2024 Storylines Betty Gilderdale Award Lecture by Joy Sellen

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DISCOVERING TREASURE: NEW ZEALAND STORIES FOR YOUNG READERS

Whāia te iti kahurangi ki te tūohu koe me he maunga teitei

Seek the treasure you value most dearly: if you bow your head, let it be to a lofty mountain

Before I begin, I'd like to say some thank yous. The first people I'd like to thank are two people who can't be here today, but who undoubtedly made me who I am – my parents. Our house was always open to anyone in need, but they always had time to read a story. They always had time.

I'd also like to thank my sister Jan, one of my first teachers – I wasn't great at going to school when I was little, so she took up the slack and would make me sit in front of a blackboard while she taught me important stuff like how to spell my name (I had problems with this). It was no surprise to anyone when she went on to become a teacher.

And I'd like to thank Belinda Cooke for giving me the opportunity to continue working on the awards, and for her apparently endless patience and willingness to listen.

I would like to thank the lovely Vicki from Storylines. When I was expressing doubts about being worthy to receive this award, she said something like – "Now's your time to shine, Joy. Administrators know more than people think."

Last, but most importantly, I'd like to thank my family, who put up with so much. Not many people could cope with their house being filled with boxes of books, pizza wheels and promotional materials – sometimes it looks like a warehouse more than a home. Not many people can put up with stressed Joy and her need to vent. But my family does, and they help in so many other ways and I couldn't do this job without their support.

Ever since I found out that I had won this award and would be giving this lecture, I've been thinking a lot about how I've ended up doing what I do. Although I've always been an avid reader, my early career took me in some very different directions and I'm not sure that younger me ever envisaged working in the children's book space.

But where people come from does tend to have some effect on where they end up, and what motivates them – that's certainly been the case for me.

I'm the youngest of six children. I was born in Masterton, although I never lived there. My Dad was an Anglican priest, and because of this, in the ten years before I was born, the family had already moved from Wellington to Huntervillle to Eltham to Tinui (on the Masterton-Castlepoint road). When I was four, we moved to Silverstream, in Upper Hutt. I think all of us expected to move again quite soon. I remember always feeling unsettled, like I couldn't or shouldn't put down roots there.

One thing people often don't realise is how poorly paid vicars were back then, and with six children to care for, my parents really struggled. Things like having to buy shoes for us all caused them huge stress. Most of my clothes were handed down from my older sisters and cousins, and we didn't have a TV or flash shop-bought toys.

But despite the lack of money, in many ways I had a privileged life as the 'spoilt' baby of the family. That's because there was always someone who had time to play with me or teach me stuff or read with me. I felt sorry for kids from smaller families.

Many of my fondest memories involve books and reading.

Having five older siblings and parents who were readers and library users meant there were always plenty of books in the house. So I read my way through my older siblings' Doctor Seuss, Tintin and Asterix books and my Mum's treasured copies of LM Montgomery's Anne books – and many more that I don't remember.

My birthday and Christmas presents were – more often than not – books. And the books I owned were treasured, and were carefully inscribed with my name and the date I received them.

The books I've held on to are the books I read a little later, over and over again. I keep most of these treasures together in their own special space. To the untrained eye this may look like a shelf full of tatty paperbacks, but to me they are precious. Particular favourites were *A Traveller in Time* by Alison Uttley, *Tom's Midnight Garden* by Philippa Pearce, and one of my favourite books to this day, *The Minnipins* by Carol Kendall – a parable about the dangers of conformity, repressing creativity and forgetting your history.

I don't have my earliest books, but I remember them including lots of Ladybird and Little Golden Book titles. There was also a picture book about a kea – I have no idea what it was called, but I remember the illustrations vividly.

There are other much-loved childhood birthday books on random shelves around our house. One that stands out is *The Complete Stories of Katherine Mansfield*, which I was apparently given for my eleventh birthday. This is one book that I've experienced very differently every time I've returned to it.

As a family, we were regular visitors to Upper Hutt library. This was always a big adventure for me, no matter how often we went. Even more exciting was the mobile library, which

parked up outside Silverstream School once a week. It was a fantabulous place. I still get excited when I see a mobile library in the wild.

My first experience of a school library was at Fergusson Intermediate. What a revelation! I became a student librarian, which gave me licence to hang out in the school library every lunchtime. I guess I did some librarian stuff, but mostly I remember reading. Mysteries and detective stories were my favourites at this age, although I also gravitated towards magical realism – in particular books that incorporated tales of family secrets, time travel, and hidden treasure.

