

**The New Zealand Society of Authors Te Puni Kaituhi o Aotearoa (PEN NZ) Inc**

**Janet Frame Memorial Lecture 2021**

**Tessa Duder**

Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa

To the Society of Author's executive officer Jenny Nagle, Society members, Storylines colleagues, book-loving friends and my whanau – thank you all for coming to share this occasion.

Especially to the Society for bringing us together in this, the finest of Auckland's heritage buildings, built 1856 to convince southerners Auckland must be retained as the capital of New Zealand.

In 1865, as we know, Wellington prevailed, but this gracious Italianate mansion remains. Having spent the past three years teleporting myself daily back to early Auckland for my next novel, to be published mid-2023, it feels like something of an emotional, even a spiritual home.

As you've heard, the Society's president, Mandy Hager, can't be with us today, but I want to personally acknowledge her outstanding contribution to the New Zealand literary landscape, not only for her leadership of the Society for the past three years, but equally the several novels that have so enriched New Zealand writing for young adults. (And of which, more later.)

My privilege and brief is to present a 'state of the nation' overview of literature and writing in New Zealand, in honour of Janet Frame, who along with Katherine Mansfield and Margaret Mahy, comprise the troika of New Zealand's most internationally-acclaimed, and in my view, greatest writers.

Well, I've been reading Mansfield since schooldays, and in 2005 I published a substantial book on Margaret Mahy, but I, for one, needed reminding of the extraordinary range of Janet Frame's writing, so much more than a public perception limited to the troubled early life that gave rise to *Owls do Cry*, the three-volume autobiography (later Jane Campion film *An Angel at my Table*) and several unsuccessful attempts by fellow writers to win her the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Between 1951 and 1984 she published some 18 novels, short story and poetry collections, basically a new book every two or three years, mostly with her American publisher Braziller, not forgetting more than 40 short stories and poems for magazines like *The New Yorker* and *Harper's Bazaar*, and one children's book.

So, standing in the shadow of these giants, rejoicing in the title of President of Honour, and charged with saying something meaningful about the state of my country's literature, the words 'imposter syndrome' are springing to mind.

You'll know that phrase coined in 1978 by two American psychologists – who else? - to cover feelings of unworthiness, anxiety, fear of being 'found out', exposed as a fraud. Dr Google advises that it's widespread – maybe 70% of adults at least once during a lifetime - but remedies are at hand. Avoid comparing yourself to others. Talk to trusted friends, seek help. Crucially, 'own your accomplishments'.

In Society of Authors terms, this means reminding myself that with three books under my belt I joined the organisation known as PEN around 1985, believing that a newish career writer should support the only national literary organisation and meet other writers. I also joined the Children's Literature Association founded by the late Tom Fitzgibbon and Betty Gilderdale.

My first meetings of PEN'S Auckland branch in the English Department's common room at the university were not encouraging. At 45, I was younger than most in the room, I was female and worse, only a children's writer. The night's business was conducted entirely between three or four of the older men, famous names whose books I'd read. However, there was always the jovial treasurer, Bernard Brown, and enough women and wine to make the socialising enjoyable.

Some five years of fairly passive membership later, but with my status perhaps slightly improved by the success of my young adult novel *Alex*, I was astonished when John Cranna asked if he could put my name forward as North Island vice-president for the PEN National Council.

I'm hardly qualified, I told him. You'll learn, he said. Any rate, it's largely honorary. You just go to Wellington once a month for meetings, support the prewsident Chris Else when and if necessary. Keep the ship steady.

Well, the Nineties turned out to be a notably turbulent period for literary politics and for the good ship PEN. I found myself in the thick of it.

There was the ruckus over the proposal to purchase a writers' flat in Bloomsbury, which ended only after a bitter stoush between the Minister of the Arts and the senior novelist who helped him cook up the scheme, this duo fighting off a posse of outraged writers, led by women, who vigorously opposed not the *idea* of a writer's flat, but the undemocratic way it was handled.

Why London, why near the British Museum, why so costly, why weren't we consulted, they indignantly and rightly asked. It got very personal, and ended with the flat being sold and writers generally regarded by the public as a disputatious and ungrateful lot.

Then there was the name change, following rumblings that PEN was fast taking on the role and responsibilities of a literary trade union, working to improve the status, rights and incomes of the country's established, mid-career and aspiring writers. Believing in the value of collective action, collective bargaining and not least, collective support, I was right behind the proposed change to Society of Authors.

