

## 2025 Janet Frame Memorial Lecture

### Writing in troubled times: Lost illusions and authenticity

It's an honour to be here in the National Library and to be delivering the 2025 Janet Frame Memorial Lecture. I would like to acknowledge the NZSA, Jenny Nagle and National Library staff. Thank you to Jenny Nagle for keeping me up to date with AI developments, and for her tireless work on behalf of writers. And I would like to pay tribute to my late brother Dr Oliver Stead, who worked in the National Library and who loved working here, up until his death in 2024.

The title I've chosen for this lecture is "Writing in troubled times: Lost illusions and authenticity."

I think we can all agree the times in general are troubled. And they're troubled in our area of concern today: the state of New Zealand literature.

I've included "authenticity" in my title because as writers, we face significant problems. In the current global climate, we need to strive that much harder to preserve our unique, local cultural identity. New Zealand art in all its forms has become more important as a national taonga than ever.

I have included the phrase "lost illusions" in my title, first as a tribute to Balzac, because my ambition as a fiction writer was always to create, with my interlinked novels and short stories, my own fictional *Human Comedy*.

And I'll talk about "lost illusions" because it was here, this year, in the Turnbull Library Archive, that I made a discovery that shocked me.

What I found shattered some final illusions. My visit to the Turnbull Archive made me more determined than ever to keep writing on my own terms.

As New Zealand authors, we write about our collective experiences; we represent our Aotearoa, our society. I will tell you a true story – how I lost my illusions in the Turnbull Archive – for this reason: as well as wanting to

preserve our collective identity and our culture, we should be concerned about the rights and the voice of the individual.

Before we get to my Archive discoveries, let's talk about the general state of the nation.

New Zealand literature is facing serious challenges. We've had to adapt to digitisation and commercialisation, the decline in bookshops, the increasing dominance of social media and screens, and lately the drop-off in the numbers of children reading. There is now very little space given to books in print media. Many of us are worried by New Zealand universities' relentless cutting of the humanities, and in these times of austerity, the lack of serious investment and funding for the arts.

We currently have no entity to champion direct investment. Books were not even name-checked as an art form in Amplify, the new Arts Strategy. Literature is only art form where all funding comes from contestable Creative New Zealand funding rounds. So there's a lack of investment in books and reading when we have a literacy crisis.

But the interest in reading and writing is steady. A 2025 Read NZ survey recorded that a healthy 87 percent of New Zealand adults read a book in the last year, up from 85 percent in 2021. That is a committed book-reading public.

We have dynamic new independent publishers; we have strong attendance at literary festivals and creative writing courses; we have the Ockham Book Awards and the Book Awards for Children and Young Adults. High quality online websites have taken the place of print media reviews and literary criticism.

Aotearoa has a great lineup of established writers and poets, and many exciting and diverse new ones. I am told, anecdotally, that Gen Z thinks books are sexy. They value physical books; they are returning to libraries, and they

consider books to be cool. This is obviously heartening and important. The future can still be bookish.

The latest, insidious threat to the creative individual, to the individual artistic voice, is AI.

As one UK publisher put it to me, “For artists, AI is a horror show.”

Our major problem, most obviously, is the theft of copyright.

As we all know, AI breaches the rights of writers by scraping creative work, learning from it and reproducing it. What it produces has a human source, but its humanity is lost. Individual voice and copyright are lost.

This is theft. It is fundamentally anti-democratic and inhumane. It’s damaging to artists and to our culture. The problem needs to be faced, and it’s not an easy issue to solve, because the technology is evolving all the time. It’s not going away, and the challenge is regulation. We have already seen that the big tech companies are not concerned about the rights of artists, nor about the rights of individuals per se.

In March, I discovered that my books are among titles that have been used in LibGen, an illegal pirate site AI companies have been using for machine learning. I joined other writers protesting to Meta, and heeded the New Zealand Society of Authors advice, which includes joining an international class action lawsuit to protect copyright, adding a No AI Training notice on the copyright pages of books, and certifying that my books were written by a human.

