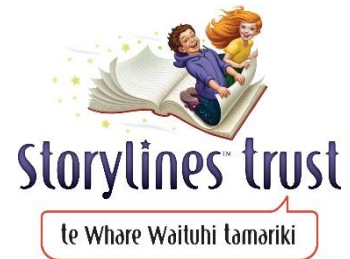


# Storylines Margaret Mahy Medal Lecture 2023

James Norcliffe

**Irksome Confections: A defence of fantasy**



I have to say at the outset how honoured and overwhelmed I feel at being accorded this accolade, not least because the award itself celebrates the wonderful Margaret Mahy.

That I should be named as a recipient of the Margaret Mahy medal is especially moving for me.

Nearly twenty years ago, Joan and I bought a section on a gentle slope of Church Bay with a view overlooking Lyttelton Harbour. Were it not for the volcanic lump that forms Otomahau, or Quail Island, blocking the view, and if we had super-hero visual acuity, we could have waved at Margaret across the water in her house at 23 Merlincote Crescent in Governor's Bay.

It's been pointed out before just how apposite that address was given the magical qualities in Margaret's writing. Mernlicote. I've looked up the origins of the name, but quite unsuccessfully. It could be a family name, or a place name somewhere. But appropriately, the word remains mysterious. Merlin could relate to bird, a small falcon, and cote to a small hut or enclosure for animals and birds, as in dove cote. There's a charming dovecote in Orton Bradley Park not far from where we live. But I prefer to think that Merlin relates to the magician, so I see Merlincote as housing a gathering of small – perhaps flying – magicians. Perfect.

I visited 23 Merlincote Crescent occasionally. For quite a few years Margaret hosted an annual Christmas gathering there for the local branch of the New Zealand Society of Authors. She would generously supply a whole leg of ham and bottles of wine. Her house was magical, especially enchanting our daughter Lissie with its walls of books, its levels, stairs, its rocking horse, and Margaret's extensive collection of kaleidoscopes. Margaret pressed copies of her books on to Lissie, gifts she treasures to this day.

When in 1992 Hazard Press published *Under the Rotunda*, my first book for young people, I was nervous of trespassing on Margaret's generosity, but Quentin Wilson, my publisher, was sure she'd love the book and sent her an advance copy, asking whether she could provide some blurb copy and, further, whether she'd consider launching it. Margaret would, and did, launching the book warmly, wittily, wonderfully. There was a large crowd, but I was realistic enough to acknowledge that many were there because of Margaret not because of me or the book.

A few years later, Margaret agreed to launch another, very different book, my dark fantasy *The Assassin of Gleam*, in 2006. It was another full house and again I had few illusions that all the people were there for me or the book. Once more, Margaret was marvellous. As a footnote, some years later, a year or so before she died in fact, I received out of the blue a phone call from Margaret. She was calling to say she had just finished re-reading *The Assassin of Gleam* and was reminded of what a great book it was – or something like that. I can't remember her exact words. She did explain in some detail; however, I was so taken aback that she should have re-read the book, liked it, and then taken the time to call me I

hardly took it in. That was Margaret: generous, kind and hugely encouraging. The call was very precious to me. And still is.

Of course, to indulge briefly in oxymoron, we respond most warmly to what we like and feel an affinity to. Margaret wrote many of the finest fantasies ever published in Aotearoa New Zealand, and she loved and read widely in the genre. In her talks and essays she often cited favourite fantasy writers: Lewis Carroll, naturally, and Ursula Le Guin, Tolkein, Susan Cooper of *The Dark is Rising* series, Russel Hoban, Angela Carter, and a host of others. These are writers I very much like, too. Perhaps, then, Margaret was predisposed to like my work.

In any event, a love of fantasy was something we shared. Given its ongoing popularity, fantasy hardly needs defending; it's a little like putting up a spirited defence of healthy food or a good night's sleep, but nevertheless, I would like in this talk to defend it and to discuss why I continue to write and read fantasy and to make some observations on its range and possibilities. I'll follow up with a discussion on the connections between my writing poetry and my writing fantasy stories.