Yes, an old guard predictably emerged, holding fast to the notion of PEN being an elite body putting most of its effort into supporting writers globally where freedoms of speech were under threat.

I remember a particularly fractious exchange of views in this very building, and more again when it became known that one of the old guard had sought to pre-empt any name change by applying to register 'Society of Authors' as an incorporated society, with the required 18 signatures garnered from his university colleagues. This bit of desperate skulduggery didn't work. The organisation became the New Zealand Society of Authors (PEN Inc), at last being named and seen for what it truly was.

But that was relatively minor compared to the tsunami that overcame the arts sector in 1994. The Literary Fund administered by the Literature Committee of the QE2 Arts Council didn't fit the new 'one-size-fits-all' business model proposed by Victoria University's Professor of Public Policy, Claudia Scott, and the newly named Ministry of Cultural Affairs. All arts became one, and literature had the most to lose.

Creative New Zealand was born, with that marketing name described at the time as sounding like a hair salon in Te Kuiti. The neoliberal ideologies of the 1980s were allowed full sway, along with the newspeak of 'goals and objectives' (surely the same thing) and emphasis on 'accountability' and 'contestability' and 'new initiatives'. Panels of anonymous 'peers and experts' appointed by CNZ would now tick boxes to enable fair and impartial funding decisions, free of the possibilities of cronyism.

Writers were told they were up against theatre companies, choirs, photographers and potters at all, and faced with filling out applications for funding under various programmes: arts access, arts awareness, or development or international access and so on, under the banner of 'strategic objectives.' Writers asked each other, how on earth do you draw up a budget to write a novel?

As I remember those first two years, the Society of Authors was by far the most outspoken of all the arts bodies grappling with this upheaval, and its new president Gordon McLauchlan, the most vehement and fearless public critic. He gave Claudia Scott, as the chair of the new Arts Board, a hard time, along with scathing putdowns of CNZ's corporate language. He especially hated the over-use, in contexts both pompous and casual, of the word 'excellence.'

In 1996, Gordon retired and it was obvious that the incoming president had big shoes to fill. It's frankly a thankless job, unpaid and, no matter how good your executive officer and National Council, consumes more of your time, energy, headspace and stamina than you could ever want to imagine.

It's made a touch harder knowing that some of the country's leading writers choose not to belong to their professional body. *Why* is a mystery to me. Even if you never go to meetings, the sub is modest, supports work of direct benefit to you, and is tax deductible. Perhaps as free spirits they just don't like 'belonging to things', yet they happily belong to the Authors' Fund (since 2008 known as the Public Lending Right) and must appreciate the annual payouts that the Society's officers lobby hard, year after year, to improve.

Whatever, in 1996, with no other candidates in sight, I took over the presidency from Gordon. Probably I was seen by the older gentlemen writers as a bit of a lightweight female fluff. I knew myself to be in a difficult space, still mourning the loss in 1992 of our second daughter aged 24, and two years after that, my marriage.

I was seeking solace with writer friends, writing and acting in our self-devised plays in schools and book festivals, even appearing in eleven episodes of *Shortland Street* as a smooth but not-clever-enough blackmailer.

But immersing myself even more deeply in Society affairs wasn't just denial or diversion; rather, I was unwittingly conforming to one of the known phenomena resulting from the death of an adult child, namely the undertaking of some project, or advocacy of some worthy cause. Maybe a book to write, a grieving parents' group to lead, even a new career or course of study?

I knew of this only because the Auckland bookseller Carole Beau recommended a new book by an American science writer, Ann K Finkbeiner, titled *After the Death of a Child: Living with loss through the years*. The author had lost her only son, aged 18, in a train accident.

Her's was the *only* book I found that, in focussing specifically on the deaths of *adult* children, gave me comfort. I now understood that for all of the 30 parents interviewed, grief was limitless, guilt was normal, and you won't ever 'recover' in the glib sense of 'getting over it'. Time is not the great healer of popular cliché. Further, *all* of these parents were now doing things they wouldn't otherwise have done. They undertook new missions in life 'with enormous force' as if the child's trajectory was continued in the parent.

I can't comment on 'enormous force' but I do know that Clare inspired many people during her short life, not least me, and that I gave the presidency role my best shot for those three years, with most people unaware, or having forgotten, what had happened to my family in that dark winter of 1992.