AI will have excellent uses, in medicine, say or engineering. But it is recognised, even by AI itself apparently if you ask it, to be an existential threat to humans, and to our environment. We’re facing a situation in which we have to fight to preserve the elements that make us human: the detail, the relational aspects, our individuality.

The challenge arises at a difficult time. It coincides with the international rise of autocratic politics, the erosion of democracy and a decline in the rules-based order. Overseas, the combination of populism with social media has

resulted in the undermining of journalism, of science, of educational institutions, of authorship itself – all bastions of independent thought.

It seems dystopian. The times are troubled, and action is needed. Public discourse itself appears to be under threat.

All over the world, writers and artists are recognising the threat that AI poses to their work and are fighting back.

In May, 400 British artists wrote to the Prime Minister urging him to protect copyright. As they put it, “We will lose an immense growth opportunity if we give our work away at the behest of a handful of powerful overseas tech companies, and with it our future income, the UK’s position as a creative powerhouse, and any hope that the technology of daily life will embody the values and laws of the United Kingdom.”

We in New Zealand should be demanding that our government protect copyright too.

In July this year, 40 of the world’s largest organizations of publishers, producers, performers, authors, and other rights-holders protested to the European Commission that the European Union AI Act’s implementation measures “fail to address the core concerns [of] our sectors—and the millions of creators in Europe which we represent.”

The NZSA website has continually updated information and advice for our authors about the issue. Generative AI poses a real threat to our work. Without any license, the technology has already been used to mine vast amounts of copyrighted work. The sources are used to produce material that can compete with human-authored books. Litigation is ongoing, and courts are having to apply existing copyright law to completely novel technologies and situations.

In September, technology company Anthropic agreed to pay \$1.5 billion to a group of authors to settle a lawsuit about its use of their books to train its AI model without consent or compensation. As the NZSA has noted, however, and I quote:

[The] ruling sets a precedent that, provided you buy your first copy, then scanning and ingesting it for AI training is fair use – no-license-required. In other words - don't pirate – but after that, please feel free to take works for your machine. Therefore the settlement doesn't "weaken" the fair use defence – at least not for AI training. It does weaken the fair use defence for piracy. But as to AI training, the decision is the opposite and a major blow to rights holders: [The Judge] decided the fair use defence for AI training squarely on the side of big tech.

Judges are being forced to apply copyright laws to technologies that weren't around when they were made. Is training an AI using copyright-protected works permitted? Who is liable when AI-generated works copy pre-existing styles without attribution or consent? The problem everywhere, including here, is that we don't have sufficient regulation ready. The Government has released a document called "New Zealand's Strategy for Artificial Intelligence: Investing with Confidence," which is vague and hasn't given writers and artists confidence. Governments need to move urgently to legislate licensing of content to train large-language models.

The situation is fast-moving, so any attempt to set down "where we as writers are at with AI" very quickly becomes out of date. Apart from suing for copyright infringement, other solutions undertaken by international writers' and artists' groups include lobbying for governments to regulate AI, and campaigning for a rigorous system of licensing, and for education. In New Zealand the Copyright Licensing Authority has lobbied for creative and publishing rights, for the protection of Māori intellectual property, for the management of licensing, for artists' rights to opt out of data mining, for education, transparency and regulation. MBIE has said they will save AI regulation for Stage 2 of the review of the Copyright Act, maybe in 2026 or

2027. Apparently, there will be a discussion paper out this month. The issue requires collective vigilance and resolve – and optimism too. Writers need to watch this space and engage as much as we can. AI is not extra-terrestrial; it's created by humans. Perhaps humans can rise to the challenge and regulate it.

Some writers are defending the use of AI in their work. Call me old-fashioned, but I find the idea depressing. The traditional model is that we're all influenced by the canon, but we don't plagiarise; we rely on our own original talent. Using AI must surely corrupt value judgments about talent. And I assume it potentially involves plagiarism.