I did mention 'ongoing popularity'. It is amusing in retrospect, but in the late nineties my agent of the time, Ray Richards, usually very astute, tried to persuade me not to persist with writing fantasy as it was passé, and instead to write an 'issues' book – the sort of book schoolteachers could use as an entrée into a class discussion on some sociological problem: alcoholic parents, teenage pregnancy, and the like. I was somewhat in awe of Ray and set off to write an 'issues' book, in this case a tug-of-love story about a father who kidnaps his own son. I couldn't resist having the father disguise himself in a gorilla suit, though. I finished the book, and it was terrible. So terrible I didn't even send it on to Ray. Luckily, at that point, I was able to forget 'issues books' as within weeks of my finishing my own pathetic contribution to the genre in 1997, J.K. Rowling published her first Harry Potter book, and the rest is history.

I have always been rather taken with Ambrose Bierce's definition of prayer, which goes something like this – I'm quoting from memory – that the laws of the universe be annulled on behalf of a single petitioner, confessedly unworthy.

This is of course from *The Devils Dictionary*, one of the most cynical compilations you'll find. Whatever else it may be, though, fantasy is the genre that grants that prayer. In fantasy characters and plots break the laws of the universe with rampant abandon: people fly, become invisible, metamorphose, become giant or miniaturised, travel through time, have x-ray vision and other strange medical conditions that give them powers and talents unknown in the world of mundane reality. Fantasy by definition breaks all boundaries.

Many of the ways fantasy breaks the laws of the universe I exploit in my own work.

In my first novel for young people, *Under the Rotunda*, a brass band gets miniaturised and a bouncy dog becomes enlarged a hundred-fold, then the same thing happens to two of the protagonists. There is a possible ghost in *Penguin Bay*, *The Emerald Encyclopedia* has an enchanted book that foretells the future; *The Carousel Experiment* has a holiday park that is in reality a rotating time machine; the *Loblolly* books feature a flying, invisible boy and other supernatural figures; *The Enchanted Flute* has, well, an enchanted flute as well as time travel; and so it goes... My latest, *The Crate*, foregrounds a ghost and like *Mallory, Mallory: Trick or Treat* also includes time travel. *Mallory, Mallory: The Revenge of the Tooth Fairy* has a comic alternative land as did, in a much darker way, *The Assassin of Gleam*.

Not everybody appreciates this flagrant breaking of universal law. In his novel *Saturday* [Jonathan Cape, 2005] Ian McEwan writes of one day in the life of a neurosurgeon in London. Henry Perowne is his name and he is materially successful, happily married with two talented grown-up children. His daughter, Daisy, a promising young poet, has drawn up a reading list of sorts for her father and he has been following her schedule albeit with some reservations. He ploughs through *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary* only to find that after hours and hours of reading he can encapsulate their messages in a few words and thus could have saved himself the bother of reading them in the first place: "...That adultery is understandable but wrong, that nineteenth-century women had a hard time of it, that Moscow and the Russian countryside and provincial France were once just so..." This is not a man likely to develop a passion for fiction.

There is fine comedy here, but as his next thoughts impact directly on our theme I would like to quote at greater length. These are Henry's thoughts:

"[*Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*] had the virtue, at least, of representing a recognisable physical reality, which could not be said for the so-called magic realists [Daisy] opted to study in her final year. What were these authors of reputation doing – grown men and women of the twentieth century – granting supernatural power to their characters? He never made it through a single one of those irksome confections. And written for adults, not children. In more than one, heroes or heroines were born with or sprouted wings – a symbol, in Daisy's term, of their liminality; naturally, learning to fly became a metaphor for bold aspiration. Others were granted a magical sense of smell, or tumbled unharmed out of high-flying aircraft. One visionary saw through a pub window his parents as they had been some weeks after his conception, discussing the possibility of aborting him.

"Henry Perowne is a brain surgeon of course and 'bound to respect the material world'. Given this, Henry believes that 'the actual, not the magical should be the challenge'. The reading list had persuaded Henry that the supernatural was the recourse of an insufficient imagination, a dereliction of duty, a childish evasion of the difficulties and wonders of the real, of the demanding re-enactment of the plausible."