I think it was in the Fergusson Intermediate school library that I discovered the first New Zealand children's books I really remember reading – *The Runaway Settlers* and *The End of the Harbour* by Elsie Locke. Even though historical fiction wasn't my preferred genre, I enjoyed these.

Our family ended up being lucky enough to have nine years in Silverstream, and that stability was good for a shy kid like me. But in my third form year we moved again – this time to Hāwera. My sister Jan (who was in the 6th form) and I were the only ones to move with Mum and Dad. We struggled with the move. Small-town Taranaki was very different from suburban Upper Hutt. I felt very much an outsider in a school where everyone else seemed to have known each other all their lives.

Reading was a welcome escape in those first few lonely years in Hāwera. But I thought I was too old for children's books, YA books weren't really a thing then, and there were slim pickings at both the school and town libraries. After reading my way through a lot of fantasy books of dubious quality, I moved on to adult fiction – mainly classics (particularly Jane Austen and George Eliot) and anything I could get hold of by Agatha Christie and Ngaio Marsh.

I do remember loving *Beak of the Moon* by Philip Temple, and eventually buying a copy of my own. Would that be classified as YA fiction these days? It wasn't then. I was also fascinated by the great Hāwera novelist, Ronald Hugh Morrieson. I found it all too easy to recognise the dark side of the town he described in *The Scarecrow*. When the film came out, I was disappointed because it wasn't quite right.

And I remember watching the TV series of Maurice Gee's *Under the Mountain* religiously and being annoyed when I couldn't find the book in either the library or the only bookshop in town.

As many others have said, books can be like mirrors, reflecting the world you live in; they can also act as windows, giving you an insight into other lives, different experiences.

In the Aotearoa that I grew up in, neither function was fulfilled very effectively by children's books.

The overwhelming majority of the children's books I read were English or American, and while they may have been fascinating, these books provided a very distorted reflection of

the world. It was a world populated by white heroes (usually male), with people of colour at best given roles as helpful side-kicks or victims in need of saving – but more often as villains.

The main sources of New Zealand stories when I was at primary school were the School Journal and the Ready to Read series of school readers (The Hungry Lambs, Boat Day etc) – but I don't have lasting memories of these because according to my early school reports, my attendance was 'very fair' (I wasn't a big fan of school). Stories featuring Māori were mainly limited to 'myths and legends', as told by Pākehā. We were taught very little about our country's history.

I had been excited to discover Elsie Locke's books in the library at intermediate, but after that the only New Zealand books I could find were written for adult audiences. The first trailblazing New Zealand YA titles by Margaret Mahy, Maurice Gee and Tessa Duder were published while I was still at school, but I had no idea they existed. They were nowhere to be found in either town or school libraries in Hāwera, or in the bookshop.

I don't remember studying any New Zealand books at school until the sixth form, and these books were written for adults: *Māori Girl* by Noel Hilliard, and *Pounamu Pounamu* by Witi Ihimaera. Interestingly these are almost the only set books I actually remember.

These books hit hard – there was a lot to unpack for a class of mostly Pākehā 16- and 17-year-olds. Especially as this was 1981, the year of the Springbok Tour protests, and we were in Hāwera, a socially conservative town in the heart of rural South Taranaki.

Our sixth form English teacher made sure we understood that systemic racism wasn't just something that happened in other countries. And in *Pounamu Pounamu* we finally heard a Māori voice. That shouldn't have been groundbreaking, but it was.

There are lots of reasons why stories aren't heard. Sometimes it's because voices and identities are actively suppressed. Sometimes it's because people don't want to listen. But often it's simply because gatekeepers – whether they are publishers, booksellers, librarians or teachers – think that people won't want to hear these stories, that they won't be interested.

And that means nobody even gets a change to hear them.

The problem of course is that if you don't see yourself reflected in the books, in the media, in what you are taught at school, you can end up feeling that this is because you're not important, that the reality that you experience every day doesn't matter.

That was definitely the message that I was getting about our New Zealand stories when I was growing up.

As often happens, having a family is what led me back to children's (and YA) books. And once they caught hold of me again, they didn't let go.

So I'm going to fast forward quite a few years now to when my children were young.

Fairly early on I remember re-reading some of my own childhood favourites, hoping that I'd be able to share the magic with them – but not many of them made the cut. That doesn't bother me, and those books will always be special for me. But their magic belonged in a different time and place.

