

JANET FRAME LECTURE 2011

Warm Greetings: In this, the 2011 Janet Frame lecture, I wish to talk about the short but astonishingly successful history of children's literature in this country; but before I do that, I'd like to thank the New Zealand Society of Authors for their generosity. As you may know, the Janet Frame lecture, is delivered by the Honorary President of the Society. I assure you I have done nothing to earn this title apart from being one of the oldest members of the NZSA. In the 1960s, we were part of the global PEN and we are still affiliated with PEN; and I was nominated for membership by Monte Holcroft, editor of the NZ Listener, on the strength of two short stories. The account of my first PEN meeting is recorded in the memoir *Navigation*, but I'll mention it again here. I was a somewhat shy young woman, a farmers wife with four small children, and Mr Holcroft had said I should attend the December PEN meeting. I went by train from Palmerston North to Wellington, found The Terrace and the venue in Wakefield House, and hesitantly walked in. The room was full of voices and tobacco smoke, with most people around a bar at the other end. Mr Holcroft was not there. I knew no one and no one knew me. I stood in the middle of the room for perhaps a minute, feeling like a goldfish that had jumped her bowl, then decided to go back to the railway station and wait for a train home. As I walked towards the door, I passed two women sitting at the side of the room. The one who wore a large brimmed hat, rose and came towards me, extending a white-gloved hand. She said in a deep voice, "How do you do. The name is Marsh." Ngaio Marsh rescued me, took me to the back of the room, and introduced me to the people around the bar. That's when I discovered that writers were ordinary human beings.

I mention this with gratitude to the New Zealand Society of Authors who has carried me for nearly 50 years; but this talk actually begins much earlier, with a child who grew up on imported literature. I didn't become a reader until I was nearly nine. There were a number of reasons for that: we didn't have books at home, I'd attended five schools before I was seven, the phonics introduction to reading meant little to a visual learner – it was like trying to do a jig saw puzzle without first seeing the picture – and I think I was probably a slow learner. My memory tells me that I became an avid reader overnight, but I know it didn't happen like that. I discovered that reading was not about fragments of language. It was about meaning. Reading accessed story, story was empowering, and that kind of empowerment was addictive to a relatively powerless child.

In 1944 this country was still shrouded by war. In times of war, luxury becomes scarce and books were considered a luxury. Very few schools had libraries. My father took me to the little public library in Otaki where there were only two shelves of children's books, all pre-war publications and all from England and America, with two exceptions from Australia: May Gibbs "Snugglepoot and Cuddlepie" and an outback family saga by Ethel Turner. I devoured the books that interested me: Montgomery's "Anne of Green Gables", Stratton Porter's "Girl of the Limberlost", Captain John's "Biggles" and Richmal Compton's "William" books. But through my reading I identified with other countries, especially England. My intellectual landscape had woods, spinneys and copses, hedgerows and lanes through meadows and fields. There was nothing as ordinary as bush and paddocks and barbed wire fences. Nowhere, did I find my own country and I was of the opinion that we were unworthy of books. Although I did not formulate that in so many words, the feeling of inferiority made itself manifest in metaphor. I told a friend at school that I

was born on a ship coming out from England. That seemed much more interesting than saying I was born in New Zealand.

By the time I was ten, I was taking out books from the adult section of the library, with the kindly guidance of the librarian who introduced me to the so-called classics. I graduated to Jules Verne, Victor Hugo, Daniel Defoe, Alexandre Dumas, Charles Kingsley, Walter Scott, Charles Dickens – you know the list. But again, New Zealand was missing.

My family moved from Otaki to Foxton. Truckloads of cut flax passed our gate – phormium tenax in its way to the mill that wailed all day. The flax was stripped, dried and made into sacks, woolpacks, string and rope. The Maori women who lived on either side of our house, showed me how to use flax to make poi and kete. At school we learned a little about Maori history and culture, about Kupe, and Maui's big fish, about Hatupatu and the Bird Woman. But all this was the lesser reality. When I entered the world of books, the door closed on Aotearoa.