A somewhat less fictional character, Joseph Conrad – much earlier – was similarly scathing:

"The world of the living contains enough marvels and mysteries as it is – marvels and mysteries acting upon our emotions and intelligence in ways so inexplicable that it would almost justify the conception of life as an enchanted state. No, I am too firm in my consciousness of the marvellous to be ever fascinated by the mere supernatural, which (take it any way you like) is but a manufactured article, the fabrication of minds insensitive to the intimate delicacies of our relation to the dead and to the living, in their countless multitudes; a desecration of our tenderest memories; an outrage on our dignity." [Author's note to *The Shadow Line*, 1920]

Among other things, this touches on the somewhat obvious point that the world as cutting-edge science currently understands it – the world of quantum mechanics with its quarks, glueballs and spots of matter existing simultaneously in two places, the wonders glimpsed from Hubble telescopes such as black holes and wormholes; and genomes, nanotechnology, genetic engineering... these things seem to render fantasy obsolete, much as many years ago Tom Lehrer saw Ronald Reagan as rendering satire obsolete.

But interesting as this point is, this is not really what Perowne and Conrad are saying.

Given what they *are* saying, perhaps I should sit down right now, waving my white flag. The prosaic Perowne and the elegant Conrad, far from helping us define the boundaries of fantasy, would allow fantasy no latitude at all.

But still when we consider the word *fantasy* and its relations we find *wonder*, *awe*, *amazement* and we note how these often translate adjectivally into words of high approbation: *fantastic*, *wonderful*, the ubiquitous *awesome*, *amazing*... Even words Henry might prefer such as 'unreality' and 'incredibility' become as adjectives *incredible* and *unreal*. Whether these are describing a film, a car, a meal, a lover, or anything – no one can deny that these are applause words.

Perowne and Conrad make some quite pungent criticisms of fantasy and, as a practitioner, I would like to address these.

Perhaps by way of expiation I could claim that my own "irksome confections" are somewhat juvenile – for the simple reason that they were written for children, and this on the face of it might allow me to duck one of Perowne's challenges. Perowne himself as we heard made allowances for children's fiction. However, at least some of my books have been marketed under the new generic "crossover" fiction; that is, books to be read and enjoyed by readers both juvenile and adult. I understand each book in the moderately successful Harry Potter series, already alluded to, was issued with two covers: one clearly aimed at ten-year-olds, the other aimed at bank managers and others equally mature – people I guess who wanted to read the books without embarrassment on the train. However the term "crossover" more properly belongs to the books by people such as Philip Pullman in his *Dark Materials* sequence of novels: books which are multi-layered and which can be read by bright younger readers but with dark and complex themes more properly understood by adult readers.

So what, then, are Perowne's objections? If I could enumerate them they would seem to be:

Firstly, that fantasy is childish. This is what I might call the condescending argument.

Secondly, that the actual not the magical should be the challenge. That writing fantasy is a dereliction of duty. This is perhaps the functional argument.

Thirdly, that fantasy is the product of an insufficient imagination. This is perhaps the qualitative argument.

Fourthly, that fantasy represents an evasion of the difficulties and wonders of the real. This is another version of the functional argument but has elements of the evaluative as well.

Ultimately though, to me, Perowne seems to be missing the point. Of course there is mystery and wonder in the real world, enough for a million mind-bending novels, but for all that, there remains room for fantasy. Please. Fantasy is fun.

As mentioned, my first fantasy novel was called *Under the Rotunda*. The title derived from a little pairing of words that cropped into my head as I was walking a dog. Under the rotunda. It was rhythmic – a silly little mantra. I have that sort of mind. I pictured a rotunda—a bandstand – a circular raised bandstand in a public park. Beside the stairs leading up to the bandstand was a tiny door. What was the purpose of the tiny door? I pictured tiny brass band players. How had they become tiny? What if an inept magician had somehow miniaturised them? Why would he do this? How could the situation be resolved? By posing and answering these *what if* questions, a story emerged and I quite quickly set it all down on paper. It ended up being a quite charming fantasy story of about 170 pages.