Australian writer Trent Dalton was quoted in the *Herald* recently talking about the potential degradation of human creativity. He said, "You need all that emotion and complication to write a half-decent book. AI just steals the shiny finished product." Australian authors are actively opposing a copyright exception for AI training. Thomas Kenealley put it well. He said,

"It's not copy-charity. It's not copy-privilege. It's not copy-indulgence. It's copyright. And our right has been taken away by ignorant people who don't realise what copyright is."

It's not just a copyright issue. The implications for education are disturbing. Learning to read and write is central to learning how to think. Education, robust conversation and journalism are fundamental to democratic culture.

So, the robots are here. The risk is the loss of individual voices and sensibilities, the erosion of culture, the downgrading of language, of originality. It's a problem for diversity and freedom of speech.

As writers we should all pitch in to raise our individual voices against undemocratic forces: whether they are political, rapacious tech companies or machines.

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Now I'll turn to another, more personal front in the battle for authenticity.

This is the Janet Frame Memorial Lecture, and here is a memory of Janet Frame. I remember visiting her in a small town, where we discovered Janet was dealing with her hypersensitivity to noise by barricading herself in, lining the internal walls. I remember wondering about this "noise problem", since the street outside appeared to be silent.

Janet said to me, "You're the one who used to think Kathramansfield was all one word." I was a teenager, and already I was thinking about translating the experience into fiction. I wanted to write about this strange, shy, charming Janet, the writer in the small, barricaded house in the silent street.

As we all know, Janet Frame's story involves what used to be called, colloquially, "madness." And since this lecture pays tribute to her, it seems relevant to describe how, in this very building, in the Turnbull Archive, my father CK Stead has lodged statements in which he asserts that I wrote my last book while suffering from "delusion" and "mental aberration," which sounds to me a lot like "madness."

This is a personal turn, but I'll tell you why I think it's relevant.

In February, I was confronted with the kind of question the universe likes to throw at writers: How was I going to deliver the Janet Frame Memorial Lecture in the very building where I'd just found statements accusing me of "delusion" – and not mention the statements?

The universe answered the question: I *had* to mention them.

To go back for a moment. I began to write fiction as a child, and so very early on I was considering the *process* of fictionalising. What are cliché and stereotype, and how does one avoid them? How does one make up a story out of elements that are closely observed and therefore believable?

If you were inventing a story about me, you might play with the idea that as the daughter of a fiction writer who used details of our lives in his stories, I became an unreliable narrator.

This would be fiction.

In fact, every time I considered the process of fictionalising, I was examining how to put reality through the fictional filter. This involved a continual evaluation. If I constantly had my eye on the border between fact and fiction, I knew it existed, and where it was. I have lived my whole life on the front line of writing. I have confronted questions about truth, fictionalising, narrative and memory. I also, to my parents' obvious discomfort, spent years noticing the ways they enforced various "truths."

My legal training sharpened my questioning about truth and right and wrong. But I was still in the dark about family dynamics until I started consulting a psychologist.

For the last decade (which I've jokingly started calling my Blue Period) I have been on a quest for answers, writing columns, fiction and my memoir. My latest novel, *The Black Monk*, which will be published in March next year, includes some of these preoccupations. (It is the final installment of the Blue Period.)

My 2021 memoir, *The Mirror Book* was my account of growing up in a family that had a public face and a stormy private dynamic.

I wasn't interested in literary feuds and gossip. My focus in the memoir was on human relationships. It's about literature, but equally it's about family dynamics and psychology, about motivation and love. It could have been about any family, in any country. I'm interested in motherhood, in children, in why people become criminals and addicts, in cruelty and kindness, empathy and savagery.



I see individual psychology as existing on a continuum that includes all human affairs. As a fiction writer, I'm interested in the way we make meaning through narrative. As a non-fiction writer I'm interested in trying to be accurate.

I had resisted heavy paternal pressure to withdraw the book. CK wrote to me. He said, "I'm writing as a critic now", advising me to withdraw this "bad book" that would damage me. He wanted me to write instead, as he put it, a "celebratory" memoir. He had labelled me a "scolding fantasist."

In January this year, I came across an online reference to family letters having been archived in the National Library. I asked CK about this. He told me that the Archive contained family emails and he reassured me, repeatedly, not to worry about it, that "all your replies are in there."

