

Janet Frame Memorial Lecture 2018

It is a privilege to be here this evening. I am honoured to be associated with the name of Janet Frame and honoured, too, to be chosen as the NZSA President of Honour for 2018.

I guess I'm here because I've been around for a while. People tend to assume that no matter how witless I was to start with, I have, by now, acquired a few scraps of wisdom and experience that might be worth passing on. Let's hope so.

I am going to talk not just as a writer and member of NZSA but also from my time as a bookseller and publishers rep and as an agent, mentor and assessor of manuscripts. I am going to talk about NZ fiction and the Market, the economic and cultural circumstances of NZ novels in particular. The story for children's literature and for non-fiction is similar but less dramatic; out of the three, in market terms, our fiction is arguably in the worst state. At the same time, many people assume it to be one of the three pillars of our literature – along with poetry and drama - and, therefore, an essential component of our culture generally.

Some of you are no doubt bristling already about value judgements implied by what I've just said. I'd like to duck those questions, if I may. I don't want to start arguing about literary versus commercial fiction or children's versus adult. For me, the term 'literature' is

broadly based and includes, crime and science fiction, fantasy and satire. I agree with the point Catherine Robertson made in the Listener a year or so ago – we need to celebrate all our writers no matter what genre they work in. We are too small a group and too embattled to stand divided. That said, however, I think it is worthwhile clarifying one question. What do we mean by a New Zealand novel?

One definition is that it is a novel published in New Zealand. This is obviously too narrow but moving beyond it raises a number of problems. When Stephen Daisley's *Coming Rain* won the Acorn Prize in 2016, some people asked whether it should be considered a New Zealand novel given that its author lived in Australia and that the book was published and set there; its only connection with New Zealand seemed to be that Daisley was born and raised in Raetehi. On the other hand, few such questions were asked when Kirsty Gunn's *The Big Music* won the equivalent award in 2013 in very similar circumstances (a book set in Scotland and published in England by someone who hadn't lived here since early adulthood). The main difference seemed to be that New Zealand readers knew of Gunn and her work and that she had written about this country in the past, whereas very few of us had heard of Daisley before his win. This suggests that prescriptive definitions are of little use; we will always argue about some particular cases. On the whole, though, we have a broad agreement and it's that agreement that I am going to rely on: a New Zealand novel is one we recognise and claim as our own. For the

most part, we base that claim – at a minimum – on the fact that the writer has written at least some of their work primarily for a New Zealand audience or in a New Zealand context.

The thing that interests me in this whole business is the tension between what we might call the aesthetic view and the commercial view, a tension that has nothing to do with genres and is at its tautest in the minds of agents and publishers. *I really like this novel but I can't sell it*: a deeply frustrating judgement.

Literary critics and commentators rarely consider this problem. They talk about the reception of books by reviewers and readers and the opinions and theories of fellow critics but they rarely pause to consider the role of publishers in defining the subject of their enquiries. Doubtless this is because the practice of their profession is grounded in assumptions made in the markets of Britain and the USA, which are so big that one can assume, by and large, that any writer who has written something worthwhile will find a publisher and, thence, an audience for it.

Nevertheless, there are still those stories about publishers' fallibility that writers take a perverse pleasure in: how *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was rejected a dozen times or more, *Gone with the Wind* at least 40 times, Elmore Leonard's *The Big Bounce* 85 times, Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art Of Motor Cycle Maintenance* 121 and so on. For me such tales are not encouraging, they're depressing because I always end up wondering how many Margaret

Mitchells there have been who gave up at 35 or Robert Pirsigs who shot themselves after rejection number 100. How many manuscripts of real value have been tossed out in the rubbish or been deleted from computer drives without a thought? And how much worse might this situation be in New Zealand where there have never been more than a handful of publishers at any one time?

Over the years those handfuls have decided what we read. These are not companies I'm talking about but individuals. We are familiar with the literary contributions of Mansfield and Sargeson, Frame and Gee, Kidman and Mahy, Ihimaera and Catton but we forget the lesser but crucial influence of Albion Wright, Bert Hingley, Geoff Walker, Bob Ross, Robyn and Brian Bargh, Ann Mallinson, Harriet Allen, Fergus Barrowman and their fellows. Their judgement has helped to form our literature; not simply because of what they have decided to give us but also because their decisions have partly determined what our writers have decided to do next.