Gradually, as the millennium approached, Creative New Zealand's systems were modified, suspicions faded, confidence and goodwill were restored, though the corporate language remained and, it has to be said, is now pretty much standard even for charitable trusts diligently drawing up strategic plans on spreadsheets to make their limited funds go further and fairer.

Which was, of course, what Professor Scott and the Minister, Doug Graham, were trying to do all along, but conspicuously failing to take the arts constituency with them. It was a masterclass in how not to manage change, but then the upheavals of Rogernomics and Ruth Richardson were hardly good role models.

In 1999, with the Society in reasonable shape, I handed over the presidency to another children's writer, William Taylor. He succeeded where I had not, in persuading the incoming Labour Government to give a much-needed boost to the Authors' Fund, renamed in 2008 as the Public Lending Right. William's presidency, and the next nine years of Helen Clarke as Minister for the Arts, were good times for writers and the arts generally.

Having arrived at the new millennium, I want to go back to my brief: in 2022, the state of New Zealand's literary world. By and large, it's looking pretty good, light years away from 1982 when I published my first novel *Night Race to Kawau*.

Forty years ago, there were no creative writing classes at universities and elsewhere, no annual book festivals around the country attended by thousands. Debut novelists didn't dream of international six-figure advances and Netflix. Self-publishing was practically unheard of.

For children's writers, no proper book awards, few available grants. Not even very much local children's publishing until around 1980 when Maurice Gee, Gavin Bishop and myself, signed up by Wendy Harrex at Oxford University Press, ignited an explosion in the early 80s that continues to this day.

Most writers worked on clattering typewriters, a few still handwrote with fountain pens. Anything resembling a computer screen, a laptop or cellphone that could play music and videolink you to someone in Tuscany would have been dismissed by your average writer in 1982 as pure fantasy, the stuff of science fiction.

Certainly, the literary world as it stands in 2022 has benefitted much from technology to become infinitely more exciting, supportive, diverse and challenging, but let's first get the negatives out of the way. In no particular order:

Why has that serious, quarterly review journal *New Zealand Books* been allowed to die? Why no decent book programme on the telly for years? Why are the major book awards not televised, as are those for sport and pop music? Is it only because of the great god known as Ratings, or lack of political will, or lack of people protest?

I just cannot understand why mainstream print media, with the honourable exception of the *Listener*, devotes so little space to book reviews and news, only one or two pages at best and precious columns given to unnecessarily large images; *surely* many of the people who still buy newspapers are the same people who persist in buying books.

The paucity of reviews of children's and young adult books throughout the print media, newspapers and magazines alike, is especially remarkable, and not in a good way; I'd even say a national disgrace and dereliction of duty.

How else are grannies, unlikely to be familiar with blogs and suchlike, supposed to know what books to buy for their moko, which are quality and which are rubbish? Best-seller lists and assistants in chain bookstores are not always reliable.

The Storylines list of Notable Books across five genres, the most comprehensive and valuable record of what *of true worth* has been published in a year, also struggles to get traction.

Ironically, the best reviews of New Zealand children's books are in that lively Australian magazine *Magpies*! The national children's and YA book awards generally make only short-lived media waves, if at all, despite hard-working publicists.

These same publicists also know that to impress editors and producers it's helpful if their writer client can produce a handy backstory, a childhood or adolescent trauma like anorexia, depression, dyslexia, a rape, neglect, gender issues, racism. We live in the age of the confessional, manifested both in many books seeking publicity and in the lives of their authors. It's not a healthy trend.

In schools, there's widespread concern about less money for school libraries, fewer specialist teacher-librarians, fewer class sets and ongoing lamentation that the iconic *School Journal*, traditionally a training ground for writers and illustrators, is no more.

Only recently we heard that two in five New Zealand children by age 15 are failing or only just meeting literacy standards. Connect the dots, people! We can't blame everything on two years of pandemic.

Clearly there's some PR work to do here, for publicists and ordinary readers like us to speak up and persuade thirtysomething media editors and producers

that the world of books and their creators is of compelling, enduring interest *across the generations*.

Which brings me to the good news, to evidence compiled by organisations and individuals far better informed than me to show that publishing in this country is doing rather better than we might imagine, despite our two years of pandemic, two major lockdowns and general anxiety for the future.

