

Midnight at the Edge of Reading

Tēnā koutou katoa

Kei te mihi ahau ki ngā tangata whenua o tenei rohe, ko Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei

Thank you to Storylines for this invitation to speak as Te Awhi Rito Reading Ambassador. And thank you particularly to Leonie Agnew and her committee for their creative thinking, organisation and excellent comms.

I'll begin with words from the twinned language cultures of Aotearoa: I think of these as epigraphs, floating above the talk, suggesting connections.

The first is an enduringly resonant whakataukī from te ao Māori:

‘Kia whakatōmuri te haere whakamua: I walk backwards into the future with my eyes fixed on my past.’

The second is a picture book by Ursula Dubosarsky and Ron Brooks, a collaboration to mark the 50th anniversary of Australia's National Library building, and to celebrate the role of libraries everywhere as custodians of history, heritage, and, imagination.

Midnight at the Library

It's midnight at the library
 And all the doors are shut fast.
 Come on!
 Let's go!
 Up the stairs,
 Down the stairs.
 Up the hallways,
 Down the hallways.
 Past all those rooms, so many rooms
 Full of shelves, so many shelves.

 Until we find it.

There!
 There it is!

Up high,
In that very dark and quiet corner.

The little book.

The little book is very old.
The little book is made of gold.

Out the window,
We can see the moon hanging over the lake
There are the mountains, there are the stars.
Hundreds, thousands, millions of lights ...

A long time ago,
A boy looked out a window, too,
in a place faraway.
He looked at the moon and the mountains and the millions of stars and he said to himself:

'I wonder what the world is?'

He thought and he wondered.
His head filled with words,

More and more words,
Words, words, words.

Out came the words,
Out of his head,
Down his arm,
Into his hand and into his fingers
And onto the page, and another, and another ...

As the pages grew
So did the boy.

Until at last all the words

Were taken away
And turned into

The little book.

The little book was made of gold.
The little book was bought and sold.

It sailed the seas.
It rode on horseback.

It went by train,
By plane,
By balloon,

Over deserts, fields and oceans.

The little book
Was wrapped, unwrapped,

Opened, loved,
Read aloud,
Given, taken,
Closed, lost,
Found, forgotten,

Left behind

Stolen,
Hidden,
Nearly burned.
Saved, buried.

The little book was made of gold.
The little book grew very cold.

But then it was discovered, uncovered and read again.

At last
It came to a place
Where it was safe,
Wanted,
Loved.

Together, with hundreds,
Thousands of books,
Millions of shining lights
Like stars in the sky.

The little book is very old.
The little book is made of gold.

And all those words
That began so far away,
So long ago,
Inside a child's head
Are waiting now,
They are waiting for you

At midnight,
In the library ...

In this little book.

I love both whakataukī and book because each is in conversation with the past; indeed each, in their different ways, insist consciousness of the past is nothing less than an orienting principle for life and work in the present, and for navigating the future rushing towards us.

Both assert the profound importance of accumulated knowledge and wisdom to the survival and flourishing of life on earth. *Midnight* reminds us that oral and written language, story, image, and imaginative reach are vital in communicating and *preserving* our accumulated knowledge and wisdom.

We live in difficult times. Never has it been more important to look back, to pause and consider what our collective knowledge can tell us about how to navigate our current cultural, social, and economic tumult.

Never has it been more important to pay attention to the incalculable gifts of story, language, and image. To acknowledge and elevate the writers and artists committed to recording, arguing with, explaining and transforming the world for our collective benefit.

Never has it been more important to salute in particular those who write and draw for *young* people, who provide a key means by which the young can come to know themselves, to know the cosmos, to absorb the languages and images that expand their sense of possibility and the fullness of life.

So I salute all of you gathered here, fools for language and image, bless you. You've answered to your less 'sensible' yearnings and committed to a working life that demands a largely solo slog, punctuated by brief ecstasies and regular visits to the pit of Dothan. You're doing god's work for the future, in my view, placing the young firmly in your sights and daring to believe they can and must be diverted, entertained, disturbed, thrilled, refreshed, electrified, saved and transfigured by story, language and image.