A full history of our market would involve sales figures, graphs of trends and the like. I don't have that information but I think we can still get a general picture of what's gone on by looking at the books and who has published them.

Throughout the sixties, according to Thomas Burns's 1981 bibliography, New Zealand writers produced an average of just over 30 novels a year. Well over half of these were light fiction particularly romance and crime. The dominant publishers were Mills and Boon

and Robert Hale, a London house with a strong interest in popular genres. Just under sixty percent of our novels were published overseas. Prominent local publishers were Whitcombe and Tombs, Blackwood Paul in a number of guises, AH and AW Reed and Pegasus. Each of these typically published one or two novels a year. During the sixties almost all the writers of mainstream fiction were published overseas, mostly in Britain: Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Ian Cross, Marilyn Duckworth, Maurice Gee, Frank Sargeson, David Ballantyne, Noel Hilliard, Joy Cowley. An exception is Janet Frame, although she, too, had moved from Pegasus to a London publisher by the time of her sixth novel, *A State of Siege*, in 1967.

There is an irony in this British involvement. For the most part our sixties novels or, at least those written by men, were still dominated by what the critics call ‘provincialism’: the literary mode, promoted from the mid-thirties by Sargeson, Allen Curnow and others, that worried over the question of our national cultural identity and was committed to locally grounded realism and social critique.

Provincialism arose as a rejection of the literature of the previous generation which, the provincialists believed, saw itself as an outpost of British culture. It’s odd, then, that so many provincialist novels – Bill Pearson’s *Coal Flat* is one of the few exceptions – should be subject to the judgement and approval of British publishers and be brought out with at least half an eye to a British audience.

How much influence did these overseas gatekeepers have on our longer fiction? On the face of it, the novelists of the time were writing for New Zealanders: most of the books are set in New Zealand and deal with New Zealand matters. For example, Maori/Pakeha relations figure prominently in the storylines. If these were distinctively New Zealand novels, why did they appeal to British publishers? Maybe English readers still saw New Zealand as The Britain of the South; maybe New Zealand writers were still attached to Mother England's umbilical cord despite their conscious efforts to separate themselves; maybe it is just a proof that good writing knows no cultural boundaries.

By the end of the sixties the old order was breaking down. The politics of protest and the intellectual ferment of the counter-culture demanded new literary responses. Those came through poetry and, to a lesser extent, short stories. Provincialism gave way to something that was its opposite in key particulars: not nationalism but internationalism, not armchair social critique but active protest, not realism, but anything goes. Here in Auckland, which was my neck of the woods back then, poets like Alan Brunton, Russell Haley and David Mitchell were into performance – vigorous, surrealist and loud. In print, it *looked* loud with its chaotic layouts, jumbled fonts, its incantatory repetitions and its scattering of graphics. This diversity and energy was possible because work was performed and reached an audience within days or even minutes following composition and

because all its print outlets were local: established magazines like *Landfall*, *Mate* and *Argot* and others like *Freed*, which sprang up when they were needed.

Change in longer fiction has a built in inertia that comes from the long production cycle and I suspect, too, that the British judgement of our 60s fiction dampened down the movement towards experimentation and diversity if only because it involved a compromise of some kind. Of course it is very difficult to judge publishers' influence on such matters because that influence depends as much on what they reject as on what they accept.

Superficially the seventies followed a similar pattern to the previous decade – 30 novels a year, lots from Mills and Boon and Robert Hale. There was, however, a significant shift in local publishing. In 1971 Whitcombe and Tombs merged with stationer Coulls Somerville and Wilkie and within five years had pulled out of fiction. Reeds and Pegasus also cut back. The slack was made up by a blossoming in other local publishing options. New smaller companies emerged: Cape Catley, Dunmore and McIndoe, for example. But the most notable change was the entry into the fiction market of the multinationals – overseas companies with local offices: Collins, Heinemann, Hodder and Stoughton and Longman. These companies had been around for a while first as sales offices then as warehouses for overseas books and finally as local publishers in their own right. One can assume they got into fiction because they thought there was

money in it. For the most part, their operations were small, compact and autonomous; the person who made the publishing decisions was likely to be the local CEO. In many ways there were very similar to local companies.