He said nothing about the statements they'd lodged about my memoir, *The Mirror Book*, to which there is no reply in the archive from me.

Something in his tone made me wonder, and without telling him I flew down to Wellington, accessed the archive and found what they'd done.

Their statements assert that *The Mirror Book* is untrue, it is fiction and should be redesignated a novel.

I assume they did it secretly because to state publicly that *The Mirror Book* is untrue and a fiction that should be redesignated as a novel, would be defamatory. Think of the controversy that blew up this year about the UK memoir *The Salt Path*, which turned out to be false. A false memoir is a fraud on the reader. It deserves to be, and often is, pulped.

The *Guardian* took it upon itself to say, of *The Salt Path*:

"Though genre-blurring is part of an evolving literary culture, categories are not just about where titles go in bookshops. Readers need to know what is fact or fiction. In a post-truth era, the credibility of publishing is crucial...As Oscar Wilde said "the truth is rarely pure and never simple". Readers

understand this. But it is the duty of memoir writers to tell their truth, however murky or complicated it may be.”

I agree with this.

CK’s Turnbull statement begins with him acknowledging that despite his having warned me that the book was no good and I would be irreparably damaged by it, I wasn’t.

He writes: “Some will think the critic Karl was wrong - the book has been a marked success, and is being talked about as the probable 'Book of the Year'; but I don't think I was wrong in that it could have been so much better if it had not been so fashionably self-pitying and self-congratulatory (especially about herself as a parent), and so ruthless on her own parents (particularly the mother) who are shown, even by the account itself, to have inflicted so little real harm.”

CK asserts that my memoir is a fiction and a fairy story. He writes:

“In that fiction Kay [my mother] is the bad fairy, the wicked stepmother, while I am the bad, domineering Ruler (though also from time to time with the help of champagne a magical one), who torments and bosses around the sad Cinderella Charlotte.

[CK goes on] “I stress again the beauty of this fairy story, the genuineness of the pain it represents, the brilliance of the writing; but it should have acknowledged its own fictional nature and not presented itself as 'truthful'.”

He describes my writing as “a mental aberration with no foundation in fact”, and a “delusion” on my part that had been “stoked by the psychotherapist.”

After referring to the writing of Elena Ferrante and Karl Ove Knausgaard as the literary fashion he says I was influenced by, he writes:

“But then if the aim was to show yourself as the victim (the one who by the currently prevailing ethic must never be rigorously questioned, doubted or disbelieved) you would need to leave out elements that mitigated the harm done to you. An unloving mother was, in the literary sense, more use to you than one such as Kay [my mother] who was generous, good fun and always there to help when help was needed. So the real Kay had to become the fictional one.”

He doubles down on calling me a scolding fantasist. He states:

“[I] asked her constantly, 'Where is the girl who had such a clear sense of reality and its boundaries, and such a marvellous sense of humour - replaced by this scolding (as it seems to me) fantasist?' Of course I asked that question. I'm asking it again now.”

He goes on, “All this is why I can simultaneously affirm that *The Mirror Book* is a beautiful work of art, and that it is not a truthful one. As a work of fiction it reveals Charlotte's talent as clearly as anything she has written. But as a work of 'non-fiction' it is unjust and untrue.”

In addition to stating that *The Mirror Book* is “not truthful”, is “fiction” and a “delusion,” my father has “dealt with” and dismissed my description of being assaulted by a pool lifeguard when I was 13. (I'd written about being rather under-parented in the eighties. We weren't really safe because of this.)

I mentioned in the memoir that if I'd complained, the lifeguard would have been charged. I wrote that my impression was that my parents wouldn't have been interested. This is borne out in their Turnbull statements. Not only are they not interested, they are disdainful.

My mother expresses scorn for the Metoo movement and states: “Today the Queen's Birthday honours are announced. Karl long ago received the highest of those for Services to Literature. In this season his own daughter has encouraged the world to ignore that honour and to dishonour him in the cause of sexual politics. Shame, I say. Forget silly old Literature; it's marital probity and the protection of women we honour in 2021.”