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Like most writers, whenever I have a talk to think through, my instinct is first to read. One way or another the reading solidifies the nascent thoughts. There's no system to it. I wandered around different piles of books and periodicals in my house. I read a collection of essays by the Irish novelist Kevin Power. I re-read *The Child That Books Built*, Francis Spufford's terrific memoir of childhood reading. I read a long, thoughtful review by the *The New Yorker's* Kathryn Schulz of the new novel *Phy* by Hernan Diaz, whose work I really like ... I read three crime novels (truthfully, that was a displacement activity - always an important part of writing a talk, or writing anything for that matter). I read a lot of picture books, new and old, including *Midnight at the Library*. It all went into the mental mouli. In a funny kind of way, one thing leads productively to another, and a coherence comes into view (or so I always hope). And a new title emerged: This talk is called 'Midnight at the Edge of Reading'

Duborsarsky and Brook's *Midnight at the Library* got me thinking of all the libraries and librarians and books that have appeared in children's literature across the last 100 or so years. I dug up some of my favourites - most of them American children's books from the middle decades of the twentieth century.

American literature of that time did what children's literature always does, whatever its genre - it reflected the social, cultural realities of the children it was writing about; it told us something about the period's cultural consensus around childhood, child rearing, and pedagogy; and its varied period settings spoke to the grander historical developments shaping American life: so many of the families in these

predominantly realist stories are first and second generation immigrants for whom the achievement of literacy and reading are preeminent ways of obtaining the American dream.

There's Sydney Taylor's Jewish-American *All of a Kind Family*, whose children forge a friendship with a kindly, enabling librarian. Among much else librarian Kathy sympathises with their considerable angst over a lost book and the pending library fine.

There's *Curious Missie*, by Danish-American Virginia Sorensen. Missie, an Alabama cotton worker's daughter, is so lit up and transported by reading she ignites a community effort to fight for a county bookmobile.

There's the Moffat family series by Eleanor Estes, the daughter of Jewish immigrants and a children's librarian. Set during WW1 the story narrates the children's adventures around their Connecticut town - simple, lively exploits, suffused with the confusions and wonder and comedy of childhood. More than once the escapades involve encounters with librarians and specific books at the local library: Jane determines she will read every book in the library, beginning with *The Story of Lumber*, a tremendous bore. Rufus, the youngest, spends a sweaty day running between home and the public library in a determined effort to obtain a library card.

I would guess that Estes' library is a Carnegie library, one of hundreds built and endowed across America and other parts of the globe, by the industrialist-philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. The libraries have a rightly contested history, not least because they were segregated and many in the South remained so until the passing of the Civil Rights Act.

As free-to-the-people locations and collections, the libraries did help accelerate literacy, reading for pleasure, and intellectual energy across the US through the late 19th and early 20th century. Estes, Sorensen, and Taylor were paying homage to the edifices and books that formed them and opened up their worlds.

One of my favourite young person-library encounters is in *Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack* a 1973 debut novel by the marvellous underground lesbian pulp fiction writer turned YA star, ME Kerr.

Tucker, a sweet-natured, wry teenager, goes regularly to New York libraries for solace and creative inspiration.

'Tucker was an authority on libraries. He went to them as often as drunks did to dry out and read up on their symptoms in the medical books; and as often as the bewildered did to talk to themselves in corners and warm themselves by radiators ... Tucker was a reader and a sketcher. In the libraries of New York he found he could do both easier than anywhere else ... [He] found a face smorgasbord in the libraries. It seemed to him sometimes that anyone with any trouble at all eventually found their way to a city library, and the really troubled ones became regulars. Their features were wrecked with disappointment and forbearance ... Tucker loved wrecked faces, sad smiles, and soft tones, and the libraries of New York abounded in them.'

Then there's *The Library Card*, a 1997 novel by Jerry Spinelli: across four devastating stories the author relates four differently burdened young peoples' encounters with the library and the quivering

possibilities offered by story. The story *Sonseray* centres on a boy who lives in a car with his migrant worker uncle. Stumbling on a read-aloud session at the local library, Sonseray is spellbound and fundamentally altered by a most unlikely fiction. It's a three-hanky marvel.

