

## THE MOUTH OF THE WHALE (THE POWER OF PICTURES)

The 2014 Janet Frame Memorial Lecture, 10<sup>th</sup> March, Wellington

I would like to start by thanking the New Zealand Society of Authors. As I said last year, I consider my appointment as President of Honour to be different to past appointments, daring even, because a writer who produces mainly short stories with lots of pictures for children is not usually taken this seriously. When I realised I would have to present the Janet Frame Memorial Lecture for 2014, I emailed a number of writers, illustrators, librarians and publishers and asked for their help. They responded generously and I have woven their comments and ideas into this talk. I would like to thank those people very much.

When I was four years old my life changed forever. My parents took me to the movies. At 8 o'clock one night in Invercargill, we went to see Walt Disney's Pinocchio. I don't remember much about the film except for one image that has stayed in my mind and become part of my memory bank.

It was the gigantic, open mouth of the whale that swallowed Pinocchio, that I can't forget. It probably remained on screen for no more than a few seconds but that cavernous mouth, beckoning like a deep, dank cave, burrowed into my brain and is still there if I close my eyes. It has become a touchstone for me; a dynamic

reference to use when I'm making a picture I hope will impact on my young readers and stay with them for the rest of their lives - a picture with power.

My talk tonight is called "THE MOUTH OF THE WHALE" (The Power of Pictures) and it is about illustration, the least understood of all literary forms.

It is the teenager of artistic endeavour. A rebel with a cause, constantly seeking approval from the art world; misunderstood by the literary world. For too long it has been seen as a device to make a book more attractive or to break up large blocks of text. I want to show that illustration has a bigger job to do than that. It is part of a storytelling process, closer to writing than a work of art. A single illustration does not stand on its own to be hung on an art gallery wall. Its place is beside other illustrations within the pages of a book to be read along with the text. And the ideal environment for illustration for me is a picture book.

## THE POWER OF PICTURES

But let's go back to the idea of a picture having the power to imbed itself in your psyche for a lifetime.

Much is made of the power of the word but for me the power of the image is just as enduring. After my first Disney movie I became hooked. Visits to the pictures as I grew older, and we are talking about going to a picture palace rather than a multiplex, became a regular and vital part of my life. It was not only the

films themselves I liked, it was the whole experience of going to the pictures – catching the bus, racing along the street to the theatre, joining the queue to slowly climb the marble steps, slipping through the polished brass doors into the lobby and finally arriving at the ticket box to buy a ninepenny seat in the front row.

Inside the picture theatre, Children, verging on hysteria, bounced up and down on the seats or ran up and down the aisles.

Usherettes helplessly flashed their torches at those who had their feet on the seats. Coloured lights lit the scalloped curtains – red, green and then orange, until finally the music swelled and the curtain sailed up into the proscenium arch with a roar from the audience. Then after God Save the Queen, Woody Wood Pecker or Bugs Bunny announced that a cartoon was about to begin.

The cartoons were often followed by serials that finished each week with a cliff-hanger. But for me it wasn't only the stories I was absorbed by, it was the pictures. They stored themselves away in my head as stills to dream about later in the quiet of my bed.

The images from these old films were simple, yet unforgettable. I didn't notice that the crocodile infested pool was a tarpaulin filled with water. I entered that magical world desperate to remain there for the rest of my life.

(Perhaps by producing picture books I am still trying to do this.)

Also, while watching these films, I learned the language of the cinema. Pictures were presented in long shot, close-up and  $\frac{3}{4}$  view. Characters were enhanced by deep shadows or were brightly lit or presented in dramatic perspective. This was the stuff of visual story telling. And although I didn't know it at the time, it was the stuff of illustration - art that tells a story in a book.

I was much older when I first went to live theatre. The language of the stage is similar to the cinema in many ways. Natural light is excluded. Artificial light is manipulated. Reality is sketchy. Your imagination has to do a lot of work. But unlike a movie, your viewpoint is fixed by the seat you choose to sit in. The players on the stage stay the same size. There are no close-ups. And the sets are often stylized and artificial.

I was as profoundly affected by the theatre, as I was by the cinema. In fact, when I look back at some my early picture books I realise that many of my pictures are presented like scenes in a play. The characters remain the same size throughout the book and so do the settings. There are no long shots, close-ups or cropped images. In my book MR FOX, the illustrations join up as one long frieze of continuous landscape observed from a consistent distance.