CK provides no evidence for his assertion that my account is false, but resorts to “guesses.” He writes:

“It's the kind of thing, as it was clearly meant to be, that catches the ear of the present moment. But my guess is that Charlotte made nothing of it at the time because there was nothing to be made. [The lifeguard] was fun, foolish and she could deal with him. She would not have wanted the fun spoiled or the harmless goof sanctioned. But years later he could loom into significance for Dr Sanders and could even be something else for which Kay could be blamed.”

CK never met the lifeguard he describes as a “harmless goof,” although he admits they knew about him. (What even is a goof?)

The lifeguard – in his forties – wrote me love letters that my parents saw, when I was thirteen. CK appears to suggest that assaults couldn't have happened because “the pool was a crowded place.” (The closed first aid room wasn't crowded.)

Post memoir, CK and Kay didn't ask me about this. They've simply dismissed it without any evidence to back up their denial.

This concept appears to be alien to them: the vulnerability of a thirteen-year-old girl.

Even stranger is CK's statement that my sexual relationship at 13 with a forty-year-old lifeguard was “fun”, the man was “harmless”, and I “could handle it”.

He writes that I “wouldn't have wanted the harmless goof sanctioned.”

This appears to acknowledge there was something for which the goof *could* be sanctioned – for all the “fun” we were having.

There's an uncomfortable echo with CK's complaint, that I had lost my sense of humour (of fun) and become “a scolding fantasist.”

These parents were my childhood advisors about sexual interest by middle-aged men. This was the difficulty I wrote about, quite calmly and

cautiously I thought, in the memoir. There were a lot of things they thought I could handle, back before I lost my sense of fun.

CK dismisses entirely the scientific disciplines of psychology and psychiatry, citing a single anecdotal memoir by a *Sunday Times* journalist. The journalist, Oliver Kamm, tried therapy and found it didn't help him with clinical depression. (This same journalist can be found online historically approving of the War in Iraq.)

CK writes:

“This, I suspect, is where 'Dr Marie Sanders' was invaluable. Psychotherapists of the post-Freudian stamp like to find a mother or father, or a sibling, aunt or uncle, who was the up-to-now unrecognised source of your trouble. Oliver Kamm [that's the *Sunday Times* journalist] in his book *Mending the Mind* describes how a psychotherapist tried to cure his serious, indeed disabling depression, by reaching back into his past - with results that were, worse than useless, briefly damaging... Fortunately Kamm recognized the mistake soon enough to escape into other treatments involving partly the right kind of drugs... and partly the conscious alteration of certain habits of mind.”

CK's statement goes on: “If 'Dr Sanders' had recommended regular attempts to remember the good things (which were innumerable) about Charlotte's relations with her mother we might have had the better book that is buried within the published one.”

In her statement, my mother also cites Kamm's book. She states that I, Charlotte, suffer from “depressive illness” which Kay says the psychologist has been “unable to cure.” This is false and defamatory. As Kay knew, I have never in my life suffered from depression or “depressive illness.”

My mother writes in her statement that it was false of the memoir to record that she was upset by CK's extra-marital affairs. She says she wasn't bothered by them, and she's sure they gave him “a lot of friendship and fun.”

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It's baffling how unnecessary this is. Why would parents seek to deny a daughter's personal story in this way? It seems bizarre and strange.

It has also been described to me, by two people I privately canvassed, as "cruel." And it is. It sure is cruel.

I could say his (and her) instinct is autocratic. It seems anti-democratic; it's effectively anti-intellectual. It certainly doesn't seem to me intellectually good enough.

In my opinion, CK's stance is aesthetically questionable. A purely "celebratory" portrait of a family must be inauthentic. Reality is messy and complex. Human life is not black and white; it's infinitely contradictory and untidy, and that's why it's interesting. We try to portray it, and our attempt is always imperfect. We aim for accuracy by making the best representation we can, and also by acknowledging what we don't know.

CK's demand for a "celebratory" portrait surely puts him on the side of bad art. It's a stand against open discourse, which is a social good.