Perhaps because I'd exhausted my imagination momentarily, but really because I was interested in the interface between the real, the mundane and the fantastic, I set the book in the quite recognisable reality of my home town, Christchurch. I set the book in actual suburbs, used actual street names, much as Kate De Goldi has in her wonderful new book *Eddy, Eddy*. I used two actual rotundas in the book and much of the book's climax is set in Hagley Park, the huge central city space of park and garden.

This fusion – perhaps confusion – of fantasy and actuality caused major problems for a couple of the Henry Perownes my publisher, Quentin Wilson of Hazard Press, was using for editors.

One came back troubled because she'd checked and discovered that the gates to Hagley Park were locked at nine o'clock therefore it wouldn't have been possible for me to have vehicles driving in and out of the park at midnight. I tried to explain that the book was *fiction*.

I had a scene where two of the protagonists were turned into giants by the magician in another failed attempt to return people to normal size – a device as old, of course, as *Alice in Wonderland*. In order to give an impression of their size, I said that they'd become so tall they'd risen beyond the trees, and I'd used a simile somewhere saying that from their new height the trees below looked like bonsai. This worried the editor who said that the trees would not look like bonsai because bonsai would be *too* small: the trees would look more like shrubs. I tried to explain that I was being *poetic*. The device was hyperbole.

A third Perowne, a scientist friend, came up to me at a party having read the book and explained patiently that of course I knew that the human body is structured to exist within certain parameters of physical size. If a human body was shrunk or stretched to the sizes I described, it could not possibly function. The skeletal framework could not support the mass, there would be organ failure, no human that small or that large could possibly survive... I tried to explain that I was writing *fantasy*.

My ultimate argument is that in the house of fiction there are many mansions, and fantasy is one of them, and a legitimate one. Perowne's strictures sound like a very limiting prescription. Fantasy can do the things all fiction does: it can entertain, illuminate, educate; it can be didactic, romantic, tragic, comic. Without fantasy we would not have Gulliver, Alice, Brer Rabbit, Pantagruel, Homer of the Odyssey, Ovid of the Metamorphoses, if it comes to that. Nor would we have had the thousands of astonishing fantasies, speculative fiction and science fiction of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, written for both children and adults. Mr. Gradgrind would have hated fantasy. That is good enough for me to give it a big fat tick.

In short, the first and third arguments (that fantasy is childish and lacking imagination) are clearly subjective. The second and fourth arguments (the functional and the evaluative) seem to me to criticise fantasy not for what it is but for what it isn't and are unnecessarily prescriptive.

What I have said so far has been a defence of fantasy, a defence based simply on the idea that fantasy is a wide-ranging exploration unhampered by natural laws. I do not feel fantasy should be criticised for not being what it patently does not set out to be.

As an aside, there is the question of whether fantasy's boundaries are changing. It would be easy to say that fantasy has no boundaries by definition; as I suggested at the beginning of this talk, it is a genre where the laws of the universe are annulled.

However, as Lloyd Alexander, the writer of the wonderful *Prydain* series of fantasy novels, based on the Welsh myths, once remarked, and again I'm quoting from memory: the muse of fantasy wears good sensible shoes. This is the salutary reminder of the paradox that the un-believability must be believable, and it becomes believable by being grounded in a created reality. There must be, within the new rules established by the fantastic situation, a consistency. What the fantasy writer does is create an alternative reality, but that reality is governed by discernible limits, boundaries and rules. All fiction asks for a willing suspension of disbelief; fantasy asks that we go further. Willing suspension of disbelief is a contract: if you accept this, there will be a payoff in terms of enjoyment, artistic satisfaction and what have you. Given this, and given that both writer and reader abide by the contract, then perhaps we should argue that the boundaries of fantasy are as limitless as ever.

In one respect however, it could be argued that the boundaries are changing. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century many forms of art became prone to a new form of expression, you know the one: heavily ironic and knowingly self-referential. There are mutual satisfactions in this post-modern approach: a conspiracy is entered into between both viewer and artist, or reader and writer. This is my material, but you know and I know that we shouldn't take this at face value – it's really an ironic joke, which I lay before you knowing that you're smart enough to see it for what it really is.