In books, illustration is used in two main ways. It can embellish the text or as in a picture book, or a comic, help tell a

story. In this talk, it is the use of illustration in picture books that I am going to concentrate on.

Most people think they know what a picture book is. But opinions vary enormously. An agent I once had in New York said to me quite simply that “picture books are for children who can’t read yet.”

Others think that a picture book is something to do when your major life’s work is behind you.

“When I retire I will write and illustrate a picture book,” I’ve been told on many occasions. The best response to that, I have found, is - “And when I retire I will become a brain surgeon.”

But Maurice Sendak, the great American writer/illustrator said, “For me, a picture book is a damned difficult thing to do. The words and pictures must be combined in a way that makes it look as if it was easy- dashed off in no time at all. There is some fine mystery in this difficult form, a mystery that is the artist’s business.”

And what do I think? Well, I see a picture book as being very like a little movie in many ways. Both art forms start with a story that is developed into a storyboard where the scenes and characters are put in place. The text in the book is included on the page where as in a movie, it becomes dialogue on the soundtrack. The words and the pictures don’t say the same things. Time is involved too, with the turning of the page or the running of the film.

I believe that the best picture books are produced by one person - a writer/illustrator. There is no special name for someone who does this. If there are two people involved, both must have a feeling of ownership. The illustrator should feel like an active partner not just an echo of the author. And most importantly, the writer and the illustrator should never be doing the same thing. Both of them tell the story and they do it together, but separately.

In my own picture books I make my pictures work hard. Besides reflecting what is being said in the text, they often have to carry themes and subplots that are sometimes only hinted at in the text, if mentioned at all. They can never be just a bit of decoration, but must show an originality of vision - fresh, new ways of seeing the ordinary. Sendak says, "Artists should think idiosyncratically."

And the physical picture book when finally published should be a delight to the senses. The sequence of events that thrilled me when going to pictures - inching up the disinfected marble steps, gawking at the posters of coming attractions, entering the glowing cavern of the theatre, waiting for the scalloped curtains to rise, is exactly what I enjoy about reading a picture book. First, there is the smell. (A new book has a special smell.) The cover suggests what attractions might be inside. As you pick up the book you notice the thickness of the binding, the texture of the paper. Your anticipation begins to build. The world around

you starts to recede. It is time to slide your fingers slowly over the dust jacket and open the front cover to gaze at the endpapers; those delicious teasers that hint at treasures concealed beyond. As you turn the endpapers, the credits begin to roll. The half title page announces the story, then, the title page names the author and illustrator. And with the turning of that page, the story nestled in a medley of words and pictures, takes off. Characters are presented in long shot and close-up, in dramatic perspectives and plays of shadow and light. Words set the pace. Pictures add subplots. Simple but complicated. Finally you reach page 32. You savour the back endpapers and reluctantly close the book. The world around you slips back into place.

Unfortunately this sensuous experience can be difficult to find today. There **are** some wonderfully produced New Zealand picture books but commercial pressures reduce many books to shadows of their potential selves. Hard covers and dust jackets are usually the first to go, followed by endpapers and half title pages. Generally, a lot of modern New Zealand picture books are mean and lean. And not only have they been slimmed down physically but their stories and pictures have been reduced and simplified to offer a “quick fix” to a busy parent. There is no gaping whale’s mouth to cast a sense of awe or offer a lifetime of wonder in any of these books.

Jenny Hellen, Publishing Editor at Random House NZ says,

“It looks as if people want rhymes and easy illustrations. Publishers **are** creating beautiful, special books but they’re not really selling very well.”

Others I canvassed observed similar trends.

“The majority of the NZ public look upon children’s books as a sort of sentimental amusement and view anything thought-provoking as a bit a challenge.”

Or more harshly -

“The quest for the shrinking dollar has meant marketability has supplanted any notions of quality or diversity in kids’ publishing.”

“Publishers are identifying a market and rushing things through with the cheapest illustrator they can find.”

Indeed, the pressure on publishers to produce books that will make money, has led some of them into dark and strange waters. And bobbing around on the waves are some pretty unpalatable things that reflect the arrested development of writers and illustrators who think they are producing what children want to read about – bodily functions.