It's also an amazing nerve, given just how censored my memoir was. He's denying my real experience to an extreme degree.

What was my reaction to this? The most obvious word to reach for is anger. But anger tends to diminish the capacity for reasoning. So I decided to take a step back, not to confront. I haven't even raised it with him. I've said nothing and gone on being a dutiful and kind daughter.

In my imagination, though, I went back to that tiny house in the silent long-ago street, knocked on the door, and consulted the ghost of Janet Frame.

What do you do when people call you "delusional"?

You write.

The answer to the anger and to the intellectual problem of the Turnbull Archive – and to the accusation of being delusional – is writing.

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The answer to complex problems is to tackle them with honesty. Is the discourse. Is open discussion.

Not taking inflexible positions but questioning, being willing to having one's mind changed – and occasionally doing reckless things like giving public lectures.

I'm not dismissing the value of anger. Given the atmosphere of oppression in the world at the moment, it's time to fight back and make some good trouble. To stand up against *all* forms of rigid, black-and-white thinking, oppressive behaviour and tyranny. We need to defend the individual against non-empathisers everywhere, whether they are tech companies or robots, political tyrants or petty ones.

My father's dismissal of my memoir is the kind of attempt at control I found elsewhere in the Turnbull Archive. I came across a letter in which he instructs me to make sure I tell interviewers that the characters in my 2018 novel "are not autobiographical."

As I mentioned, *The Mirror Book* is very censored. Even as I am emboldened by shock at the weirdness of my parents' defamatory Turnbull statements, I am still censoring, and will go on doing so. But I have only firmed up my ideas about writing. There must be a belief in honesty. Democracy and justice, like charity, should begin at home.

In my novel, *The Black Monk*, to be published next year, I wrote this:

"She had begun to believe that authenticity is the revolution. Against inauthenticity – bad art, propaganda, AI, family gaslighting – human stories are the salvation. Telling your story is fundamental. Call it free speech. It can save your life. It can bring down the palace walls."

I should note that I haven't set about asserting that CK's three autobiographies are untrue works of fiction. Nor that he is "mad."

My parents could have shrugged and said, "Sure, it was the eighties, we were preoccupied; we probably weren't great parents. Fair enough, tell your story."

It is also notable that CK has wanted to discredit the work, not of a stranger, but of his own daughter. Objectively, this seems extreme. I think it reinforces the portrait I tried to make, of a family struggling with these issues.

So, the Turnbull archive now records that *The Mirror Book* is the untrue delusional product of mental aberration and uncured depressive illness, a fantasy and a fiction.

*The Mirror Book* is fake news.

I advanced a theory that the family imposed a regime in which we were not invited to be our real selves. If they hadn't lodged these statements in the archive, they wouldn't have bolstered my theory in the emphatic way they have. This seems poignant to me.

CK states definitively that *The Mirror Book* was "timed to coincide with the publication" of his third autobiography. This is not correct. I had no idea when his book was coming out, and it wasn't discussed by me or my publisher. But for CK and Kay, everything was always about them. Even my personal memoir was only about them.

They believed that my life was exclusively "Their story to tell."

This is what I believe: there is no such thing as a "post-truth world," except as a definition of a world lived in service to forces like propaganda, disinformation, gaslighting and autocracy.



There *is* such a thing as objective truth. Of course, perception differs, experience differs, but there is a fundamental duty to *get at* objective truth, to keep trying to get at it, to speak it and value it.

*The Mirror Book* is not fiction. Before publication, it was vetted by a specialist QC. It is litigation-proof, because everything in it is true.

In 2021, I published it hoping to help my parents understand my experiences. This turned out to be a vain hope, but it was sincere.

If they'd challenged it openly, they would have opened themselves up to discussion of more extreme true family details.

They appear to have arranged it so they could defame me without sanction.

Reading the statements, I'm struck by their unified disdain. I hadn't expected this. We all, deep down, have an irrational hope that our voice will be heard (the voice of that thirteen-year-old girl perhaps). Writing, we are trying to make ourselves understood.