I am glad to say that my children were lucky enough to experience a much more exciting and diverse range of children's books – by both international and New Zealand authors.

The lovely staff at Wellington City Libraries issued them with library cards when they were babies, and we would head to the library at least once a week, sometimes more. It wasn't unusual for them to have over 100 books (each) out at any one time.

And they also had access to some amazing treasure troves of children's books – Island Bay Book Shop and Stationers, run by the lovely Fay Far, and of course The Children's Bookshop in Kilbirnie, then run by the legendary Ruth and John McIntyre. When my children reached school age, one of our standard school holiday activities was to visit either or both of these shops and choose books to buy. We also took full advantage of the amazing school holiday programmes at organised by Wellington City Libraries, and went along to several Storylines Family Days.

I don't have time to name-check the many, many incredible books that my family read and loved. In the picture book space, it's impossible not to mention the queens of New Zealand children's literature: Joy Cowley, the late great Margaret Mahy and Lynley Dodd. Thank you for being so prolific and creating so many special memories.

As they got older, my children increasingly gravitated towards international titles – they were much more visible. But at least New Zealand books were there for them to discover.

I went along for the ride as my children moved from their first chapter books to intermediate and YA fiction. Particularly powerful bookish memories in this stage were created by Margaret Mahy, Fleur Beale and Maurice Gee. I was very excited to finally get to read *Under the Mountain*! Rachael King also warrants a mention here, for her compelling depiction of Wellington's magical South Coast in *Red Rocks*.

And when a group from my daughter's Year 8 class had the opportunity to go to a writing workshop with Fleur Beale, I didn't need much persuading to volunteer to be a parent helper for the day. I enjoyed every second of it. This was my first experience of an author event organised as part of the awards programme, and it was great to see first-hand how inspiring such events can be.

It was to be a few more years, however, until I was directly involved in the awards.

It's hard to believe, but I'm now in my tenth year of working on the New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults and the HELL Reading Challenge.

When I started working at the New Zealand Book Council (now Read NZ Te Pou Muramura) in 2014, working on the awards wasn't part of my job description. I watched from the

sidelines as the Book Council team organised tours for finalist authors and illustrators in the awards. At that stage Book Council shared an office with LIANZA, so I also saw the huge amount of work involved in organising their awards and the early stages of the Reading Challenge.

I'd been working at Book Council for about 18 months when the New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults and the LIANZA Children's Book Awards merged. I was asked to take on the 2016 awards and the Reading Challenge. I'm not sure whether I really knew what I was letting myself in for, but I said yes. A couple of years later, when the Book Council's contract with the Book Awards Trust to administer children's awards ended, I didn't take much convincing to stay on.

And so here I am, and what a privilege this job has been! I've read so many brilliant books and encountered so many fantastic people in the New Zealand children's literature community – judges, writers, illustrators, publishing people, school librarians, teachers… I originally planned to list a few names but quickly realised it would be an extremely long list. What amazing people you are.

And then there's the books. Every year our finalist booklet and posters proclaim "Best Books of the Year for Young Readers." It may seem like a bold claim, but it's true – although I know that sometimes the judges are frustrated by the maximum size of the category shortlists and would like to add a few more. I'm sure the same thing happens with Storylines Notable Books judges.

It's my opinion that the best of our New Zealand children's books can sit proudly alongside any in the world. Our fantastic children's writers and illustrators deserve to be celebrated. Awards are a good place to start. I'm sure a living wage would also be appreciated.

I love the fact that today's tamariki and rangatahi in Aotearoa can see themselves, their realities and their dreams reflected in children's and YA books in a way that I never could. There's so much more to discover in this space than when I was their age.

There's a long way to go in terms of reflecting the diversity of their experiences. But while progress often feels painfully slow, it's still progress.

As Margaret Mahy said: "Reading is very creative - it's not just a passive thing. I write a story; it goes out into the world; somebody reads it and, by reading it, completes it."

In a world where there are so many distractions, and reading for pleasure too often seems to be considered an alien concept, we all need to work harder than ever to help complete the creative process that Margaret Mahy described.

Books need readers. Stories need to be told or they fade away to nothing.

For everyone working in the children's book sector, young readers should always be at the front and centre of everything we do.

A huge part of the awards programme is focused on creating more opportunities for tamariki and rangatahi to discover books and reading. For me this is one of the most satisfying aspects of my job, and I'd now like to talk about some of our awards-related activities.