This new local energy had an impact. While some of our established authors, like Janet Frame, Joy Cowley and Maurice Gee, continued to be published overseas others such as M K Joseph, Noel Hilliard and R H Morrieson moved towards local publishers as did most of the newer names: the likes of Ian Wedde, Vincent O'Sullivan and Jean Watson. Between 1970 and 1979, the number of locally published novels tripled. Numbers of novels published in London fell accordingly.

All this seems to suggest a growing New Zealand readership for locally published novels, which in turn might derive from a rising awareness of local issues. Feminism, anti-apartheid protests, the 1975 Land March, Bastion Point all helped to stir up local culture both Maori and Pakeha. More generally, one can see the seventies as a movement of the sixties' counter culture into the mainstream with significant changes to the attitudes of the New Zealand middle class, which was shaken up by its discovery of protest, pot and promiscuity.

These changes were reflected in the novels of the time. The seventies marked the arrival of Maori and Pasifika voices: Witi Ihimaera's *Tangi* and Albert Wendt's *Sons for the Return Home*, Herataunga Pat Baker's *Behind the Tattooed Face*, Patricia Grace's *Mutuwhenua*. By the end of the decade Wendt had published two more novels and

Ihimaera one. Karl Stead's *Smith's Dream* and Craig Harrison's *Broken October* presented dystopian views of New Zealand. Maurice Shadbolt's *Danger Zone* directly engaged with the protests against French nuclear testing in the Pacific. There was an increased interest in history with the likes of Shadbolt's *Strangers and Journeys*, Philip Temple's *The Explorer* and James McNeish's *McKenzie* and a sharpening of feminist social critique in the novels of Joy Cowley, Margaret Sutherland and, in 1979, Fiona Kidman, whose novel *A Breed of Women* broke new ground in its frank approach to female sexuality. Such fiction seems more seriously engaged with its time and its place and the active concerns of its readership than the novels of the past. It's probably safe to say that while the provincialist writers were deeply interested in ordinary Kiwis and what made them tick, ordinary Kiwis didn't reciprocate; they were into Barry Crump. In the seventies, I think New Zealand fiction became secure in its readership.

This growth was part of a world-wide expansion of interest in fiction that continued into the eighties and nineties. The multinationals continued to play an active part in the local market, although a frenzy of buyouts and takeovers meant their names were constantly changing and they were gradually getting fewer and bigger. Collins combined with Harper and Row to become Harper Collins; Century combined with Hutchinson to make Century Hutchinson and then with Random

House to make Random Century. Penguin started publishing in New Zealand.

Such changes resulted in local staff movements. Experienced book people who found themselves out of a job or who chose to resign set up as local publishers; some of which grew quite rapidly into successful companies - Benton Ross, New Women's Press, Tandem Press, Longacre, Godwit, Mallinson Rendell, for example. In 1985 Fergus Barrowman took over at Victoria University Press and quickly turned it into a major player in our fiction and poetry. Geoff Walker at Penguin and Harriet Allen at Random House also established themselves as part of what became the triumvirate of our fiction publishing.

This Golden Age was characterised by the rise of the New Zealand best-seller. Between *A Breed of Women* in 1979 and Jenny Pattrick's *The Denniston Rose* in 2003 we have Philip Temple's *Beak of the Moon*, Sue McCauley's *Other Halves*, Keri Hulme's *the bone people*, Stefan Eldred-Grigg's *Oracles and Miracles*, Alan Duff's *Once Were Warriors*, Barbara Else's *The Warrior Queen*, Elizabeth Knox's *The Vintner's Luck* and Catherine Chidgey's *In a Fishbone Church*. Ten books and doubtless there are some I have missed that could have been included.

This list is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, all the books except *A Breed of Women* were first published in New Zealand and

although some later went on to considerable overseas success, they were all best-sellers here before that happened.

Second, five of the ten were first published by independent publishers and five by the multinationals. Indeed, *the bone people* was famously turned down by many publishers before it was brought out by the Spiral Collective, a group of Hulme's friends, and only then picked up by Hodder and Stoughton.

Third, the list shows a wide range of subject matter and writing styles from what one might call an eco-fantasy (*Beak of the Moon*) to a hard-hitting social critique in something like the language of the street (*Once Were Warriors*) to a domestic comedy (*The Warrior Queen*) to a historical fantasy set in France complete with angel (*The Vintner's Luck*). The somewhat dour realism of the provincialist period is long gone.