Some modern fantasies introduce elements of these attitudes, and as a result have quite different tones – sensibilities from what has been before – and have explored the wonderfully comic possibilities of playing, as it were, against type. I'm thinking here of the work of Douglas Adams and the *Discworld* books of Terry Pratchett among a host of others. I love it that these people and their disciples have introduced, or re-introduced, this self-referential humour into fantasy – there aren't many jokes in *Lord of the Rings*. Perhaps the boundaries are changing.

Finally, my hats.

I wear a number of writing hats, but two have given me the greatest satisfaction: writing fantasy for young people, and writing poetry for older people. So much so that my work seems to run along parallel lines and I sometimes wonder whether I'm known as a children's writer who writes poetry, or a poet who writes children's stories. The two – poetry and fantasy – may seem to be quite disparate, but to me the genres sit well together and share a number of features.

These include the primacy of imagination, the striving for originality, the element of surprise, the importance of structure, the rich possibilities of layered meaning, and a delight in play.

When I consider the primacy of imagination, both poetry and fantasy involve – lovely expression – flights of fancy. Flying. Taking us somewhere new. Both a fantasy novel and a poem start out with a germ of an idea: a word, an image, a memory, perhaps a 'what if' stream of thought. Everybody does this – from romantic dreams to Lotto dreams and everything in between. The trick is to erect a narrative on top of the dream or fantasy, or use it to build a poem. Paul Klee once wonderfully described drawing as 'taking a line for a walk'. Writing fiction, especially fantasy fiction, is taking an idea for a walk, taking a dream for a walk.

As writers, whether of poetry or fantasy, we strive for originality and, at its most essential, originality means saying something that hasn't been said before – or saying something in a

completely new way. Ezra Pound once famously instructed writers to 'make it new' stressing the importance of being innovative. It is hard to come up with a completely novel fantastic possibility, and even plot lines have been quantified and catalogued, but within those parameters, originality is possible, just as it is in music. The best fantasy and the best poetry avoid the predictable, the cliché, the tired worn-out tropes that equal some kind of literary paint-by-numbers.

And the mention of predictability brings us to the importance of surprise. At one level, introducing the element of surprise is as easy as shouting BOO! But this is cheap currency and not at all satisfying. The best surprise in fiction is not gratuitous, it is the surprise we get when we put down the book and say, "Well, I didn't see that coming!" This is the surprise that the greatest who-dunnit writers strive for, the surprise we could have seen coming if we had been properly alert – the clues have been artfully present all along: the surprise of discovering a given character is not quite who we thought they were; the surprise that makes us re-evaluate events, situations and people, their motives and character, the surprise that makes perfect sense after the event. Often such a surprise, or series of surprises, will come at the end but they can be peppered throughout the story, so that we as readers are zigzagged about and jolted into new understandings and suspicions. It is utterly satisfying if you can come up with a real doozy of a surprise, that comes as a stunner to the reader but at the same time – after the event – seems utterly inevitable. I think the ending I am proudest of is the finale of *The Crate*. Each time I re-read the ending, as the realisation of what has really happened dawns on Amy and Danny, I feel the hair on the back of my neck begin to prickle. I'd love to share the ending with you, but spoilers, spoilers. I'm reminded how Agatha Christie wanted to put out an embargo to prevent audiences of her famous play *The Mousetrap* from sharing the ending. At the play's end one of the actors traditionally enjoins the audience to keep the ending locked in their hearts.

As an aside, perhaps the most astonishing rug pull in our own fantasy comes at the end of Margaret Mahy's *The Haunting*, her first full-length fantasy which won her the Carnegie Medal in 1982. Haunting of course implies ghost and ghost implies dead person. However, the end of the novel brilliantly reveals that Barney is not being haunted by a dead something, but by the spirit of his very alive great-uncle Cole.