School reviewing process

In the time that I've been involved with the awards, a lot of thought has been given to the issue of how to involve young readers more in the judging process. After all nobody is better equipped than they are to pass judgement on whether a book has appeal for its intended readership, or whether a book demonstrates insight into the world of a child or young person.

While our judges are always people who have a wealth of expertise and experience in the children's book world – librarians, teachers, academics, writers, illustrators, booksellers, and reviewers – they do tend to be slightly older than the target audiences for the books they are judging.

To ensure that shortlists don't just contain books that adults think young readers *ought* to read, but that these are books that they actually *want* to read, it makes sense to take the books to these young readers and find out what they think of them.

Above and beyond providing input for judges, the review-based system that has been developed encourages young readers to use critical thinking skills. They are asked to think about the ideas in books, how writers use language, and how books are created – and how all these things combine to make great books.

For the reviewing process, we've developed a series of forms. The starting point for these was a form that 2019 convenor Crissi Blair had created for asking intermediate-aged students about picture books.

Different review forms have been created for each awards category/genre, including forms in te reo Māori for books entered for Te Kura Pounamu award. As well as asking questions about a book's appeal, and whether or not they would recommend it to others (and why/why not), the forms ask students to consider elements such as plot/structure, characters, themes, language and so on. The forms have been designed to be short enough that they aren't too daunting, but they can be adapted easily for use by different age groups.

Older primary and intermediate-aged students can work independently using the review forms, but for younger primary school children we encourage teachers or librarians to use the questions on the form as a starting point for class discussions (and record the answers). Often schools go even further – for example by encouraging students to do extra activities like creating their own artworks or stories in response to the books they have been sent.

While some secondary school students use the review forms, others prefer to use the questions from the form as a framework for short essays on the books they are asked to

review. If I had to describe reviews from students in this older age group, I would say “brutally honest”. There’s never any doubt what they think of a book. Here’s one memorable example:

> “This book is evidence of the fall of fine literature. Books just don’t hit the same any more. There’s no flair or life to it.”

Did the judges agree with that assessment? Well, I suspect they thought it was a teeny tiny bit harsh. Other reviewers of the same book had very different opinions – but every single one of them had obviously thought carefully about its strengths and weaknesses before pronouncing judgement. This provided the judges with plenty of food for thought.

Here’s a few more quotes from reviews by younger students of some other books that went on to be shortlisted and/or win awards in 2024:

> “This book made me feel very happy. This is because of the colourful pictures, the funny language that they used, and the nice plot… There is nothing that I do not like about this book.”
>
> “This book makes me feel proud of who I am and how I can represent my Māori culture.”
>
> “The story had a deep heartfelt vibe and there was definitely truth behind the fiction.”
>
> “Although I typically don’t read a lot of books set in NZ settings (regardless of past/present), it is one of the best books I have read this year, and I am very happy I got the chance to participate in these reviews, otherwise I would’ve never considered reading it.”

For this year’s awards, 75 schools around the country signed up to review books. Copies of every book entered into the 2024 awards were sent out to schools for reviewing, and in most cases, students at two or three different schools reviewed each book. Over 500 reviews were received and sent on to judges. I can confirm that the diligent judges did indeed read the reviews and referred to them during their decision-making meetings.

Yes, we could have saved the judges some time by going for a voting-based system – but it’s my opinion that the qualitative information provided in the reviews is far more valuable than mere numbers can ever be. One problem with voting-based systems is that they disadvantage the books that are harder to get hold of, the books published by small presses for example. With this system every single book entered in the awards is sent out to schools for reviewing. The questions that young readers are asked are designed to make them think carefully about these books and the ideas behind them. We also ask them to consider who might like the books they’ve read, even if they don’t themselves.

Schools consistently report back that their students are so excited to be helping the judges – and about the new books they have discovered along the way. In so many cases these are books that these young readers might not otherwise have seen.

As an added bonus, it seems that many of the students involved in reviewing books for the awards become invested in the results – and have gone on to read more of the shortlisted and winning books than they probably would have done otherwise.

The Back-a-Book Challenge involves creating short video trailers to promote finalist books, and is now an integral part of the awards calendar. Many of the schools that entered videos this year have taken part every year since this competition began in 2022, and it's clear that they take it very seriously and put a lot of thought, time and effort into making their videos.

The majority of schools involved in the Back-a-Book Challenge make videos about books that we send them. Often they want to make more than one video, but sadly the limited number of books we have available means that we have to operate a strict 'one book per school' policy when sending out books – otherwise some schools would miss out altogether. In 2024 some schools opted to use finalist books that they already had in their school libraries, especially if they wanted to make videos about more than one finalist book. That's an approach we'll encourage in future years if it means more schools can be involved.