Fourth, one would be hard pressed to classify these novels as either literary or popular. Perhaps only *The Denniston Rose* fits obviously into a standard genre – popular historical fiction.

Last, seven out of the ten are written by women and a slightly different seven are first novels by unknown writers.

The eighties and nineties were also notable for a steady increase in the number of titles. I don't have any firm figures but I recall from my time on the Montana New Zealand Book Awards management committee that by the turn of the twentieth century the fiction prize

was receiving around thirty entries a year. This number consisted solely of work that their publishers considered serious or literary fiction and excluded romance and crime and other genres. It seems our output of published novels across all genre had at least doubled in twenty years.

This positive trend slowed and then reversed towards the end of the nineties. Book sales generally and sales of New Zealand novels in particular went into a decline. Structural changes in local publishing reflect this trend. A number of our strongest and longest lasting independent publishers either went out of business or were bought out by bigger companies: Hazard Press, Mallinson Rendell, Longacre, Tandem Press. Others, such as Otago University Press and Canterbury University Press, stopped publishing fiction. The multi-nationals all retrenched by downsizing their local operations, moving their warehousing and some of their administration to Australia.

Companies like Hachette, formerly Hodder Moe Becket, formerly Hodder and Stoughton, retained little more than a sales office here and published a minimal amount of local fiction from Australia.

Harper Collins also cut back its fiction publishing. Most significantly, in 2013, Penguin combined with Random House. Since that time, the publication of adult fiction in New Zealand has been dominated by two companies: Penguin Random House and Victoria University Press. Two is not enough.

How did all this happen?

The first thing to note is that the decline was part of a global trend caused by a perfect storm of influences including the rise of quality TV drama, beginning with *The Sopranos* (1999); the impact of the internet and social media; uncertainties arising from the development of the ebook and the fallout from the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-08. A further factor was the appearance of the international mega-seller: the likes of *Harry Potter*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The massive sales of these titles were not simply an addition to the total sales of fiction; in part, at least, they took sales away from other books. Internationally, publishers found themselves relying on fewer titles to keep themselves going in tough times. In other words, their risks increased.

Two consequent factors had a particular impact on the New Zealand market. One was uncertainty about the future of Whitcoulls, which at that stage represented over fifty percent of local sales. Second was the rise of Amazon. Thirty years ago it still made sense to talk about a New Zealand market, an Australian market, a British market and a US market. Increasingly, these boundaries are blurred. Not only does promotion and word-of-mouth operate globally through social media (a major factor in the rise of the mega-seller) but retail sales do too. The problem with online retailers is their limited browsing potential. Their recommendation algorithms tend to make you keep reading the kind of thing you've read before and their headline titles tend to be the mega sellers.

This environment is not kind to the sales of New Zealand books, although I think our novels have suffered the most. Increasingly they compete in a global market, a market in which they are almost invisible. Non-fiction, of course, tends to maintain its market share through its subject matter: our biography and history, our writing on our social problems or the environment aren't in competition with overseas books in the way that fiction is. Our children's fiction has the support of educators who think it important that our kids read at least some local stories. As for our poetry, well, I think that forms a market on its own, with its own independent network of publishers and channels of promotion. The sales of local poetry might be tiny but my guess is they have, at worst, been steady over the last twenty years whereas sales of our novels over the same period have declined.

The years of decline have had their best sellers, of course, most notably Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip* and Ellie Catton's *The Luminaries*, which sold in numbers that rivalled and even exceeded our best-sellers of the eighties and nineties. The difference, though, is that both of these books achieved the bulk of their local sales on the back of recognition in the Man Booker Prize whereas the earlier books were best sellers before they achieved international success. A similar example is Witi Ihimaera's *Whale Rider*, which sold steadily, with four reprints between its first publication in 1987 and 2002, but took off like a rocket both locally and internationally following the release of Nicky Caro's movie. One theory is that success following Booker

recognition demonstrates that cultural cringe is alive and well in New Zealand – we need the imprimatur of an overseas authority before we believe anything locally produced is any good. This might be so but the case of *Whale Rider* suggests a more straightforward explanation. A successful movie is not, of itself, an endorsement of the book behind it. What it does is bring the book and, more particularly, the story to our attention. It increases the book's visibility, in other words. The collapse of our publishing and our declining market share is not just a quantitative problem. There are qualitative effects, too.