In 2006 the redoubtable Richard Peck sets his sly comic novel *Here lies the Librarian* in 1914 small-town America. The proverbially cantankerous librarian is recently six feet under in the local cemetery - her epitaph reads:

Electra Dietz (note the German surname) 1851-1912

Shhhhh

Here lies the Librarian

After years of service

Tried and True

Heaven Stamped Her

OVERDUE

The townspeople are now locked in dispute about the library's future - on one side ornery philistines and town council bean counters (it was ever thus!) on the other, those who treasure what the small collection of books represent. Riding to the rescue in a caravan of top-end automobiles - a Packard, a Peerless, a Pierce-Arrow and a Stutz - comes a sorority of glamorous and determined graduate librarians (with their millionaire patriarchs). They offer their services plus hard cash to refurbish and refill the town library with books.

This time round, I was struck by a new, sobering reading of these novels. I saw now that they were not just rich stories with memorable characters, but also showed the arc of America's economic, cultural, and reading apotheosis – and the beginnings of its calamitous decline: First the civic commitment to building cultural infrastructure in the New World - universities, concert halls, art galleries, and *free* public libraries, palaces for a population hungry for literacy and knowledge; then, gradually, post WW2, the changing face of libraries - abundant now, and treasure houses still – for learning and second chances – but increasingly, necessary refuges for the disenfranchised and othered.

And why in 2026 does Richard Peck dive back to 1914? With 45 years of writing, more than 40 superb novels, and a large readership behind him – Peck was only too aware of the rising economic and social depredations on libraries and the steep decline in reading for pleasure across America. In *Here Lies the Librarian* he is reminding us that once upon a time – but really not *that* long ago – communities, governments, even captains of industry shared a common creed: reading was the path to literacy, a deep education, accumulated knowledge, sustaining wisdom, new ideas, greater equality, strong democracy, social unity and prosperity.

Peck's title, *Here lies the Librarian*, encodes a number of interpretations, and one of them is a warning: Listen up folks, look what we *had* ...

Kia whakatōmuri, te haere whakamua.

In 2010 Peck spoke on a panel at a PEN conference and was asked advice about how to write. Nearly eighty, wise and clear-headed, he answered gnomically:

'The only way you can write is by the light of the bridges burning behind you.'

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There aren't many libraries or librarians or indeed books in the first 70 years of NZ children's literature. The story orientation is to the outdoor world - children battling the land and waterscapes, tramping, swimming, sailing adventures, much *weather* and peril and well-meaning but awkwardly wrought encounters with tangata whenua - it reflected a different colonising culture, different preoccupations, different aspirations, a smaller place and economy, and isolation from the centres of global culture.

There were, though, reading communities across the motu; there were fee-paying libraries, and large private libraries in grand homes. And between 1908 and 1916 18 free-to-the-people Carnegie public libraries were opened across Aotearoa New Zealand. Twenty years later the Carnegie Corporation funded a landmark survey of New Zealand libraries whose recommendations underpinned free public library practice for decades.

It must be acknowledged – and I'm grateful to Shelley Burne-Field for prodding me on this painful fact – that for decades those public libraries were not places where Māori and tangata moana felt at all welcomed or encouraged. And nor did they see themselves or their cultures reflected in library buildings, contents, or services. At long last, contemporary public library culture and practice means this is slowly changing : our two most recently rebuilt metropolitan libraries, planned in close consultation with iwi – Tūranga in Ōtautahi Christchurch and Te Matapihi ki te Ao Nui in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington – both embrace the centrality of tangata whenua in Aotearoa public library structure and practice, and in multiple ways are working to correct the historical sense of estrangement carried by Māori and tangata moana as a result of their experiences with our public library system.

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One of the most inspirational narratives of this country's nation-building, for me at least, is that of the librarians, public servants, and aspirational communities who came together to create the country and school library services in the 1930s, important building blocks in the foundations of what became our National Library Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa.

Te Puna Mātauranga is globally unique and sometimes envied by other national libraries, because of its school library services and resources – a support network that has played an outsized

role in building literacy, making books accessible and providing increasingly creative curriculum resources within our education system.

In 1967, a 31-year-old writer for children began work at National Library schools' services in Christchurch. Across the next 45 years her stream of picture books, stories and novels changed the face of children's literature in Aotearoa. She consistently featured singular characters explicitly moulded by reading, language and story; dangerous, magical adventures underpinned by metaphysical and philosophical ideas; language pyrotechnics previously unseen in New Zealand children's books, themes that riffed thrillingly on the relationship between writing and responsibility – 'the power and peril of authorship,' as she called it. She was of course, Margaret Mahy.