Surprise is important in poetry too, perhaps tied up again with Pound's dictum to make it new. Of course, it's not the surprise revelation of plot or character, but rather surprise in language. Much poetry relies for its effect on figurative language especially metaphor and simile. The poet strives to avoid those clichéd figures of speech sometimes known as dead metaphors. You know, ships ploughing over the seas, the sea being so rough you must batten down the hatches because life is no bed of roses when it's raining cats and dogs.

An image which juxtaposes two utterly unlike ideas is striking not only because of its novelty, but because the reader is forced to consider the ways in which the comparison is apt in new and surprising ways, and this adds resonance and memorability to the poetic concept. In this way, it compels the reader to consider things anew. Poetry can also work against type in surprising ways. It can recontextualise language, reconsider form, and in doing so pull the rug on the reader.

An example of this from my latest collection *Letter to 'Oumuamua* is called *Dear Contributor*. It plays against form by asking the reader to accept as a 'poem' a piece of writing that purports to be a letter from an editor to a contributor, then it subverts that form by using text

that does not read at all like such a letter, and finally it has an ‘I didn’t see that coming’ conclusion.

Here it is:

### **Dear Contributor**

Spruce is a member of the *Picea* family. It is a coniferous evergreen from the northern temperate and boreal regions of the earth.

Pine trees are also conifers, also evergreen, and comprise members of the very large *Pinus* family.

Larch is another conifer of the genus *Larix* from the boreal regions of the earth. It differs from the aforementioned in that it is deciduous.

Hemlock is yet another conifer, a member of the *Tsuga* family, found in North America and parts of Asia. It is not to be confused with the herb hemlock, a decoction of which was used to put Socrates to death.

The above are all useful and beautiful trees, none of which we are prepared to sacrifice in order to publish your contribution.

Sincerely

The Editors

Which brings us to layered meaning.

A good poem is in many ways like an onion: you can peel back layers of meaning, of suggestion, of possibility. I sense that it is this aspect of poetry – which certain English teachers love – is a reason why so many people came to dislike poetry at school.

Fantasy, too, has or can have layers of meaning, metaphor, symbols. There are the famous ‘themes’, again beloved by teachers. My *Loblolly Boy* is first and foremost a story full of surprises and reversals, some comic, some scary. But it also explores the deep-seated and irrational desires of so many young people: the desire to be able to leap into the air and fly, and the desire to be invisible. Flying of course equates to freedom and the thrill and excitement of being able to soar like a bird; invisibility equates to safety, to the desire to be present but not present, the ability to eavesdrop with impunity, possibly the desire to indulge in consequence-free mayhem and mischief.

Irrational desires? Not always. The need to fly suggests the need to escape; invisibility does too – a magical escape from depressingly real and intolerable situations.

The layered meanings of fantasy are as old as Aesop – stories often imply morals or lessons. These should, naturally, never be laboured or propagandist, but subtle, true, and best reflected on in the resonance or after-glow of the story. Like a poem, actually.

Finally, play. Back in the forties, in Holland during the German occupation, the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga wrote an influential book called *Homo Ludens* – a term usually translated as Man the Player. The book develops the argument that play is a central and formative component of human culture. It’s easy to see how play is essential to the creative process, but Huizinga cast his net much more widely. I often say I write for children



because it allows me to be a kid again, to play again. I'm afraid I never, despite the Letter to the Corinthians, never put aside childish things. So much of my creative impulse stems from play – playing with words, playing with ideas, imagining and playing with people, places, situations, conversations. Such play may lead to a poem, or to a fantasy novel.

Many years ago, I came home from work early and eavesdropped on our daughter Lissie, aged about nine, her older brother Tom, and one of Lissie's school friends who were playing in the lounge. They'd raided the linen cupboard and trashed the room, draping sheets and blankets over chairs, sofas and tables to make huts. As I listened I could hear their excitement as they leapt from one scenario to another.

'Let's make it a hospital! Let's make it an island! Let's make it a puppet show! Let's make it a radio station!'

I still play that game: let's make it a poem; let's make it a fantasy story!

And with a little bit of luck, I can make it too: an irksome confection perhaps but at the same time a fantastic poem, perhaps, or a poetic fantasy.