With the end of the war, publication found new life. My younger sisters discovered Enid Blyton and Dr Seuss. I was aware that AW and AH Reed were publishing New Zealand reference books, but I was a story addict, and my reading, still in the Northern Hemisphere, moved into personal war stories from authors such as Nicholas Monsarrat and Douglas Bader. I was almost 13 years old before I found New Zealand in a novel. This was Satchell's "The Greenstone Door" and although I no longer remember the story, pictures of the landscape are still with me. That book closed the gap between my two worlds. After that, I found Katherine Mansfield's short stories, John Mulgan's "Man Alone" and Jane

Mander's "Story of a New Zealand River." But apart from Reed's "Myths and Legends of Maoriland" where were our children's books?

You would be quite correct if you stopped me here and told me there were children's books published in New Zealand before the 1950s. I've been told that there were a few books written for young people, modest printings of limited life and distribution. I have not researched these. My knowledge is experiential and for me, the pioneers of children's books in this country were in the late 1960s, early 70s: Maurice Duggan with "Falter Tom and the Water Boy" and Elsie Locke who wrote "The Runaway Settlers. "

You will notice that I talk about children's books, rather than children's literature, because there has been a source of children's literature, from 1907 to the present day, which has surely been the matrix of children's books in this country. It is, of course, the School Publications branch of the Department of Education and specifically, the School Journal. This monthly magazine distributed to schools provided a school book that was published here and relevant to the needs of New Zealand children. In 1939, Dr Clarence Beeby, the director of Education, believed it important that publications reflected the New Zealand identity. The School Journal certainly did that, and although we tended to see the journals as magazines, rather than books, we remember them with much affection. In them we encountered our history – even if it did have a colonial slant – geographical and botanical information, stories that wore gumboots and smelled of sheep, and delightful poems that we memorised. I believe now, that the School Journal gave us excellence in writing and illustration. We remember fine wood engravings, the drawings of Russell Clarke and Rita Angus. We sat up eagerly when a new bundle of journals

were brought into the classroom, and read our copy as soon as it touched our desks. Afterwards we endured the tedium of listening to it read aloud, one paragraph at a time, by our fellow students. Even when I was at High School, I pounced on the School Journals brought home by my younger sisters. But the influence didn't end there. In the early 1960s I became a School Journals' author and I discovered that School Publications – or School Pubs as it was called – was in effect, a school for New Zealand writers and illustrators. If you were to go through a who's who list of New Zealand writers you would find that most have contributed to the School Journal. Margaret Mahy had her first stories published there. So did I. We were in the company of Peter Bland, James K Baxter, Louis Johnson, Witi Ihimaera. Sam Hunt, Tom Scott, Patricia Grace, Denis Glover, Roger Hall, Jack Lasenby, Diana Noonan, Alistair Campbell and many others. From the late 1960s through to the present day, I have enjoyed a warm relationship with the editors of School Pubs, later, Learning Media. They were always very helpful to new contributors, offering guidelines and advice. Sometimes I visited editors Brian Birchell and Michael Keith in the old Government building on Lambton Quay, which was a warren of creativity. I have happy memories of Christmas parties. Under the influence of the Greek brandy Metaxa and the film of Zorba, the Greek, Brian and Michael used to do the bakers' dance on top of the desks. What has that got to do with children's literature? Quite a lot, actually. The child in children's editors is usually alive and well.

The 1960s post-war book boom was echoed in New Zealand, with the publication of New Zealand works, almost all written by men. Today it seems incredible that only fifty years ago, there was a bias against books written by women. A man who reviewed for *The Listener*, refused to accept women authors. Denis Glover openly boasted that he would never

read a book written by a woman. When my first novel “Nest in a Falling Tree” was published in England in 1968, it received a favourable review which began: “Occasionally, the female predilection for gossip can be turned to good account.” Some books by women were published in New Zealand and I think the one that broke the gender barrier was Sylvia Ashton Warner’s “Spinster,” followed by Janet Frame’s “Faces in the Water.”

But where were the children’s books? In England and America, quality books for young people were being published and exported. The picture book had come into its own, show-casing beautiful art by people like Brian Wildsmith, John Birmingham, Maurice Sendak, Eric Carle. In New Zealand, there was very little trade publication for children, and the books that were produced seemed to have magazine or comic book quality. There was still a popular view that writing for children was the occupation of people who had failed at real writing. In the 1980s, when I began writing full time for children, I was asked, “When are you going to get back to real writing?”

