siblings and I to stay with my grandmother in Dunedin. For whatever reason, my mother thought it important that my brother and sister and I experience the mysteries of the city's wharves after dark. This was when it was still possible to park right *on* the Otago Harbour wharves, just metres away from the huge ships that were moored there, with their strange

names written across their bows in letters from alphabets we children didn't recognise. My mother would turn off the car's ignition, and instruct us to wind down our windows. We were then urged to keep completely silent so that we could hear the sailors talking to each other in foreign languages on the decks of the ships high above us.

This was very exciting for us (it obviously excited my mother). It meant that there were other people and places in the world; places that we didn't yet know anything about, but might one day visit – and in the meantime, we could always imagine. Years later, when I was writing non-fiction for an early literacy publisher, I managed to go aboard one of those foreign vessels with a maritime inspector of dangerous goods. It was every bit as foreign and exciting as I had anticipated. It never fails to surprise me the doors that are opened, and the places people are willing to take an author, when their pretext is research.

Educators are forever reminding teachers and parents that for children to be writers, they must first be readers. But perhaps what is even more important than reading, is that children experience drama and adventure in their own lives. I feel Margaret nodding in agreement. And adventure can be found everywhere, and in the simplest of ways. What could be more exciting than sleeping in a tent in your own back yard, or visiting a playground after dark, or climbing the crater walls of an extinct volcano? I feel that now, more than ever, whether it is out of a misplaced sense of safety, or simply a lack of imagination, that adventure often seems to be something that is out of bounds; something that happens *to* children rather than their being an active part of it. Exploring a river can change from something you do on an inflated inner tube, to something that happens to you when you are buckled into a seat on a commercial jet boat tour; climbing a high hill can turn into a gondola ride.

My first experience of combining strength of feeling, a sense of drama, and the pleasure of writing, came when I gave up teaching to live as self-sufficiently as possible in The Catlins on the east coast of South Otago. Then, more than now, this region was considered the ends of the earth. But with its winding gravel roads, wild coast, dark rain forest, and inhospitable climate, it was also a deeply romantic place, and it stirred in me the same emotions that my mother's recitations had.

The Catlins was not an environment to be ignored. It demanded response. My husband's response was to paint it onto the pottery he was making. I thought I would also respond through painting. But I quickly discovered that I wasn't a natural painter, and as you now know, I am not someone to practise. So when Keith suggested I paint with words, instead, I quickly followed his advice.

Having been a secondary school teacher of English, I was familiar with young adult novels because I was always searching them out for my students. So when I began painting with words, I simply directed my writing into that genre because it was

uppermost in my mind at the time. It was certainly not a deliberate decision to write for young people. And although, presumably, publication must have been in the back of my mind, I certainly have no recollection of it. It was just that winter nights were long in the Catlins, and the days freezing cold. And sitting beside the fire, with my typewriter on my lap, was rather enjoyable. And because I always finish what I start, I soon realised that in order to get to the end, I had better learn some basics about the structure of books.

This involved little more than grabbing a Judy Blume from our shelves, and counting how many words were in a chapter, and how many chapters made up a book. It surprises me, today, that these basics are often what a budding author still wants to know. And that it can actually prevent them from moving forward until they do. That, and on which page a picture book actually begins. At least I have been able to impart that much.

And so I wrote each day in our little house overlooking the sea while the endless rain fell all through the winter. And each day, late in the afternoon, I would ask Keith to listen to what I'd written. I was so certain that it was nothing more than appalling drivel, that I would make him turn his back to me while I read, so that I couldn't see him wincing. Something similar still goes on today, although I now have a modicum of confidence. At times.

When the story was finished, Keith gallantly bundled the typewritten pages together and sent them off to John McIndoe, a Dunedin publisher. I could never have done it. Then we sewed ourselves some rain jackets and panniers, and set off with our battered 10 speed bicycles to cycle the world. It was a great relief to leave the manuscript behind. I didn't want to think about who else might be wincing, or worse, sniggering, as they read it. And as I had no anticipation of it being published, it was easily forgotten.

I do think that every writer, unless they are a genius, must serve some sort of apprenticeship. For some it's through writing many rejected manuscripts. For others it's as a student of writing. My apprenticeship came not through writing my first novel—which is too far too clunky to be considered helpful in that regard, but through writing letters home while I was travelling for nine months.

I wrote these missives almost daily, and they were very long. And quite possibly tedious to anyone by myself. But I was so desperate to make sense of all that I felt and saw while travelling, that I sent them to everyone I could think of: family, friends, the children of friends, friends' mothers, neighbours, our local school, even the tiny congregation of our country church. No one was spared this correspondence.