In a 2012 paper, Lydia Wevers, talks about 'the relentless middling of our literature' by which she means a pressure, which comes from both funding bodies, such as Creative New Zealand, and the commercial constraints of publishing, that squeezes out both ends of the literary spectrum: avant garde experimentation, on the one hand, and popular genres such as crime, romance, science fiction and fantasy on the other. She is no doubt right in seeing this pressure as the result of constraints imposed by our small market. A genre, either literary or popular, gathers to itself a particular audience – the fans. If our total market is small, the market sector for any genre or anything other than mainstream taste is smaller still. As our overall market share shrinks, experimentation and genre publishing become less and less economic. The term 'middling' has a slightly pejorative feel, which Wevers no doubt intends. It suggests both homogeneity and also a tendency towards risk aversion, implications echoed in Colm Toibin's review

of *The Picador Book of Contemporary New Zealand Fiction*: ‘Much of the writing,’ he says, ‘is polite and orderly; writing is a way to ward off chaos and keep things as they were.’ This anthology, edited by Fergus Barrowman, was published in 1996, at the height of what I have called our Golden Age, and it represents more a future trend than its immediate context. It is the first hint that things were about to change and not necessarily for the better. Thus, Toibin’s judgement seems more applicable to our fiction today, especially our literary fiction, than to the writing in the fifteen years up to the time he made it, years in which there were more publishers and greater visibility – years during which, I believe, our market share was growing. Back then our novels showed a great deal more diversity and challenge. *Once Were Warriors* wasn’t polite and orderly; nor was *Other Halves*; *A Breed of Women* was not aiming to keep things as they were.

Our writers today are in a bind. We have creative writing schools pumping out aspiration in industrial quantities and a market share that makes commercial publishing marginal. Over the years our mainstream publishing has become more risk averse and more and more reliant on the judgement of fewer and fewer people. We are in danger of losing touch with our audience, if we have not lost it already.

Patrick Evans, in his book *The Long Forgetting* and elsewhere, sees this situation as an aspect of a broad trend towards cultural

globalisation. This influence on our writing has, he thinks, been gathering momentum since the mid sixties and came to a full flowering in the nineties with the rise to prominence of the International Institute of Modern Letters. It involved a major shift in attitude. No longer did our writers focus on New Zealand – its people, its culture and its problems. Instead we insisted on our freedom to write about whatever we wanted in whatever manner we chose. The end result of this opening of perspective is that our writers have stopped writing for a New Zealand audience and work constantly with at least half an eye to what the wider world might think. Evans deplores this trend. He believes it has led to a loss of specificity, which equates to a consequent reduction in vividness and authenticity and produces writing which is homogeneous, bland and ungrounded.

I think there is a valid point here. A lot of the fiction I see, in whatever genre, suffers from a lack of specificity. Places, characters and language, especially dialogue, are all generalised because, I suspect, the writers are looking to an overseas audience; an audience that they don't know in a cultural context that they have learned about second hand through books, TV and movies. However, I think there is a distinction to be made here between embracing a global culture and trying to write for a global audience. The Auckland poets who I mentioned earlier – Haley, Brunton and the like – were all internationalist in their literary outlooks but they were writing and performing for New Zealanders; their aim was not to be invited to

literary festivals in New York or London, it was to transform the local scene, to shake New Zealand poetry out its Provincialist habits.

In his 2015 Book Council Lecture *Where is New Zealand Literature heading?* Witi Ihimaera takes a similar line to Evans. He, too, deplores the recent changes in New Zealand writing. He looks back to the Provincialism of the 1950s and sees it as ‘a nationalistic’ imperative, a more or less successful attempt to forge a local literary identity; one that, nevertheless, still had its roots in English culture – ‘the Old World’, as he calls it. He thinks that the changes Evans describes have ‘led to a blunting of New Zealand’s edge.’ ‘Where’ he asks, ‘are the anarchic novels, those books which change our world?’ Overall, he is looking for a return to that national imperative but with a difference. He wants to sever links with the colonial past. ‘I would love,’ he says, ‘to see our literature find a different home in the world, not the Old World but Our World.’ In a tongue in cheek passage, speaking as a Maori writer, he says that if he had his way he would ‘make New Zealand a literary republic privileging Maori or Maori-Pakeha bicultural imperatives’. He’d stop teaching ‘Shakespeare, Eliot and all those other Dead White Guys’ and replace them with ‘Maori mythology, art, history and culture’. He’d also come down hard on what he calls ‘those nostalgia fests on television’: *Coronation Street*, *Downton Abbey* and *Antiques Road Show*.