One of the things I appreciated so much about Margaret was how she loved to talk about other people's books, as much as – perhaps even more than – her own splendid creations. Above all else, our most astonishing writer, was a *reader*. Once, in an interview, she said with emotional emphasis, 'I was made and shaped by what I read.' And that reading was acres wide and fathoms deep, encompassing science, geography, history, sport, literary theory and every kind of fiction across continents and centuries.

Additionally, Margaret's formation as a librarian combined with a tirelessly questing brain meant that books and reading, libraries and librarians, and the ambiguities of authority over knowledge featured often in her stories.

In a great essay on just this subject, writer Catherine Butler catalogues the brilliant use of books and libraries in Mahy's work: '*The Changeover* is that rare thing,' writes Butler, 'the story of a fight to the death in which the weapon of choice is a librarian's ink stamp.'

In *The Catalogue of the Universe*, Angela gives Tycho, '*a thick dark-covered*' book about astronomy, entitled 'The Catalogue of the Universe' – thus, Butler writes, '*The Catalogue of the Universe* contains 'The Catalogue of the Universe' – the harnessing of all possible knowledge is a piquant suggestion. Later, Angela stands on top of the chunky tome so that Tycho may more easily kiss her, and another kind of enchanting knowledge is enabled.

In *The Librarian and the Robbers*, librarian Serena Laburnum is kidnapped by a band of larcenous ruffians. Her deep familiarity with books means she can help treat the robbers' measles affliction. Later, freed, she hides the robber chief from the police 'by stamping him "*with a number as if he was a library book* and shelves him under L' (his name is Salvation Loveday). '*Alphabetical order is a habit with librarians,*' says Serena.

It seems to me that in profound ways – through her fiction and essays, her work in schools, her public statements, her absolute insistence on the primacy of language, story, imagination, and complex ideas -- Margaret asserted time and again the act of reading. She was a true and tireless reading ambassador long before there was an official role and title.

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I have been in the Awhi Rito role for 18 months now, and both Margaret Mahy, and the history of our peerless School Library Service have been much on my mind – embodying as they do both vocational passion and exemplary creative practice. Models and guiding lights, you might say. I have talked to sundry sector conferences and community groups, read aloud in many classrooms (from whence reading aloud is fast disappearing), written articles and blog posts, worked on a children’s book podcast, taken part in reading forums at festivals, read and interviewed many writers, buttonholed complete strangers on planes, trains, buses and in taxis about the reading mission, shadowed local body politicians, given book seminars with librarians and teachers, and committed more than a few webinars. I feel increasing urgency about the collective reading life of our culture.

I owe my lucky life to reading. In a very real way, reading saved me. It disciplined a decidedly wayward mind and soul, brought me to my possible self, but also, importantly, rescued me from congenital self-absorption and bestowed valuable perspective. Without doubt, reading made me a writer.

So I’ve always maintained a stubborn confidence in the future of books. In a careless way, I’ve always assumed there would be readers too – turns out that was an entirely self-centred projection. The enormous amount of global data on reading decline now available – not to mention the daily evidence of our eyes and ears – tells another story entirely. New Zealand’s reading decline – as everywhere else -- began gradually in the 1960s, accelerated about fifteen years ago and has become vertiginous in the last seven or so years.

Here we are at this lovely two-day gathering, enjoying stimulating panels, workshops, networking, publishing pitches, general kōrero. It’s all nourishing, necessary, and important, and I’m grateful to Storylines for providing this professional development and peer support over many years, its consistent efforts to connect the children’s writing community with its readers throughout Aotearoa.

Still, at this wobbly moment in history, I’d argue all of this laudable mahi is shadowed by a existential question: **Will there be readers for our books in twenty or thirty years time?** Clearly, the answer to that question has profound implications for every one of us here. It demands serious thought and, I would hope, some reorientation from each of us.

Eight years ago, in response to the growing body of global research on reading, the National Library developed a suite of reading and research initiatives – a first step in addressing our reading crisis. These collective impact projects developed reading communities across Aotearoa to test hypotheses about both the barriers to reading for pleasure and solutions to its decline. A revealing and galvanising body of research resulted from this. At the same time the Reading Ambassador role was established – research indicated that a public-facing role model can rouse action around reading decline by building awareness of reading’s critical role for education and society, and conversely what is lost to our culture if reading continues to decline.