Price Milburn, who published Beverley Randell’s popular PM Readers, were aware of the lack and in 1967 they advertised a competition for a story for a children’s picture book. At this time, New Zealand was involved in the Vietnam War, and there were many people like myself who felt helpless. We sat in coffee bars, listening to the protest songs of Joan Baez and the Kingston trio, and sometimes we marched with peace banners. We knew more was needed, but what? About this time I read a small news item about a duck that had made a nest on a building site in Chicago. Work on the site stopped for three weeks until the eggs were hatched and the duck with her offspring, could be safely moved.

Vietnam and Chicago and Price Milburn came together. I submitted a story called, “The Duck in the Gun” and it won the competition with a prize of \$500 which was very handsome in those days. But full colour art for a picture book, is very expensive and after a year, Price Milburn decided they could not afford to publish the book and they reverted the rights to me. I sent the story to New York, to Doubleday who had recently published the novel “Nest in a Falling Tree,” and it was accepted by their juvenile department. It was published in 1969 with illustrations by New York cartoonist Edward Sorel. My children’s story had become a real hard-cover picture book.

In 1969, the same thing happened for another New Zealand author. Margaret Mahy’s story “The Lion in the Meadow” was published in England. Both *The Duck in the Gun* and *The Lion in the Meadow*, were published overseas. In New Zealand, the focus was still on adult books: fiction, non-fiction, poetry and academic texts.

I believe that socially, we were still in the era that considered children to be adult property, adult investment, rather than individuals in their own right. Apart from the innovative materials coming from School Publications – materials that belonged in schools – and a few pioneer publications, there was nothing we could call home-grown children’s literature.

In 1971 after my first visit to Fiji, I wrote a novel called *The Silent One*, about a deaf mute boy and his friendship with a white turtle. I sent it to three publishers and had much the same reply from each: the story fell between two stools, was neither a children’s novel nor for adults, and had no market. So I put it in a bottom drawer and forgot about it. Six years

later, Max Rogers, publisher at Whitcoulls, mentioned the picture book “The Duck in the Gun” and said, “Why don’t you write a novel for older children?” I laughed and said, “I did and it was a flop.” “Let me see it,” he said. So I dug out the old manuscript of *The Silent One* and mailed it to him. I still have the telegram, Max Rogers sent. “It’s marvellous and it must be published.”

The Silent One came out in 1979, with pencil drawings by Sheryl Jordan who later became one of New Zealand’s top children’s authors. Since then the book has gone through several editions, been made into a film and is still a set text in Fiji secondary schools. That same year, 1979, another successful novel was published: Maurice Gee’s *Under the Mountain*. It too, has live through many editions, has been filmed twice and is still in print. Author and authority Tessa Duder says that for her, New Zealand children’s literature came to life in 1979. I agree but would add 1980 because this was the year of the first major children’s book award, sponsored by the New Zealand Government Printer. Until this time, there had been several awards, scholarships, fellowships, for writers of adult books, but very little for children’s authors. I was at a conference in America when the Government Printer awards were presented. A cablegram was pushed under my hotel door. *The Silent One*, three times rejected by publishers, was children’s book of the year. This did suggest to me that our attitude to children’s literature had changed.

The Government Printer Award became the Aim Children’s Book Award and then the New Zealand Post Award, and every year has grown so that it is now a national event, with input from children all over New Zealand. But I shall talk more about that later.

What else was happening in 1979? Penny Scown joined Ashton Scholastic who were publishing educational books, mainly big books inspired by Don Holdaway's enthusiasm for shared reading. Scholastic moved on to work with Margaret Mooney and the Department of Education on a series called Read by Reading, but it wasn't until the early 1990s when Graham Beattie took over, that Scholastic started producing trade picture books. One of their early hardback picture books was "The Little Yellow Digger" by Betty and Alan Gilderdale. It is still a firm favourite. Scholastic now publish 30 – 40 new children's titles a year, and they work with Katarina Mataira to publish Te Reo editions of many of their picture books.