The letters were so long they belonged in the novella genre. I know this because I found some of them, recently, when I was going through my late mother's papers, and

was shocked to discover that my tight handwriting filled every millimetre and both sides of up to 20 pages at a time of tissue-thin blue paper. Reading through these letters, I realised that they were full of drama and feeling, sentences and phrases were carefully balanced, alliteration flourished, description was elaborate, there was no shortage of real-life characters. There were even lengthy passages of dialogue!

When at last we arrived back in New Zealand, it was to discover the manuscript Keith had sent to John McIndoe had been accepted. I am sure that everyone I had written letters to was hugely relieved, because it would mean my writing would now be directed into literature (where it belonged), and not into their mail box.

Even though I didn't realise it then, that first acceptance was the beginning of what would be my job as a writer from thereafter, and it brought with it some challenging and often amusing experiences. Barbara Larson, managing editor at John McIndoe, immediately asked me what I was working on next. What I was working on, was gestation, but of course I didn't mention this, and instead, obediently began writing a second young adult novel. Of course, I was then obliged to finish it simply because I had begun it. Shortly after that, Barbara announced she was coming to visit, and would be staying over in our village.

I was eight months pregnant. We were living on \$36 a week, in a two-roomed fishing cottage with a single cold water tap and no bathroom. There was nothing that could be done about that, but I did plan to make myself as presentable as possible when she arrived, and we had hauled some food from the garden, and lit the wood stove, to make a welcoming meal. However, Brian Turner, Barbara's partner at the time, must have been a fast driver, even on gravel roads, because when their car pulled up, outside our home, it was an hour earlier than expected. They found me on the roadside, picking blackberries for their dessert while I supervised the evening grazing of our donkey, Ambrose. I was dressed in a curtain, which my elderly neighbour had given me, and which I had run up into a maternity smock.

Barbara, an animal lover, advanced on Ambrose to give him a pat. He took fright at this, and galloped past her, whipping his lead from my hand. Full of gallantry, Brian managed to catch hold of his rope, but was then towed up the road at great speed, his heels skidding along in the gravel in a shower of dust until he eventually disappeared over the brow of a hill. He returned in time for dinner, having finally chased Ambrose into a neighbouring paddock. If ever I had any pretentious notions about being an author, they quickly evaporated.

After that, journalists and the occasional TV crew ventured south to see what a writer and her family were doing to survive in such a remote part of the country. What we were doing in the Catlins was our choice, and gave us great happiness, but it was far from romantic. We were growing food, catching fish, cutting fire wood, drying nappies, and caring for a baby. My husband was making pots, and in any spare moment that might be available, I was trying to write another book.

As interest in our lifestyle increased, many curious passers-by came to visit. This posed something of a problem because, in our very small home, there was nowhere to hide in order to find peace to write. (I can write anywhere at all, but I do find noise a terrible distraction.) To escape, we would saddle our donkey with his panniers, fill them with baby paraphernalia and food from the garden, and trek along the beach to a friend's holiday home where we could not be found. Eventually, I discovered that there were other ways to carve out the space to put pen to paper. It was something I learned from Tessa Duder when I met her at a writers' gathering shortly after my first book had been published.

The constraints of our lifestyle must have preceded me, or perhaps Tessa had read about the 'derelict fishing cottage' in a magazine, but she encouraged me to apply for a literary grant (I hadn't known such things existed). No doubt, as I had with the letters from abroad, I filled up far too many pages of the application with real life drama, but the tales of trying to write in between chopping fire wood, filleting fish and hoeing up cabbages, secured the much-needed grant.

When I went to Auckland to be presented with it, and expressed to Tessa my astonishment at receiving what felt to me like a vast sum of money, she paused for a moment, then smiled kindly and said, rather tactfully, I thought, that 'some applicants were obviously more deserving than others'.

It was at that same occasion that I met Pauline Cartwright, a children's writer from Alexandra. Pauline is someone to whom I owe a huge debt of gratitude because it was she who sowed the seed that has enabled me, ever since, to make a career from full time writing. Pauline came to visit us in the Catlins with, I am quite sure, the express intention of being helpful. One day, when we were walking on the beach (this time I was wearing a pair of shorts made from a cut down batique table cloth), she said gently, "Have you ever thought of writing picture books and early literacy, because you're never going to make a living from novels."

As I had no idea what early literacy was, and didn't want to admit this, I started with the picture books. It's often said that writers draw on everything they have ever known to fill the pages of their books. Every person, every place, every experience: nothing is sacred. But I think that writing is as much about what we *don't* know and want to find out, what we have never seen but wish to explore, what we have not experienced but wish we had.

In my childhood, there may have been literature in the air, and drama and adventure, but the everyday grind to survive difficult circumstances demanded stoicism on the part of my mother. There was little room for displays of emotion that might be construed as vulnerability. Now, in this new picture book genre, I was free to explore what tender, intimate relationships between a child and a parent might look like, and to plumb the depths of a child's delicate mind. As always, I was to feel my way forward, but this time, it would be into uncharted territory.