The ever-reliable *Listener* reported six months ago that general book-buying in 2021 was up by 16%. During lockdowns, people bought books online; my local bookseller told me she could barely keep up with the demand.

Locally published books were up 14% by value, children's and YA 10%. What did especially well were graphic novels with sales doubling, books on sport up by 40%, politics up 30% and mind-body-and-spirit up a mind-boggling 70%. Historical non-fiction was thriving, anticipating the Government's welcome re-introduction of history teaching in schools.

The top-selling local title was *Aroha*, Hinemoa Elder's truly beautiful book of Māori proverbs, 10,000 copies sold and counting. Any resident or visitor returning to our bookshops after two years away will notice the welcome diversity of titles not only by talented Māori authors, but also Pasifika and Asian, and also more by and about women, notably younger women.

We're not alone here – in the UK book sales in 2021 were the highest in a decade, worth close to two billion pounds, with adult fiction rising 20%. That would have seemed impossible to contemplate back in 2009, with the arrival of the Kindle e-book predicting the slow and inevitable death of the printed book. Not so fast - many of us still like the feel of paper, the slow turning of pages, and always will.

For a professional snapshot of our reading habits we can take comfort from the 2021 National Reading Survey, commissioned by Read New Zealand Te Pou Muramura, formerly the New Zealand Book Council. It concluded we're a nation of book readers, especially to our children at bedtime.

Over 12 months our adult population reads, across all genres, around 16 million books by New Zealand authors, about 20% of their total reading. The under tens enjoyed nearly 5 million Kiwi books, but note, 35% of their total.



Together we read nearly 13 million Kiwi-authored books of fiction, 9.3 million non-fiction, 3.5 million books of poetry. In total, that was about 25 million New Zealand books a year. About half of adult readers use Kindles and other e-books, but say they buy and read printed books as well.

Through its core business of advocacy and surveys like this, and especially the long-running Writers in Schools programme, Read New Zealand is doing important work to ensure we remain a nation of readers. There's good evidence from UK that writer visits inspire children to read above their age level, have greater enjoyment and confidence in their reading than children in schools not visited by writers.

This same conviction in the value of school visits inspires the Storylines Trust, Te Whare Waituhi Tamariki. The Story Tours take teams of authors and illustrators out into the regions, reaching tens of thousands of students every year. The same Trust's programme of awards for unpublished manuscripts has produced a sizeable body of new works, some awarding-winning, others marking the start of good careers. The Christchurch School for Young Writers provides teenagers with regular opportunities for publication.

Thanks largely to the National Library, last year saw the long-awaited arrival of the Te Awhi Rito Reading Ambassador, currently that compelling speaker and writer Ben Brown, who travels the country promoting the value and many pleasures of reading.

Actually, this good news momentum has been building for some time.

With both Ministry of Education and impressive corporate support, Duffy Books in Homes continues to get thousands of books into the hands of disadvantaged children.

After some rocky years, the Ockham Book Awards and the Children's and YA Awards have both settled into major celebrations of talent and achievement. Kim Hill and others on RNZ *National* and the *Listener's* book pages regularly provide author interviews and reviews, always reliable and well-considered.

Book festivals have proliferated, particularly that extravaganza that is the Auckland Writers Festival. The children's and YA writers and illustrators get together for a national hui every two years, as do the romance writers annually.

Creative writing courses have become popular, along with freelance assessors and editors who, for reasonable fees, will help prepare a manuscript for submission to publishers and short story competitions. Self-publishing has become respectable and in a few cases had led to careers with mainstream publishers.

And at an exclusively adult level, there's the Academy of New Zealand Literature, launched in 2016 by Dr Paula Morris with \$130,000 funding from the University of Auckland. It aims to provide writers with a platform to promote their work, raise their profiles and connect with residencies, festivals, academic networks and other opportunities around the world. The hundred or so members are handpicked, but I can't help noting that no writers for the young are yet included, not even superb YA authors like Kate De Goldi, Mandy Hager, Bernard Beckett, Fleur Beale, Anna McKenzie, David Hill, Shilo Kino, Whiti Hereaka – a line-up as 'literary' as many on the Academy list.

I should also mention the professional associations of publishers, self-publishers, the literary agents, booksellers, school librarians, the English and History teachers ...

All these worthy agencies are working their hearts out, with efficient staff and in some cases, such as Storylines, drawing on the services of suitably qualified volunteers.