Dramatic exaggerations aside, I think there is a point here, too. There is certainly valuable work to be done at the interface between Maori

and Pakeha culture. Much of the writing by Pakeha that I see either ignores Maoritanga, plunders it in ignorance, treats it as a marker for a phoney authenticity or tiptoes around it with excessive deference. None of these attitudes suggest a satisfactory relationship. Ihimaera's argument is a timely reminder to pay some attention to who we are. I don't, however, agree that we need to sever our links with the Old World. Cutting ourselves off from Shakespeare and Eliot, not to mention Dead White Dames like Austen, Bronte and the other Eliot, is not the answer. The English language is rooted in the work of such writers; without them we turn it into Esperanto. I would have thought that biculturalism requires us to recognise that our heritage involves England's dark satanic mills and its green and pleasant land as much as it involves Hawaiki.

Our problem, in my view, is not our connection to the Old World, which, after all, is part of our story, but our enslavement to the New World, the neo-colonial present. Globalisation has brought a globalised culture and that culture is dominated by the USA. Think of the subjects of our dinner party conversations. Back in the day, we used to talk about books and movies and the books were as often as not New Zealand books. These days we talk about television and Donald Trump and the television is not primarily *Coronation Street* and *Downton Abbey*. It's *NCIS* or *The Handmaid's Tale*. In the old colonial days of the 60s and 70s, we used to say that the only good TV came from the BBC; these days most of the drama we watch is

American. And as for Trump, the horrible fascination we have for him is a measure of our cultural servitude: we are all disenfranchised citizens of America.

We live in a globalised world and when our novelists say they have no cultural duties specifically to New Zealand and that they can write about whatever they like, then they are doing no more than saying they have a right to operate in the culture they actually live in – a huge conglomerate of stuff that is partly bounded by the English language and, beyond that, the values of a generally liberal, Western consumerist society. Within that mass, or shall we just call it a mess, New Zealand is a tiny dot, a pixel on a screen.

Of course, along with American culture comes the American Dream, which might currently be under threat in Michigan and Wisconsin but is alive and well in our Masters of Creative Writing classes. A global market offers global success and – thank you, Ellie Catton – it's possible, right?

A word of caution, though. Catton did not win the Man Booker Prize by working to please an overseas audience or by avoiding risks. No one in their right mind would set about writing an 832 page Victorian pastiche set on New Zealand's West Coast, structured round the twelve signs of the Zodiac and with each chapter 38% shorter than the one before it, if they were trying to second guess the taste of a reader in Manhattan or Tunbridge Wells. Catton had a vision and went for it; she also had a publisher who took the risk with her. I'm not sure how

many other publishers in New Zealand or even Australia would have taken on *The Luminaries*.

Where does all this leave us, then?

The general decline in the economic environment of our writing and publishing seemed to hit rock bottom in 2015 with the loss of sponsorship for all our book awards and for the Katherine Mansfield Fellowship. This moment was largely symbolic, however, for the tide had already begun to turn. New players were in the market: Upstart Press and Makaro Press were both, by then, in their second year and two Australian Companies – Allen and Unwin and Text Publishing – were taking an interest, which has since increased in Text's case with their involvement in the Michael Gifkins Prize. The establishment of the Ockham Book Awards and the Acorn Prize plus the new children's book awards have given us back some prestige. The Ngaio Marsh Awards receive much more recognition than they used to do, thanks in no small part to Craig Sisterson's work in making our crime fiction visible. A whole range of publishing options has blossomed from collectives to new small companies to contributory arrangements to self-publishing. There is plenty of energy and activity. What we lack perhaps is focus and a clear understanding of our problems.