Ann Mallinson, of Mallinson Rendel, was an independent publisher who consistently produced children's books of high quality during the 1980s and 90s. Only a few titles were published each year, but all had excellent design. As far as I know, Ann Mallinsen was the only publisher in that era, who used the services of a book designer.

But back to 1979: a group of women who called themselves The Spiral Collective were concerned at the lack of New Zealand content in children's books. The Spiral collective were publishing Keri Hulmes "The Bone People" which went on to win the Booker Award. Some of the group also programmed several children's picture books including Patricia Grace's fine story "The Kuia and the Spider" illustrated by Robyn Kahukiwa and published by Penguin.

1980 brought a decade of growth, influenced by the new annual awards that lent status to trade children's books. By the end of the 80s all the major New Zealand publishers, were producing quality children's

literature. The 1980s saw the emergence of fine illustrators of international quality: we Gavin Bishop's beautiful picture books, books by Martin Baynton, Robyn Belton, Elizabeth Fuller. Educational books lost their text book appearance and sat well beside imported picture books.

The educational publisher who put us on the world map in 1980, was the remarkable Wendy Pye. I was told by the American President of Reading Recovery, that there is not an elementary school in the United States that does not have books published by Wendy Pye. This may be exaggeration, but the error would be only about 2%. New Zealand authors and illustrators became familiar names in schools as American children read Maori folk tales and stories about sheep, kiwi and giant weta. In the late 1980s, it was said that export sales of NZ children's book, exceeded that of NZ wine. I have no figures to validate that claim but I believe it could have been true. Tessa Duder writes of the growth of children's literature in the 1980s: "This explosion, helped by new awards, arts council grants and opportunities for authors to promote this fast-growing indigenous literature in schools, was truly astonishing."

I was a member of PEN which is now the New Zealand Society of Authors, affiliated to PEN, I had been keenly aware that children's book writers and illustrators had no organization that brought them together and protected their interests. Easter 1994, a group of 40 children's writers and illustrators came together in the Marlborough Sounds.

Accommodation was a bit like School Camp, but weather, wine, food and friendship were all fine, and the weekend became electric with creative ideas. Seeds were sown for future gatherings, more people, larger venues, and the idea was floated that once a year, we should put on a festival of

children's literature, free for families. That was the beginning of Storylines. For the rest of that year, Gaylyn Gordon, Tessa Duder and I worked towards a Sunday family day in Auckland. Money was raised through sponsorship and donations, and the Museum kindly donated the venue. Museum staff told us that they normally had about a 1000 visitors on a Sunday, and they thought our festival of children's literature would probably bring another 1000. The programme was well organised and publicized, and by the time the museum doors opened there were approximately 10,000 adults and children waiting on the grassy slopes outside. I imagine that the staff felt some concern for their exhibits, but the day was a huge success and nothing was damaged. What was to become the Storylines Festival of Children's Literature was adopted by the Children's Literature Foundation and is now in its 17th Year with family days in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, author/illustrator visits to other venues, a Story Bus in schools, workshops, competitions, book signing in shops – it keeps on growing.

The 1990s brought exciting new writers and illustrators. I asked Gavin Bishop what he saw as celebration in the development of New Zealand Children's Literature. He replied. "I have been around during the enormous groundswell in all the arts of New Zealand over the last 40 years, and I am confident when I say that I think children's literature has been at the forefront of this movement. The best of our books now match anything that has been published in the rest of the world."

The enormous groundswell extending into the 21st century, has brought us fine design from book designers, especially Kim Dovey of Christchurch, and beautiful books from new publisher Julia Marshall of Gecko Press, Wellington. There is no longer a quality gap between books

published here and overseas. Writers too, are growing in confidence. One of this country's popular new authors Kyle Mewburn wrote: I think special cause for celebration is the emergence of so many new writers willing to explore different theme and genres, and to take risks. It raises the bar for all writers of kiwi kidlit and keeps us on our toes.”