These are waters in which the whale sensibly keeps his mouth well and truly closed.

I agree with Tessa Duder when she says, “Children may be entertained by simple catchy tunes and scatological jokes, but to enshrine these in book form is sad and unwelcome.”

But, is the tide turning? Have publishers in New Zealand in recent months been producing more picture books of a higher quality? Dr Libby Limbrick from Storylines thinks this is the case. She said that when choosing the 2013 picture books for the Storylines Notable Books List, the selection panel, impressed with the quality of both writing and illustration, increased the number of notable picture books from 10 to 13.

This is heartening. It suggests that the few picture books that offer more than a quick sniggle are being noticed. But in many bookshops I suspect they are still being muscled off the shelves by the cheap and cheerful that booksellers can sell easily.

## HISTORY

In 1950, at primary school we had a book cupboard in one corner of the room. Inside there were children's novels, readers and an atlas, but no picture books. At home there were no picture books either. I had COLE'S FUNNY PICTURE BOOK No 1. But that wasn't really a picture book in the modern sense. I had a few comics. For birthdays and Christmas I usually received an annual - Boys' Own, Eagle or Chatterbox. But no picture books.

In the late 1950s we moved to Invercargill. At the public juvenile library, I saw American picture books for the first time. Books by Virginia Lee Burton - THE LITTLE HOUSE and MIKE

MULLIGAN AND HIS STEAM SHOVEL. I also became familiar with the illustrators of the Little Golden Books, –Art Seiden, Garth Williams and Alice and Martin Provensen. And in the school journals I saw the work of Russell Clark, Roy Cowan, Juliet Peter and E. Mervyn Taylor. But stand alone NZ picture books were few and far between.

According To Betty Gilderdale in her 1982 book A SEA CHANGE, very few picture books as we think of them now, were published in New Zealand before 1940 and there were only five in that decade. Bill Naglekerke says, “Part of the answer lies in the very poor book production of early New Zealand publishers. A second important factor was that picture books require both illustrator and author, and there were fewer children's illustrators than writers.”

Again there were few NZ picture books published in the 1950s.

The Hutu and Kawa books by Avis Acres, with their Pohutukawa fairy characters, were heavily influenced by the Gumnut Babies by May Gibbs in Australia. Even though efforts were made to reflect indigenous flora and fauna in these and other early New Zealand picture books, they had the appearance and feeling of having been produced in England.

Among the picture books published in the **1960s** were two that explored Maori themes. Ron Bacon’s THE BOY AND THE TANIWHA and RUA AND THE SEA PEOPLE were both illustrated

by Para Matchitt. Flower power had a definite influence on John Castle's HIPPY, and Joy Cowley's THE DUCK AND THE GUN illustrated by Edward Sorel, was an anti-war story.

The 1970s saw a larger number of picture books published. There were stories firmly grounded in Aotearoa – THE HOUSE OF THE PEOPLE again by Bacon and Matchitt, MAUI AND THE BIG FISH by Katarina Mataira and NICKY AND WI by Iris Wallace and Peter McIntyre. And the two books by Rhonda and David Armitage, THE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER'S LUNCH and the THE TROUBLE WITH MR HARRIS made no excuses for their obvious English settings. But it was Eve Sutton's book MY CAT LIKES TO HIDE IN BOXES illustrated by Lynley Dodd that pointed the way towards the enormous eruption in New Zealand children's publishing in the 1980s. Over the last 30 years, the picture book scene in New Zealand has found a confident voice that speaks to and for our children. Illustrators like Christine Ross, Trevor Pye, David Elliot, Ali Teo, Ruth Paul, Fraser Williamson, Dick Frizzell, Robyn Belton, Lynley Dodd, Bob Kerr, Donovan Bixley and many, many others have produced idiosyncratic pictures with an originality of vision that has filled the children of this country with awe and wonder. I am enormously proud to have been part of that movement too.

## **NATIONALISM**

The nervous New Zealand habit of “looking north” for acceptance from the rest of the world has given New Zealand literature a distinctive personality. In contrast to this has been the bloody-minded doggedness of writers and artists to try to imbue their work with a sense of national identity.

Attempts to give some recent picture books a distinctive New Zealand flavour by the self-conscious inclusion of so-called kiwi icons –black singlets, jandles, pavlova and rugby balls - has generally been heavy handed and ultimately boring. But it is a difficult thing to do well. I know, because I’ve tried to do it myself.