The New Zealand Book Council, under the smart guidance of Peter Biggs, has begun conducting surveys of New Zealand reading habits. The 2018 survey builds on what was found out the year before and

suggests that there is good news and bad news for New Zealand writing. The bad news is that overall readership seems to be declining. In 2017, 12% of people who answered the survey had read no books in the previous year, in 2018 the figure is 14%. This downward trend is due entirely to a rise in the number of male non-readers. The good news, though, is that readership of New Zealand books seems to be on the increase. In 2017 50% of readers had read at least one book by a New Zealand author; in 2018 it is 55%. Reading of our fiction, too, seems to be growing. In 2017 New Zealand fiction represented 11% of all fiction read; in 2018 that is 12%. Reading is not the same as buying, of course, but these figures do suggest a small increase in market share.

Overall, according to the survey, New Zealand readers read 33.3 books a year on average, a total of 92,377,300 books. There is an audience out there and it seems we have two problems: we have to reach them, in the sense of producing what they want to read, and they have to be able to find us: we need more visibility.

On the first point, my advice is to forget about a global readership, engage through your writing with the world you live in and don't compromise your vision. The world you live in, of course, includes Trump and Netflix and climate change along with multiculturalism, the state of our rivers and domestic violence. Your writing needs the specificity that your passions give it. That isn't necessarily specificity of place, although Evans sometimes seems to suggest it is. There is

little physical specificity in Jane Austen compared, say, to Dickens. What Austen provides is social and psychological specificity. Specificity won't guarantee you success but I don't believe there's much success without it. Specificity doesn't mean realism. Think how Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* grounded Middle Earth in the New Zealand landscape. In short, write about what you know even when you are writing about something you've invented.

We are inundated with stories that are not our own but, in another sense, they *are* our own precisely because they are what we are inundated with. I think we need to become a great deal more conscious of where we now find ourselves.

Some examples in our current fiction that represent fruitful responses to our situation. The most obvious is historical fiction. This has tended to buck the trend over the last twenty-five years. The work of writers like Jenny Patrick and Deborah Challinor, not to mention the more recent work of Fiona Kidman and Witi Ihimaera, has all found and kept an audience because it is telling our stories in an obvious way. Crime writing in a New Zealand setting from Paul Cleave, Vanda Symon, Ben Sanders and others makes a similar contribution. Greg McGee's *The Antipodeans*, which has become a best-seller without fanfare, mostly through good, old-fashioned local word-of-mouth, provides a polychronic exploration of the relationship between New Zealand and Italy. Other less literal responses to our present cultural complexity are to be found in Nigel Cox's mash-up novels,

the work of Mike Johnson and Fiona Farrell, Tanya Moir's remarkable *The Legend of Winston Blackhat*, Pip Adams's *The New Animals*, Tina Makeriti's *Where the Rekohu Bone Sings* – all work that challenges New Zealand preconceptions and makes us think about who and what we are.

Our point of difference both for local and for international readers is that we are not American or English or Australian. I believe the best way to international success is to write for a local audience and to avoid being timid and polite and moderate and risk averse.

We need a strong and diverse local publishing industry that is willing to take risks. We can't rely on the multinationals anymore. We shouldn't rely on the Australians or the British either. We have to do it ourselves. Our fledgling publishers need help from Creative New Zealand and elsewhere in the form of mentoring, marketing and money. And I think it is time, too, that our university presses recognised that our literary fiction is just as much in need of their support as our poetry. Most importantly and to underpin all this we need a bigger market share and that mostly comes down to one word: visibility. According to chief judge, Anna Smaill, there were over fifty works of fiction entered for this year's Acorn Prize at the Ockham Book Awards. If anyone here can name more than a dozen of them, I'd be surprised. I can't and I don't think I have read more than eight or nine.

This is partly a marketing problem and one that the Book Council works to solve and that Creative New Zealand could pay some serious attention to. In one sense the decline of the multinationals is a good thing. A company like Hachette, say, was never going to be fully focussed on increasing the market share of New Zealand books because such any increase would be at the expense of their overseas titles. Overseas books are our competition. This is one of the reasons I am ambivalent about big writers' festivals. It's great to be introduced to exciting new overseas authors but then I see the long queues in front of those authors' signing desks and the paltry queues in front of the New Zealand writers' desks and I get frustrated about where all those discretionary dollars are going. All their positive benefits notwithstanding, big international festivals are bad for our market share.

And we can all do our bit. No one has an obligation to read New Zealand books but if you are a New Zealand writer you would be foolish not to. Buy them, borrow them, read them, lend them around and, above all, talk about them in person and on social media. It is the talk that matters because it is the surest way of finding your audience.

Thank you.