In terms of being published, my picture book manuscripts were quickly accepted. So, once again, I don't have a lot to offer by way of tips. Except, in hindsight, perhaps this:

I think, that as writers for young children, it's our responsibility to tread very, very carefully. We are writing for tiny humans whose emotions are still only partially formed; for strange little beings who think and feel and behave in ways that we can only ever guess. We're dealing with the most fragile of egos, with scraps of humanity that are easily damaged. These little people have no defences against what life might throw at them. One minute they are happily dancing around a room in a fairy costume, the next they've dissolved into tears because they've dropped a biscuit.

My husband was a teacher at our local primary school for a number of years, and I would sometimes go to visit him to support his students when they were taking part in a sports or a pet day. I would inevitably arrive to find him calling out encouragement to children confidently jumping hurdles or parading a puppy, while beside him, holding tightly to his hand, was a little thing sobbing its heart out because mud had dirtied its new shoes or the ribbon from the collar of its lamb had been lost.

Children are not people we can afford to take risks with when we write. As authors, we have to judge it right first time. As editors, we must quickly weed out the didactic and punishing manuscript that seeks to dictate and push children into some preconceived mould of the writer's own fashioning. And what I find most worrying is this: while self-publishing no longer carries with it the stigma it once did, it also means there is no guarantee of a guard on the gate of publishing; no editor to reject or advise or caution or refine. I am sometimes sent books that have come through this unguarded gate, and it frightens me to think that they are being foisted upon children. At best they are tedious, at worst they are adult-centred, moralistic, and damaging.

And here, perhaps, I do have a little advice. Before we write picture books, we would do well to read the work of paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott, who coined the concept of the 'good enough mother'. For in many ways, a good enough picture book has many of the same qualities of the good enough parent.

Winnicott warns us away from being the helicopter parent who swoops in to rescue a child from every difficult situation they might find themselves in. That would never help a child to become resilient. Nor does Winnicott advise that a parent leave a child alone in their distress. This neglect will only breed the narcissist for whom there is nothing in the world but themselves. What Winnicott does advise is that, for *most* of the time at least, the parent simply be intimately present and available to the child; to hold them, always emotionally, and often physically, in a place of security while they weather whatever storm they are encountering. And if they do that, then, when the storm finally abates, the child will emerge from it to find they are still in one piece. They will be stuffed with a little more resilience than before.

And this is what the good enough picture book does. I say 'good enough' because how can we ever hope to write the perfect story when we have no access to the mind of someone who is yet too young to fully articulate their feelings.

When a writer takes a young child on a picture book journey, they *manufacture* the storm, but it is real enough to take the child along with it. The writer develops the storm slowly, until the child is on the brink of being subsumed by it. They hold the tension for just long enough to allow the child to experience real fear, or sadness, or loss, or anxiety, and then, very gently they bring the child down from this unbearable situation by providing a solution. Of sorts. I say 'of sorts' because, in real life, solutions are seldom perfect.

What I believe makes one 'good enough' picture book excel over another, is its denouement. It's this crucial stage in the story that allows space for the main character (and the listening child – I see them as one in the same) to explore their *own* answer to the crisis. Because who are we, the grown-up, to think we can possibly provide the best answer? As an adult, we have left childhood behind, and can only ever hope to enter it again in some tiny, imagined way.

And so, in the picture book *Aunty Rosie and the Rabbit*, which Christine Ross kindly illustrated for me, a little boy finds himself in the midst of unbearable separation from his parents as they head off to a maternity hospital to await the arrival of a baby that will usurp him. The situation for the little boy is horrendous, but a kindly 'helicopter' aunt, who has been sent to care for the child until his parents return, swoops in to cheer up the little boy by refurbishing his one hold on security – his soft toy rabbit.

The situation grows graver as the kindly aunt transforms the rabbit with mends and patches and a fine set of news clothes. Now the little boy is not only separated from his parents, but also from the rabbit with its all its familiar textures and smells. The child is completely alone. What was a storm has become a maelstrom, and with the familiarity of the rabbit gone, there is no anchor for the child to hold on to. He is adrift, and in a terrifying world that is now is beyond chaos.

Of course, the storm abates, as it must do, and it seems that all is well when the child, taking the refurbished rabbit with him, at last goes to the maternity hospital to meet his baby sibling, and the family regroups in a new way.

We, the adult, think all has been restored to harmony, but as I said, it is the denouement that is most important part of a picture book, for it allows the child reader space to create their own satisfactory solution. That is why a denouement must be firm enough to be conclusion, but light enough to prove the writer wrong.