In 1978, when Oxford University Press were actively looking for New Zealand children’s stories, I wrote a story about a sheep, a Canterbury lamb called BIDIBIDI. I collected drawings and took photographs on family holidays of the mountains in Arthurs Pass and the lake in Tekapo and wove these details into my illustrations.

I followed this book with another. MRS MCGINTY AND THE BIZARRE PLANT was set firmly in Linwood, an eastern suburb of Christchurch, home of the famous Edmonds’ Baking Powder Factory.

And I took a similar approach to my next few books setting them in and around Christchurch where I live, until I began working on the illustrations for THE THREE LITTLE PIGS when something unusual happened. The effects of a severe drought that summer, suddenly appeared in my pictures without my being aware of it.

The hills behind the pigs' house were bleached almost white like the hills I could see from my studio window. And when I drew MOTHER HUBBARD the following year, her house was filled with the kind of clutter that ours is.

Was this a natural sense of identity sneaking up on me? Was I at last honestly reflecting **my** world, allowing New Zealand references to creep into my work without my being aware of them?

It continued to happen until I tried to get published in the USA. The nationalistic flavour in my work became a problem.

So in 1997, I deliberately wrote LITTLE RABBIT AND THE SEA with an American audience in mind, not allowing any NZ references at all to creep into the pictures. But by doing this I experienced another set-back I hadn't anticipated. LITTLE RABBIT AND THE SEA received good reviews in the US but here, the book was criticised for being slight and too American in its style.

It happened again in 1999 with STAY AWAKE BEAR. American readers liked it. New Zealand readers wondered where my New Zealand flavour had gone.

There are many **challenges and problems** that present themselves to picture book illustrators. One of the most common difficulties is being associated with children and having one's work regarded as lacking the intellectual depth to be of serious

interest to adults. This attitude can be seen in **reviews** of picture books, where illustrators are usually given second billing, if they are mentioned at all. Try finding the illustrator's name on the weekly NZ bestseller list.

And **royalties** don't usually reflect the months it takes to produce the pictures for a picture book. A writer can often write a text in a few days. But both illustrator and writer receive the same royalty percentage, usually 5%.

**Copyright** problems for illustrators resulted in the past with their original artwork not being returned after the publication of a book. Some publishers misunderstood that they paid only for the limited use of the art, not for the ownership of the illustrator's work.

It was in Educational and Government publishing where this problem mainly occurred. Today, digital illustration has reduced this problem because of the lack of a hard copy.

Until 2004, picture books received less from the Public Lending Right Scheme because they had fewer than 48 pages. Why 48 pages? No-one knew. This policy reflected the hierarchy that still exists in the literary world. Even today, some books are still more equal than others.

To apply for **Creative NZ funding**, a picture book illustrator has to compete with writers of all literary genre. In recent years few illustrators have been successful. The limitations set by the conventions of a picture book - target audience, limited number of pages etc., make it extremely difficult for an illustrator's funding application to stand up to applications from authors of more substantial books.

Illustrators are affected too by the turmoil that publishing finds itself in at the moment. There are threats and challenges presented by the retrenching of multi-national publishing houses, changes to copyright laws and digital media. Ebooks seem to offer a fairly seamless way forward for books of text but when it comes to picture books it can be a little more complicated. Apps and interactive ebooks are already being developed for ipads and iphones but the expense involved restricts most of these to fairly basic functions. No doubt costs will eventually come down and make more sophisticated apps widely available. I had an early taste of this technology when in 2003 I was Writer in Residence at Canterbury University. I worked with the HIT Laboratory to produce the world's first 3-dimensional, animated, picture book. It combined a picture book with computer technology that allowed characters on a page to stand up and walk around in 3 dimensions. Readers viewed the book through special glasses. A soundtrack played a reading of

the story with backing music. It was the closest I ever came to making a movie. But was it a book or was it a toy?

Challenges for illustrators have always been around, but I think that today there is more **support and recognition** available than ever before.