We're living through hectic changes across the educational landscape and cultural infrastructure of Aotearoa. We're also seeing developments that are epistemically compromising for our society:

- * steeply declining concentration in our young
- * a disturbing growth in anxiety disorders
- * an assault of pre-digested, misleading information
- * increasing groupthink
- * the accelerating encroachment of AI
- * a measurable decline in critical thinking faculties – at precisely the moment in history we need them most. Reading's depthless gifts are badly needed.

#

Te Awhi Rito is asked to advocate for, model, and inspire reading in children, their whānau, families, and communities – in other words, everyone. The role is both iterative and cumulative. Our inaugural Te Awhi Rito, writer Ben Brown, emphasised the twinned story and language cultures underpinning reading in Aotearoa; the oral tradition of te ao Māori, and the print tradition of Pākehā; he spoke powerfully about the *primary* need to sing, recite, share oral story, pūrākau, folk tale, and to read aloud to one's children. His successor, school librarian Alan Dingley, crisscrossed the country talking to young people, educators, and school librarians about reading as the doorway to a lifetime of joy, growth, and wisdom.

I continue to build on Ben and Alan's messages. But I'm also working to bring the advocacy to areas outside of education: community audiences and sector groups such as yourselves, service organisations, and the government sectors already involved in helping New Zealanders' lives: local bodies, health, justice, arts and culture, business. Countering our reading decline will require **a nationwide collective effort that considers every piece of the reading jigsaw**. It's particularly important that decision makers across all sectors are brought on board.

We know, for instance, that reading for pleasure's role in schools is absolutely crucial for full literacy and expansive learning. In fact, though, reading's presence in the school curriculum is largely determined by school management priorities and is certainly hostage to management whims. In other words, the sustainability of school library environs, a librarian's job, a book budget, is never guaranteed. And that's not counting the schools where neither books, library, nor librarian exist. Practically speaking, not every school can provide a library (our country is dotted with small country schools). But ensuring ongoing *access to books* for children within the education system should, the research tells us, be absolutely non-negotiable. It may be the only consistent access to books for many, many children.

Principals, school boards and managements need to hear the reading for pleasure message, for sure. If you haven't read it already, check out Claire Mabey's excellent *Spinoff* article on the current school library landscape across Aotearoa.

Reading in our country begins to taper around nine years and enters a precipitous decline in teenage years. A complex interplay of factors are at work here: gaping economic disparity, the growing burden of work across all communities; the heavy socio-economic and emotional demands of parenting and family; a sharp increase in mental health problems; families and teachers disengaging from reading for pleasure once a child has learned to read alone.

Then there's the formidable array of competing leisure alternatives – long form television, YouTube, gaming, short-form video, to name just some; and not least, the advent of the smart phone and its enticements. Let's say what must be said: **there is a clear correlation between the appearance of the smart phone and global reading for pleasure heading sharply south.** We have all undergone a near-complete colonisation by this technology. I'm sure all of you are uncomfortably aware of its incursions in your own lives.

So the reading message needs to be powerfully communicated to adults too – those who have left reading behind and are now, along with their children, at the mercy of algorithms, rolling news cycles, and an addictive relationship with screens. If we lose adult readers, we lose an incredibly important element of nurturing young readers – the *modelling* of reading: within families, schools, aura and beyond. It is certainly true that the literacy tail and reading decline are linked to poverty and inequality, but it is also true that families across all income brackets have allowed reading to slip away.

Disastrously, reading for pleasure has declined amongst teachers – including English teachers. Reading for pleasure is barely touched on in teaching training. But, there's also teacher exhaustion, the panoply of daily tasks and cognitive overload, increased numbers of students with learning difficulties and complex emotional needs, and the surging demands of the curriculum. Small wonder then that so many, in their leisure time, lose themselves to online scrolling. The same thing is happening with growing numbers of public and school librarians. And these groups are three of the key agents in building cultures of reading amongst young people and their communities.