Some schools do take part in both the reviewing process and Back-a-Book, but most opt for one or the other. Even within the schools that do both, different classes/age groups are usually involved in each activity. So Back-a-Book provides an opportunity to get even more young readers actively engaged in reading and thinking about books – and to get creative themselves, while they think about how to 'sell' their book to other readers.

Sometimes videos can be a bit rough, yet they still reach out and grab you because they show that these kids really 'got' a book. These videos can feel more authentic than some of the more sophisticated efforts – it's obvious that they're coming from the heart and that something about the book has really resonated with these readers. To my mind these ones are just as important as the videos that go on to win prizes. If a book engenders that sort of response, then that's a win as far as I'm concerned.

One of my favourite videos from the 2024 Back-a-Book Challenge was one made by a group of Ashburton Intermediate boys about Selina Tusitala Marsh's *What Knot You Got?* It wasn't flash in terms of production values – but you could see that this special book had got them thinking about their 'knots'.

For those who are interested, the winning videos for the 2022-2024 Back-a-Book competitions can be found on the NZ Book Awards for Children & Young Adults YouTube channel (@nzcyaawards).

Books Alive school events

School events featuring awards finalists have been a part of the awards programme since long before I was involved. The nature of the events may have changed over the years, but the goal remains the same – to provide young readers with opportunities to get up close to authors and illustrators and to learn more about finalist books and the creative processes involved in producing these books. Books Alive in its current form differs from the excellent programmes run by Storylines and Read NZ (where authors visit individual classes) in that Books Alive sessions are large-scale events where hundreds of kids descend on one big venue, creating a real sense of bookish excitement.

In 2024, it was exciting to be able to hold Books Alive events in Invercargill for the first time, thanks to funding from the Mātātuhi Foundation and some amazing organisation by Pauline Smith and her team of volunteers. Partnerships with WORD Christchurch, Wellington City Libraries and the National Library also continued for Wellington and Christchurch events. In total 23 finalist authors and illustrators and nearly 1,500 students from 48 schools in Wellington, Christchurch and Southland took part in Books Alive events in the week leading up to the awards ceremony.

I'll be honest with you – Books Alive is really hard work, especially the Wellington events, which are hugely complicated, typically involving 20 (or more) schools, 20 (or more) finalists, and multiple event spaces and types. All on one day. Trying to slot different school groups into sessions that match the interests and ages of the students involved can be a challenge – especially when schools change the size or year levels of groups attending at the last minute. Or the programme has to change because a particular finalist has had to pull out. It feels like there's always something that doesn't quite go to plan, but the teams on the ground on the day always find a way to make things work.

And it's always worth it. If our efforts inspire tamariki to read a book they might not otherwise have picked up, or to start writing or illustrating their own stories, then we've done our job. I love being involved in Books Alive.

If you need convincing that these events really are inspirational, here's some of the feedback from schools that attended Books Alive sessions in 2024:

> "ALL our students were reading their book OR drawing/ writing on the bus on the way home. They all talked about the different aspects that they took away such as being an inventor, saving the world OR writing about their own whānau." (Ōtātara School, Invercargill)

"They loved it! They were all fizzing the entire car ride home. The conversation ranged from believing in yourself and following your dreams to inventing flying limousines."
(Te Parito Kōwhai Russley School, Christchurch)

"Thank you to you for an amazing experience at the National Library. We had a wonderful time, so inspiring for our students… The authors and illustrator events we attended were fantastic, had a great vibe and were very insightful. We had some very tired students on the train home. They loved being able to attend and the excitement over the books so they could get autographs ... oh boy!"
(Wilford School, Lower Hutt)

The HELL Reading Challenge

The HELL Reading Challenge is a hugely popular and successful programme that aims to get tamariki reading. It was the brainwave of HELL Pizza's former marketing manager, Jason Buckley. He was upset when he found out that his children were being bullied at school because they went to the library. Jason also recognised that there were a lot of children who needed an incentive to encourage them to read more. He wanted to do something that would hook reluctant readers on books – and would make going to the library cool. I believe that a chance meeting with someone who worked for LIANZA may have been the final connection that got the ball rolling.

LIANZA administered the Challenge for the first two years of its existence (2014 and 2015) alongside the LIANZA Children's Book Awards. When their awards merged with ours in 2016, I took on the task of administering the Challenge as well. I'm proud to have played a role in its phenomenal growth since then, but obviously that wouldn't have been be possible without the ongoing enthusiasm of the HELL Pizza team.