Both Gavin and Kyle are describing the coming of age, of children's literature in New Zealand. Generally we no longer see children as adult insurance policies, waiting to mature. We don't talk down to children or use sentimental language. We respect the authority of children at every stage of development, and honour their achievements. As far as literature is concerned we do not offer them leftovers from the adult plate. They are deserving of the best we can offer. In a new millennium, we have a solid tradition of books at the top end of children's literature, crossing over to adult reading – works by Kate de Goldi, Margaret Mahy, Tessa Duder, Patricia Grace, William Taylor, Gavin Bishop, and others. Recognitions of excellence abounds. Scholastic have partnered awards with Storylines: The Tom Fitzgibbon award for a junior novel, the Joy Cowley award for a picture book script, the Gavin Bishop award for a children's book illustrator and the Tessa Duder Award for an unpublished young adults novel. The New Zealand Library's Russell Clark Award for illustration is now accompanied by LIANZA's Esther Glen medal for junior fiction, Te Kura Pounamu medal for Te Reo, the Elsie Locke Award for non-fiction and a Young Adult fiction award. A new award, established this year, is the Mallinson Rendel Illustrators Award.

I mentioned the New Zealand Post Awards that began in 1980 as The Government Printer Award. These have grown in size and scope each year until they are in effect, the country's biggest book awards. Schools throughout New Zealand are involved for weeks before the

awards are presented. The Book Council sponsors author visits, and students vote for the Children's Choice Award. Those of you who have been to a NZ Post Awards ceremony will know that there is nothing second-rate about the occasion. The ceremony has all the serious fun and panache of a Government House investiture.

New Zealand Booksellers show respectful interest in home-grown children's literature, as do book reviewers. In a speech in *The New Zealand Author*, Tessa Duder quotes Owen Marshall who observed that in terms of international success and commercial returns, those who write for children and young adults are the country's most successful authors.

I need to mention a fine tradition in this country, the expectation of "giving back." People who are successful are expected to lend a hand to those who are on the way up. Children's writers and illustrators, and those who sponsor them, are generous in giving time to schools, and the fruit of this is the number of young writers emerging through competitions such as the Bank of New Zealand Awards and the Sunday Star Times. We also owe much to an education system that places emphasis on creative thinking. Professor Stuart McNaughton of Auckland University, reminds us of people like Marie Clay and Dorothy Butler who stressed the importance of books in early childhood years. He also gives a thumbs up for philanthropic organizations such as Duffy Books, that provide books in homes.

Indeed we have much to celebrate. But most of us still see gaps, challenges for the future. Stuart McNaughton points out that although we have some Te Reo books, we need more. We also need books that represent other cultures living in New Zealand. Stuart keeps pace with the

growth in children's literature; but Tessa Duder questions the amount of support that comes from other academics who teach children's and YA literature in universities. Tessa believes that there is currently minimal connection between academics and practising authors, publishers, librarians and school teachers.

Gavin Bishop and Kyle Mewburn see the "growing space" of trade publication as being off-shore, with the rest of the world enjoying reading about us. This will probably happen as more New Zealand publishers and agents attend international book fairs. Gavin Bishop also thinks it is unfair to create a hierarchy of unworthiness on literature and that children's literature should be included with adult literature as a genre along with poetry, non fiction and biography.

My awareness of growing space lies in three areas. The first concerns local sales. The independant book shops do a good job of selling New Zealand children's literature, but go into any of the big book stores, you will not find children's books until you get to the back of the shop amongst the cards and stationary. Only a handful of titles are by New Zealand authors.

The second concern is on the behalf of our illustrators. Gavin Bishop gives time to encouraging new illustrators, especially those who enter the Gavin Bishop Illustration Award. This is Gavin's attempt to meet a great need. Ann Mallinson has a new award for illustrators. But as yet, we do not have a school or certificated course in children's book illustration, which seems extraordinary given the quality and quantity of children's books produced in this country. Why this lack?

My last concern is for an increase of books in Te Reo – in non-Maori homes. Many Maori are bi-lingual; most Pakeha are not. Maori is the indigenous language of this land. Other languages in this country have their homeland somewhere else. Te Reo belongs here. Our English language effectively describes things and events. I am much less fluent in Maori, but in learning Te Reo, even at a basic level, I discover a language that is all about relationship, our relationship with each other, our relationship with the land. For me, it is the language that best describes the heart of who we all are.

So what of the future of New Zealand Children's Literature? If we can judge from past growth, and from the quality of writing we see coming out of New Zealand schools, then it will be very good indeed.

4407 words; Joy Cowley

Joy Cowley