In this very building in February, I confronted the stark reality. This was the lost illusion.

The irony is worth recording. CK has always been a public intellectual and often a contrarian, yet here he appears to have no tolerance for dissent.

He has championed intellectual rigour yet has demanded that I express myself in platitudes.

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It's a "storm in a literary teacup." But *The Mirror Book's* focus was on family dynamics, not literature – and it was received as such. Readers recognised the experiences in their own lives.

It does have salience here, when we're talking about literary matters. We're talking about free expression and "dumbing down," about disinformation and the suppression of inconvenient truth.

The dynamics of power play out in all spheres. From the microcosm of the family – the stormy literary teacup – we can zoom out again to the macro.

Currently, as we've noted, technology seems to be playing a contributing, oppressive role in the erosion of intellectual richness and diversity of thought. We're all worrying about the downgrading of local journalism. Between 2006 and 2023, 1700 jobs were lost in NZ media. Social media platforms like Facebook have cancelled fact-checking. Our country's baffling, short-sighted unwillingness to invest properly in public broadcasting leaves us undefended against disinformation.

Knowledge is power. Education is power, and we wonder if that's being undermined, too. In Denmark, they're waking up to the damage screens have done to literacy and are scrambling to push books and libraries. We should all advocate for these remedies. I'm concerned about screen addiction, and I support following Australia's restriction on children's access to social media.

Reading reinforces reasoning and debate; it develops the ability to question, to make sophisticated evaluations. If we lose intellectual capacity and rigour, if we lose literacy, we are disempowered. It threatens our cultural identity. The UK is going to make 2026 The Year of Reading. Why can't we do the same here?

As Jenny Nagle put it to me, "The book world is by its nature community-focussed, where stories connect directly, and emotionally with readers. That is our strength."

The arts are fundamental. They are who we are. We disregard them and starve them at our peril.

We leave copyright undefended at our peril.

What do we value when we love an author's work? We love their voice. We love their personality, their idiosyncratic strangenesses, their take. If we enjoy novels by, say, Catherine Chidgey or Elizabeth Knox or Eleanor Catton – or by CK Stead – it's because we love the author's uniqueness, the world as expressed by them. We queue up for them, because we want that author, that personality. We don't want a mash up churned out by a robot. We don't want celebratory hagiographies churned out by robotic enablers either. At least I hope we don't and never do. That will not do at all.

And why should another author take advantage of copying of established writers' genuinely original output?

Machines are not raised; they're not a unique mix of genes and environment; they don't develop a psychology. They are created by humans, but they only approximate individuality.

When we call for regulation of AI, we're standing up for our creative rights, and our freedom. To preserve subtlety and complexity, as well as local culture, we need to stand against the anodyne, the generic, the featureless and impersonal. And obviously against the theft of originality.

We are lucky to be New Zealanders. We have something special and exclusive in Aotearoa, and we can champion it.

At every opportunity, we should support public broadcasting, local journalism, local books and artists. We should stand up for our institutions, universities, education, the humanities, science. It's the duty of all of us to keep visiting bookshops and buying books, going to festivals, reading, telling our own stories, listening to each other. We need to keep writing, keep valuing the discourse, aiming for truth, being open and curious.

Writers are at the front line of culture. Individual – human – New Zealand writers should have solid copyright protection.

I've described what I discovered in the Turnbull Archive because it's a complicated human story, and that's what I want to champion. Like many narratives it's complicated. In its own minor way, it is a tragedy.

It's an epilogue to a theme of *The Mirror Book*: the family as a microcosm of society, where a domineering force just will not stop trying to control what it does not like.

The microcosm expands out and out, into the world, and the forces we're up against have the same characteristics. We are sentient individuals with rights. In standing up for those rights, we act for our collective good.

The state of the literary nation may be troubled, but let's be optimistic about New Zealand writing. We need to defend it and keep it human.

Remembering the great Janet Frame, let us celebrate our unique New Zealand voices. And let us each value our own authentic understanding of "celebratory."

**Charlotte Grimshaw**