Occasionally pleas are heard from within the sector that there could be more collaboration, partnerships formed for mutual benefit, since the agencies share a common purpose and are often chasing the same sources of funding, notably Creative New Zealand and charitable trusts big and small.

There are encouraging signs that the new Coalition for Books is filling that role. Last year it held five hui, bringing together all the major players in the writing, publishing, promotion and selling of books.

Their key findings were mostly positive, reinforcing the 2021 Reading Survey quoted earlier. Covid has been good for local books and authors; children's book sales have performed most strongly. There are new small publishers, new bookstores opening up and momentum in the notion of 'reading for pleasure'.

The Coalition's own website, *kete*, is winning universal acclaim as the go-to place for well-written book reviews of local publications, across all the genres.

Of course there were areas pinpointed of ‘could do better’: more effective promotion, more diversity. The literary sector could learn from the music sector’s investment into understanding its audiences, how to reach out to communities not currently well served.

The key issues most often raised were FINDING NEW READERS and PROMOTING BOOKS TO CHILDREN.

To my mind, that second issue could have read ... PROMOTING BOOKS TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG ADULTS. There was only one passing mention in the report, that ‘a greater degree of focus on teenagers ... would be helpful to many’.

Now here’s the thing. Back in 2008, giving the first Janet Frame lecture, Owen Marshall stated that across the literary sector ‘Writing for children and young people has had perhaps the most spectacular growth and success’. Leading writers like Margaret Mahy and Joy Cowley and others are ‘... among our most successful writers artistically and financially...’

All indications since then point to local children’s book sales holding up. Adult books across the genres are by and large doing fine. But what about the group in the middle?

Mention writing for young adults and you’re likely to be met with negativity and pessimism. It’s a small market, doesn’t sell, kids don’t read these days. They’re focussed on their cellphones, social media of all stripes, video games, movies, sport, their friends, homework, and coping with serious covid-19 disruptions to their schooling and social life.

They’ve no time for books, the hours and focus that reading requires. They don’t see the point, when stories can be delivered faster and more visually by so many other media.

A high school librarian whose opinion I trust tells me that in a typical class about half will come from intermediate schools as enthusiastic readers; with encouragement they’ll remain so. About 30% might respond to a teacher’s enthusiasm for carefully chosen books, but probably not become readers as adults. The remaining 20% are not and never will be interested in books. They might pass through the NCEA system barely opening a novel at all.

You might be asking, just what is young adult fiction? Why do novelists choose to write for this age group? One of New Zealand’s very best, Mandy Hager, has

a good answer: 'I love writing from a young adult standpoint as it allows a fresh-eyed view of the world and the ability to challenge entrenched views, as only a young person can!'

At the first ever Young Adult Literature Convention held in England some years ago, writers across the board agreed that the essential feature of YA 'is an adolescent protagonist, who will face significant difficulties and crises, and grow and develop to some degree'.

Is that not reason enough to appeal to teenager readers? It's not quite so simple.

In his wonderful memoir of childhood and reading, *The Child that Books Built*, English writer Frances Spufford suggests that a pre-teen can go one of two ways: jump from junior fiction straight to 'adult' books, the Greek myths and classics by Jane Austen and Dickens. Which I suppose, in the absence of any YA books as such, is what I did, reading *War and Peace* at 14.

Or, your pre-teen can jump to novels that use familiar means to talk about new things. In other words, YA. He singles out Cynthia Voight and Margaret Mahy, her 'terrific Brontë-esque supernatural thrillers' like *The Changeover* and *The Tricksters*, doing family life 'with an elegant, witty realism that made you feel you were getting a leg-up to being an altogether more noticing kind of person.

'Simultaneously, she understood how inchoately sexy magic is, at a point in your life when real sex is still three wishes away, and gleams with as much mixed fascination and alarm as if it were truly a spell.'

But there's little consensus about who is actually reading YA, when anecdotal evidence suggests that typical readers also include 11-year-olds still at intermediate school, and middle-aged (mostly) women, who, fed up with the opaque nature of much adult 'literary fiction', prefer the strong characters and straight-forward narrative lines of YA.

So are authors and publishers missing the mark entirely?

Well, I have some evidence of what can be done to make YA reading cool, to foster new authors and to help young people transition from Harry Potter through to YA and on to adult reading.

There's a great brick of a book called *1001 Children's Books you must read before you grow up*, 960 pages edited by Julia Eccleshare, Britain's foremost expert on the genre.