A recent hair-raising article by Rose Horowitz in *The Atlantic* magazine, details some of the glaring consequences of global reading decline. It focuses on American trends but everything in the piece mirrors developments in Aotearoa:

- Even the demographics that traditionally read the most – retirees, women, and university graduates – have seen a collapse.
- Increasing numbers of children in early education and school no longer hear the rhymes and folk lore of their cultures; many don't understand the mechanics of a book.

- The books people do read are very much simpler than they used to be. Bestsellers today have sentences around one-third shorter than a century ago.
- Vocabulary is shrinking across every age group.
- And across age-groups, genders, and education levels, **people's ability to think deeply about writing is diminishing. The higher-order abilities of comprehension and synthesis are being lost.**

#

The question humming beneath the Awhi Rito advocacy is, of course, Why? Why does it matter? So what? All of us gathered here are happily certain of reading's transformational capacity, but historically it has been very difficult to make that case to those who believe reading for pleasure is little more than a passive recreational activity.

My message for the unconvinced is what the quality research data makes plain:

1. reading for pleasure is *fundamental* to young people's educational success, to the development of full literacy, and *ipso facto* to social and economic achievement and life-long cultural capital
2. Reading for pleasure builds empathy and contributes to sustained well-being across a lifetime.
3. Reading for pleasure builds the capacity for critical thinking – an essential skill for navigating a world now awash in disinformation and misinformation.
4. A dedicated reading for pleasure habit is a more powerful determinant of a student's success in life than their parent's income. What a potent piece of information!

What is lost if reading for pleasure is not part of young people's lives, or the lives of their families and communities?

The American literacy academic Maryanne Wolf catalogues the losses in her pungent book, *Reader, Come Home*. She lays out revelatory findings from neuroscientists' study of brain activity when children are reading or being read to: to put it crudely, *everything's going off up there in the cranium*. The neural circuitry is sparking, furious decoding and analogic thinking are at work, intuitive leaps are being made; the brain is being fantastically exercised and expanded – pinging back and forth between prior and new knowledge, building complexity and nuance, examining, comparing, critically assessing.

A child nurtured in reading from birth is engaged in a powerful virtuous cycle, exponentially growing a reservoir of language and image, deepening intellectual and empathic capacity. In a very real sense, they are constructing a singular identity and an independent belief system that arms them well for the challenges of an increasingly complicated, fractious world. Not least, the young reader-listener-looker is learning the pleasures and fruitfulness of concentration, deliberation, and enduring retention of what they're drinking in.

And if the brain is *not* fuelled and nourished by deep reading but pushed aside for the instantaneous, though fleeting, satisfactions of the digital world? Then we have tsunamis of information – overload – on screens that encourage skimming, browsing, word spotting, infinite distractions, and ever-diminishing attention spans. This is catastrophic for children and adults alike. The sorry fact is that we are increasingly outsourcing our brains to outlets that offer the swiftest, most simplistic, most digestible distillations of information. The advance of AI is already accelerating this tendency and will only continue to erode thinking capacity. Schools and universities are right now engaged in an existential wrestle with their students' use of large language models. Put simply: when we outsource our thinking to these tools, our brains lie fallow. We retreat from complexity, our thinking narrows. And that narrowing is negatively exponential too: the less the brain is used, the more it loses plasticity and capacity. Horowitch's *Atlantic* article reports that the decline of reading is concurrent with less rational, analytical, and sophisticated modes of thinking. **At grave risk then, is the very ability to think for ourselves which, of course, has profound implications for democracy.**

#

But! There's good news too. We know the way forward.

We have at hand so much knowledge about exactly how to rebuild a reading culture.

First up: we need to grow nationwide understanding of the state of play, the research data, and evidence-based proposals for action. Sharing that message is certainly part of the Awhi Rito kaupapa, but the gathered knowledge is available to everyone.

I say, read the aforementioned *Reader, Come Home*. It will fire your blood.

Read *The Enchanted Hour* by Meghan Cox Gurdon – a book that illustrates so powerfully the extraordinary effect of reading aloud in an age of dementing distraction.

Read Rose Horowitch's article in *The Atlantic*.

Read Frank Cottrell Boyce's book *A British Childhood*, where he digs into the multiple barriers facing reading today; the book is painfully relevant to Aotearoa.

Read the rich resources freely available on the National Library's website which include much research evidence and the multiple ways to build reading for pleasure in the home, in communities, and in schools.