For example, the **LIANZA Russell Clark Award** for excellence in illustration may not have been set up until 1978, (the Esther Glen Medal for fiction was established 33 years earlier), but it throws a spotlight onto illustration in a way that the NZ POST Children's Book Awards do not. And so does the **Mallinson Rendel Illustrators' Award**, presented for the first time in 2011. Some think it doesn't sit in total comfort with the other NZ Arts Foundation Awards but to see illustration singled out as an art form in its own right is uplifting for those of us who have devoted our lives to it.

And there is more **training** for illustrators available than ever before too. Several tertiary institutions such as Wellington Massey University, Auckland University of Technology, and the Christchurch and Otago Polytechnics offer illustration majors.

Several shorter courses are offered in Auckland by Sandra Morris and Nina Rycroft and other illustration courses of varying length occur from time to time in other parts of the country.

**Storylines**, the Children's Literature Charitable Trust of New Zealand is a haven for illustrators as well as for all writers

for children. Besides organizing one of the biggest annual literary events of the year it supports several major awards. The two that are of benefit to illustrators are the Storylines Joy Cowley Award for a picture book writer and the Storylines Gavin Bishop Award for an illustrator. Both offer a monetary prize and a chance to have some work published.

**Te Tai Tamariki** New Zealand Children's Literature Preservation Trust was established in 2006 in Christchurch. Since then, it has organized and toured nationally, 7 exhibitions of picture book art with an emphasis on story-telling and "visual literacy". The trust also aims to collect material - roughs, storyboards, dummies and original art - produced in the production of NZ picture books.

The **NZ Book Council** administers several initiatives, including the excellent Writers in Schools Scheme that offers employment to writers and illustrators with the chance to promote their work.

The **NZ Society of Authors** has welcomed illustrators as full members for many years now and that is one of the reasons I standing here today. Their professional services have been very helpful to me on several occasions.

There are many other ways, yet to be developed, of raising the profile of New Zealand picture book illustration. Closer ties with writers and illustrators in Australia should be considered.

Ann James and Ann Haddon, founders of Books Illustrated in Melbourne are keen to establish stronger links between New Zealand and Australian illustrators that could lead to exhibitions of original work here and in Australia.

Also, Ann James was instrumental in setting up and administering the newly established Australian **Children's Laureate**. There are many here who would like to see a similar initiative in New Zealand. I think a Children's Laureate could raise the profile of not only New Zealand Children's Literature but also the importance of literacy for the whole country.

Illustrators should support Te Tai Tamariki to allow it to continue to mount exhibitions of picture book art and the processes involved. These not only promote illustrators' work but they educate the public and in some cases open the eyes of those most closely associated with picture book production. As one of my contacts commented, " My editors know virtually nothing about illustration."

The Te Tai Tamariki Preservation trust is not in the position yet to collect and store original picture book art on a large scale, therefore I am pleased to hear that the huge collection of illustration produced for the School Publications Branch and Learning Media will be properly preserved and archived. The Ministry of Education will provide secure digital storage to digital illustration files and the National Archives will continue to archive illustrations on paper.

## CONCLUSION

Essentially I believe the concept of a picture book, a nimble story told with text and pictures, is here to stay for some time yet. Technology may eventually change its format into an application for a computer, but its current make-up of 32 pages within a cover is pretty successful and fulfils its function well.

But the world of the New Zealand Picture book is not a big world. There is little room to accommodate large numbers of illustrators. The market is small and the road into the future for all types of publishing looks to be a rocky one. But the major limiting factor is that picture book illustrations demand a peculiar way of thinking that few people have. The mouth of the whale for many, will always remain firmly shut.

If an illustrator is seeking fortune and fame, they should forget about it. One person every two decades makes some good money, but most don't. And as for fame?

The following letter puts that into perspective.

“Hi Gavin,

We are a Duffy Books in Homes school and Duffy Books usually organize someone famous to present the free books that every child in the school is given. Unfortunately this term, because of the earthquake, the Duffy organization is unable to send a famous person and I was wondering if you would be interested in coming to our school instead.”

But, no matter what developments take place in the future or what challenges lie ahead, I can see the sky above Picture Book Land full of sky-rockets and Roman candles. There are some wonderful picture book illustrators in this country, published and yet-to-be-published. They will instinctively move in the right directions, making fresh and challenging pictures in paint, collage, Photoshop or Adobe Illustrator that will have the power to become a child's life long friend. The mouth of the whale will be forever open in astonishment and delight.

GAVIN BISHOP 2014