A careful analysis of the 272 novels selected as the best globally published for 12-plus readers proves interesting. The list goes back to *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719. Five New Zealand books appear – I'm pleased to say, *Alex* is one.

There are 93 novels by British authors, and 49 by Americans – this you might expect. But wait, 36 from Australia? *Thirty-six*, more than double the number from any European country, or Canada, or South Africa? How has Australia produced so many world-class YA novels since a trickle became a flood, starting around 1990 with Gary Crew's *Strange Objects*?

This is both the story of how one woman altered and enriched Australia's literary landscape. It is also a cautionary tale.

Agnes Nieuwenhuizen was born in Tehran of Hungarian Jewish parents, arriving in Australia at the age of ten. With an English degree from Melbourne University, she worked as a high school teacher, becoming intrigued by what students were reading and how books were being presented in schools. She turned this interest into a second career.

When I met her in 1992, at the first conference of the Australian Children's Book Council in Sydney, she had just become Victoria's first Youth Literature Officer. It was near the start of some twenty-five years' devotion to persuading young readers that the books written for them were exciting and rewarding in every way. Particularly, but not exclusively, books by Australian authors.

She was a one-woman promotional *tour de force*, understanding instinctively that her campaign required more than just marching into a school and telling students they should be reading books.

Agnes operated tirelessly and simultaneously on every front. She ran the vibrant Schools Programme of the Melbourne Writers Festival, began the Centre for Youth Literature at the State Library and masterminded the Reading Matters conferences. She befriended countless writers, she was on first-name terms with all the publishers, agents and good booksellers.

She took teams of writers out to schools into rural areas, had theatre directors adapt books – my *Alex* was one – into plays for teenage audiences.

As well as reviewing, she produced several books, *Good books for Teenagers* and the like, invaluable to teachers and librarians in the days before the internet. She and I edited a cross-Tasman collection of YA short stories.

‘I’m not a team player’, she once told me, hated committees, but worked miracles leading a small group of professionals. She loved drawing up festival programmes to suit writers and audiences. God knows how she kept up with the reading that informed her decisions.

Through the 1990s until her retirement in 2005 I enjoyed her professional support, appearing at three of her exuberant Reading Matters conferences, and continued to value her friendship right up to her death in 2017.

Tributes came from across Australia’s literary community, noting how she set a framework that changed the perception of young adult literature in Australia. It is no coincidence that Australia’s YA authors feature so strongly in that tome of 1001 books you must read before you grow up.

I mentioned a cautionary tale. From enquires in Australia I’ve learned that much of Agnes’s framework based at the State Library has recently been dismantled, breaking many hearts. The Centre for Youth Literature has been retired, even a watered-down teen programme discontinued.

The usual reasons are cited: lack of funding, schools and teachers too busy for partnerships and visits. Reading Matters conferences are no more, so too the Inky Awards where teens themselves were the judges.

Review space has markedly diminished. YA publishing has flattened out, and authors are turning to junior fiction, deemed as more profitable. I’m told that in the digital age Agnes’s model wouldn’t work: teens are reading on social media, they want to read, write their own stories and share them.

Even as I write this, I can hear Agnes’ voice saying, yes, it’s heart-breaking but nothing lasts for ever and the world has changed. Now then, you over there in New Zealand, think *what might be possible*. Since you never had anything like a Centre for Youth Literature, you’re starting with a low bar.

But she wouldn't waver from her belief, which I share, that it's crucial that our teens have books to read that reflect their own lives, concerns and the unique culture of Aotearoa. If we want an adult reading audience in the future, somehow we must persuade a good many of our teens that exploring their world through books is time well spent, especially the books written for them by some of the best writers in the country, bar none.

We could start with a conference – next year? - with all interested parties. It would honour the authors and publishers who invest their time and money, involve the English and History teachers, the librarians and booksellers and media editors. It would bring in young people to tell us what *they* want, how to adapt book-reading to the digital age.

If there's one thing the past two years have taught us, it's the value of such gatherings. Not by Zoom, incredible technology though that is, but the buzz of a roomful of enthusiastic people, debating proposals, conjuring up solutions.

On that note, I'm grateful to the Society of Authors for bringing us together on this occasion, in this lovely old venue, to share our passion for storytelling through books and how together we can make our dreams happen.

Thank you all.

Tena ra tātou katoa.

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Coalition for Books

Ends