In the case of *Aunty Rosie and the Rabbit*, just as the little boy meets his baby sibling, he also discovers a tiny familiar hole in the toy rabbit's coat. His well-meaning aunt has not found it with her needle and thread. And into this tiny hole the little boy pushes his finger until he feels the familiar softness of the rabbit's stuffing. Although he doesn't know it, cannot articulate anything about it, it is this literal stuffing that will sustain him

until the memory of the storm finally abates, and he emerges from it with a little more resilience – a little more of his *own* stuffing. This is the power of good literature to build up a child.

I'm enormously grateful to Pauline Cartwright for suggesting I write picture books, and in terms of making a living from my work, for introducing me to the potential for writing early literacy. New Zealand has led the world for many years in this field, and the international appetite for these little Kiwi-written books, while not quite what it once was, is still there.

It was an interest in early literacy that eventually led me to write for the *School Journal*, and the acceptance of my first piece for this publication, a short non-fiction article titled 'Mother Earwigs and Their Babies', was a highlight of my writing career. Despite having been published in many other fields, I really felt that, by having work included in the *School Journal*, I had somehow joined the ranks of real New Zealand writers. I'm sure this was because so many Kiwi authors, Margaret Mahy among them, had had their first piece of writing printed in this iconic publication. I may have had to work my way backwards to achieve this feat, but I was no less proud of it.

Alas, this elation, which stayed with me for the next three years, was somewhat deflated when I eventually went to Wellington to work as editor of the senior parts of the *School Journal*. This was in pre-internet days, when writers and editors were known to each other only by name, through the exchange of letters. I was 36 years old. I had been 33 when I wrote the piece. On my first day at work, I was met by the outgoing editor, who had agreed to stay on for a week to show me the ropes. There was some general chat, and then, I suppose by way of breaking the ice, he announced jovially, that when my 'Earwig Mother and Babies' article had first arrived in the School Journal office, the staff who read it had assumed it was the work of an elderly eccentric. My ego, which only ever extended to publication in the *School Journal*, was shattered – which was probably a good thing.

I managed to live in Wellington for two years, but homesickness for the Catlins dove me back to our cottage by the sea. By this time, the internet was in its infancy, but was sufficient, when coupled with my rural postal service, to allow me to work on the *School Journal* from a tiny garden shed at the back of our house. It was not much larger than a double wardrobe, but Keith lined it for me to help keep out some of the Catlins cold.

Working from a remote outpost in the middle of a rainforest, and using a new-fangled technology called 'The Internet' to do so, somehow captured the imagination of the media, and once again, journalists beat a retreat to our door. I remember one reporter in particular. Wishing to photograph me at work on the *School Journal*, and being unable to fit into my 'office', he was forced to climb a ladder set up in the garden outside. Balanced on the top step, he managed to train his camera through the window, and obtain the required shot, just as the ladder began to teeter.

And then there were the misplaced flowers. An Auckland radio station had decided it would honour the first Kiwis to use the internet to work remotely on jobs of national importance. They phoned to say a gift of flowers would soon be with me. I adore flowers, and couldn't wait. What the radio station hadn't mentioned, however, was that the flowers were being sent from Auckland by courier. The Catlins had no courier service. When the flowers arrived nine days later, having first been sent to an isolated village in Northland, only one (a green carnation) was still alive.

Over the years, I have been grateful not only to have received flowers, but more support than I could ever have imagined possible. For that assistance I want to thank the many illustrators who have worked alongside me, the publishers and editors who have accepted and refined my work, and the booksellers, librarians, and schools who have promoted it. I am especially indebted to the late Ray and Barbara Richards who, as literary agents, worked tirelessly on my behalf for many years.

Without the generosity of Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa, and a host of private providers of residencies and funding, my life as a writer would have been much more difficult. I would also like to thank my Catlins community for acknowledging my work, celebrating my successes, and for sheltering me in many different ways when solitude has been required.

To my extended family, thank you for your support over the years, and for often dressing me for literary functions, especially in the early days, when a curtain or tablecloth might well have been the only alternative. To Janice Marriott who was on the staff of Learning Media when I went to work as editor of the *School Journal*, thank you for your breath-of-fresh-air company, and for your friendship ever since. I would also like to acknowledge Hone Apanui and the late Maringi Riddell for their patience in introducing me to the world of Māori publishing while I was on the staff of Learning Media.

To our son, Max, thanks for joining us on the ride, even though you had no choice, and for often being my child critic. To my illustrator and author husband, Keith Olsen, thank you for partnering with me on many literary projects, for carving out temporary homes for the three of us wherever in the country we have washed up on residencies and jobs, and most of all for always patiently listening to my writing without wincing (although I can't be sure of that as I still make you turn your back to me when I read).

I am honoured to be receiving the Margaret Medal, and to have this connection with someone who was so hard working, and who offered such kindness to so many writers. Thank you, Storylines, for honouring me in this way, and for the many hours of voluntary work it will have involved.

Kia ora

Nō reira, tēnā koutou katoa