Read them all and then tell others what you've learned!

All these confirm that a reading insurgency requires strategic change from a dozen different points of entry. We need to:

1. Empower families and schools through equitable access to books; books in te reo Māori, in the languages of tangata moana and the home languages of other New Zealanders – books that reflect the lives of *all* young people in Aotearoa, and books that enlarge their understanding of other people and other worlds.
2. Build parents', caregivers', and whānau understanding of reading's horsepower so they are encouraged to place reading for pleasure at the heart of their children's life and learning.
3. Support our early education sector and schools to seed and grow reading cultures that **provide inspiring role models, that strengthen reading aloud and rebuild reading for pleasure in the classroom.**
4. Protect our magnificent public library systems – their status and resources are never guaranteed.
5. Work with government services to grow understanding of reading for pleasure's contribution to recovery, well-being, and the emotional sustenance of individuals in need.
6. Encourage *all* publishers to bring forth books that are needed – not just the ones allegedly wanted; books across a wide variety of forms – non-fiction, poetry, fiction, narrative non-fiction, picture books, graphic story. A reading life will always encompass multitudes but the acceleration of fast publishing has meant an oversupply of formulaic, arid books for young readers, books crowding out titles that provide challenge and extension alongside immersion and delight.
7. Assert a cultural narrative from bottom up and top down that recognises and champions the essential role the language arts – literature, writing, oratory, poetry, drama – play in a flourishing society.
8. Above all, agitate for sufficient and sustained funding for the component parts of our reading infrastructure. This will be a *decisive* contributor to rebuilding a nation of readers. We have a heavy job of work to do in that regard; a fully cohering book and reading sector **with an insistent collective voice** is our best hope.

Parents, whānau, teachers and librarians are in the vanguard of this insurgency but *every* New Zealander can play a part – modelling, inspiring, advocating for reading as central to a full and thoughtful life.

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What, you may well be wondering, does this mean for writers and illustrators? Isn't our job simply to continue working hard, making new books? Well, yes. But also no. Or at least, in my view, not that alone.

I greatly appreciate that you'll be preoccupied with your own craft, the idea you're currently prosecuting, your works' prospects in the fast and fickle book economy. You might be burdened by the (apparently) pressing need to build brand, to service an online profile, to court overseas markets, to produce work as swiftly and voluminously as possible. To perhaps try and diagnose what sells and see if that accelerates your chances. To write shorter sentences? Steer clear of demanding vocabulary? Write only in the first person and the present tense? – or whatever seems to prevail.

I'd like to push back on those dubious imperatives. I accept that we all write for different reasons. Pleasure. Prosperity. Posterity, to quote Donovan (Bixley). Possibly Prominence and Political Purpose. Or the propulsive need to say or draw something urgent on the page that hasn't been said or drawn quite that way before.

But I believe that the best books for young people – the ones they deserve – come from a place far distant from the market's siren calls. Bugger the market! Don't look to it for direction. It's ruled by too many false assumptions, and algorithms that shackle authors to the lowest denominators. Our job is to give young readers delight, diversion, puzzlement and affirmation; served up with **singularity**, **originality**, and **daring**. Write *up* to your young reader, not down, said CS Lewis. We should trust their protean, versatile, hungry selves. Dare to stretch those porous minds and fevered energies. And trust your own deep story desires.

Margaret Mahy, that luminous star in our literary history, didn't parse or analyse the market's specious demands, though she depended on writing for her income. She answered to an insistent internal voice, a muse that led her to comprehensively entertain but also to expand the boundaries of children's story, language and ideas; she was daring on the page, and disdained homogeneity -- and she conquered the world.

But something else too. I believe the children's writing and illustrative community here in Aotearoa is uniquely placed to contribute significantly to the rebuilding of our once enthusiastic reading nation. You are the living embodiments of reading's astonishments, made and formed by those experiences; you're intrinsic reading models, advocates and insurgents ...

Of course we all want our own hard-wrought books to be read and appreciated, to earn us some income too. We tote them and their origin narratives to schools and festivals; we all want to connect with potential readers, we want to communicate the ideals and emotions, the comedy and creativity that have driven our babies. That's all right and good.

But I think we can go beyond that, too – indeed, I think we have a duty beyond that – to actively witness to and inspire the act of reading itself, to acknowledge its essential place in building our own fortunate gifts, to communicate its stimulus, provocation, and wonder.

I think we can do that by elevating and amplifying other people's books as much as our own – books across sundry forms and genres, books from Aotearoa and elsewhere too.

We can share with young and old the thrilling variety of our reading lives and how it has nourished and expanded our world, our thinking, and our work. We can suggest how it might ignite and excite our young readers; we can emphasised the twinned relationship of reading and writing. In this way we become reading as well as writing models, we're building a future readership. (We may be ensuring some purchase on our own writing futures, too!)

#

So, the nation of readers jigsaw requires effort on multiple fronts. It will take decades. But I think we've arrived at a hinge point – media are at last heavily reporting research and opinion pieces from cultural commentators on what is lost if reading declines. Awareness and momentum are building. The moment is now – and it needs all of us.

Fascinatingly, over the last 15 years there has been a resurgence of children's novels featuring bookshops and libraries and the perils of reading loss, (the Pages & Co book series; The Library of Ever series; *The Lost Library* by Rebecca Stead; *The Secret Library* by Kekla Magoon). Picture books too are asserting in sundry ways the unique properties of books and reading (Lane Smith's withering *It's a Book*; Kate Messner's *How to read a Story*; *The Loud Librarian*; *The Book is my Best Friend*). To name just a few. As ever, children's authors are responding to the anxieties of the cultural zeitgeist.

And from amongst us comes a fiction project that, in my view, knocks most of those books out of the park. Claire Mabey's *The Raven's Eye Runaways* and *The Raven's Eye Rebellion* – an immensely subtle and sophisticated pair of novels. They're hymns to reading's indispensable gifts, thrilling adventure stories, with tensely fought battles between a tyrannous reading elite and an oppressed populace deprived of reading's potent possibilities. Best of all it's the kids that crack open the systemic injustice.

Here's a brief passage I find very moving. Getwin and Miran, two of the books' determined characters, are newly friends after lengthy misunderstanding; they're realising their common cause.

They walked side by side, abandoning the Scholar-Servant rules of foot travel. Getwin was changed. The books she'd read had been etched into her through the Strangeness of the Scribes that had been forced to make them. The information swirled and argued in her head ...

They stood facing each other for a long time, letting an understanding flow ...

'Can you imagine,' said Miran, after a while, 'if everyone around us, all of these people' – she gestured to the people shuffling by, to those already tucked inside their houses – 'could read too? Imagine if they could read Sight books' ... Miran stopped, gazing around them as if her vision had rendered her speechless.

But Getwin could see crowds inside a huge open library, reading and talking. Even arguing. She could see people, ordinary people, writing new books to challenge the old ones ...

And lost in the bubble of their dreaming, Miran and Getwin walked and talked like old friends, heads close, hardly noticing where they were going ...'

A future community of readers if ever I witnessed one.

It's midnight at the edge of reading. Can we push back the dark? Can we chase through the metaphorical midnight library, gather up and distribute the treasure within?

The little book is very old.

The little book is made of gold.

As that profound whakataukī suggests we do, the epigraph at the front of *The Raven's Eye Rebellion* walks us backwards into the future of reading by recalling an old book and its wisdoms. The author's epigraph quotes from *The Sword in the Stone* by TH White, perhaps the most antic and original retelling of the Arthurian legend.

Young Arthur, known as Wat, has been brought low. Observing his sadness and flagging hope, his teacher Merlin, suggests this:

*'The only thing for disturbances of the mind is to **learn** something. That is the only thing that never fails ... You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics ... there is only one thing for it then – to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it ...*

Of course we learn in multiple ways -- and through every sense; certainly the young Arthur's education in White's book is relational too, and fully physical. All the same, I feel pretty confident that TH White – writing in the mid-1930s as the malignity of European Fascism crept ever closer – believed *reading* was a crucial way to discover just why the world wags and what wags it. He made books for that very reason. Like all of you.

The little book was very old.

The little book was made of gold.

Ngā mihi nui.

Kate De Goldi

October 4, 2026

Acknowledgements & works cited:

'Kia whakatōmuri te haere wakamua'

This whakataukī speaks to Māori perspectives of time, where the past, the present and the future are viewed as intertwined. The past is not behind us; rather the past is carried with us into the future.

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