The costs associated with running a massive nationwide reading programme like this are definitely not insignificant, but everyone I have worked with at HELL Pizza over the years has been genuinely excited about the idea of getting children reading. When I talked to Jason recently, he was thrilled to hear how the Challenge had continued to go from strength to strength since he had left HELL.

As far as schools, libraries and families are concerned, the way the HELL Reading Challenge works is simple. Children receive a stamp on their 'pizza wheel' for each book they read, and when they have read seven books, they can exchange their completed wheel for a free 333 kids' pizza at HELL.

The Reading Challenge has been designed to be flexible, so that schools and libraries can choose how they want to run it. Rules are kept to a minimum and mostly relate to how wheels should be completed and redeemed.

In terms of what counts as a 'book', schools and libraries can use their judgement, based on their knowledge of their communities, and the ages and reading abilities of the children involved. When they ask me, I tell them that the important thing is that it's a challenge, and that the free pizza should be seen as an incentive for tamariki to do reading that they wouldn't otherwise have done.

A few examples:

One school was having difficulty getting students to do their reading homework. They decided that completing a homework reader could count as a 'book' on a pizza wheel, and went from zero participation and interaction with students and whānau to 98%.

Another school had a community of enthusiastic readers who on the face of it didn't need much encouragement to read. This school decided to use the challenge as a way to get these young readers to read books they might not otherwise have picked up. They ran the challenge alongside a 'reading bingo' game and found this provided a great incentive for their readers to try new genres and to push themselves just a little bit harder.

And another school used the challenge as a way to encourage their senior students to read with junior students during buddy time. Suddenly these senior students were very interested in which picture books made good read-alouds!

The HELL Reading Challenge may have been running for ten years now, but teachers and librarians are still managing to come up with twists on the basic programme that keep it fresh and exciting for their communities of young readers, and encourage them to keep on reading and visiting libraries. I've heard stories of children that don't even like pizza completing multiple wheels, just because they like the challenge.

Back in 2015, 220 schools and 160 public libraries participated in the HELL Reading Challenge and just under 95,000 pizza wheels were sent out. So far this year 604 schools and 203 public libraries have joined up, and 336,000 pizza wheels have been sent out. If all of these wheels are completed, that would represent well over 2.3 million books read by New Zealand children this year alone.

While there's no doubt that the HELL Reading Challenge has been hugely successful over the years in achieving its initial goals of hooking children on reading and encouraging them to use libraries, the HELL Pizza team haven't been content with that.

One of the Reading Challenge's mottos has always been that 'any reading is good reading'. But the association with the awards means children are now also being introduced to a wide range of New Zealand books.

In 2022 an optional add-on to the Reading Challenge was launched – HELL's Great NZ Book Trip. This initiative is aimed at helping young readers to learn more about New Zealand books and their creators. It includes New Zealand themed teaching resources and also a programme of online author events that run throughout the year.

These Book Trip events feature writers and illustrators who have been finalists or winners in the New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults. We've been fortunate to be able to include the last four Margaret Mahy Book of the Year winners – Tania Roxborogh, Gavin Bishop, Mat Tait and Stacy Gregg – in the schedule. The average audience size for live streams of each Book Trip session varies, but typically would be between 2,500 and 3,000 children. Many more watch the sessions later via a playlist on the NZCYA YouTube channel.

After each Book Trip session my inbox fills up with excited emails from schools, often accompanied by photos of children engrossed in writing their own stories or creating their own works of art. It has been great to be able to give students around the country – especially those in areas that might not have access to in-person author events – a chance to be inspired by so many fantastic New Zealand authors and illustrators.

There's a lot to love about the HELL Reading Challenge and I'm glad to be part of it.

There are so many people doing good work in the New Zealand children's literature and literacy space. This work deserves a lot more recognition (and funding).

I'm in awe of the work being by Storylines and Read NZ. I love the Kids' Lit Quiz and the various Readers Cups and the many, many other activities that are organised around the motu and do so much to create genuine excitement about reading. I also love the work that the people at Duffy Books in Homes and Kiwi Christmas Books do to get books into the hands of children who might not otherwise ever have a book of their very own.

But I'm sad that Toitoi – a fantastic initiative aimed at encouraging young people to share their own stories – will be going into hiatus in 2025. I hope they will be back before too long.

Thank you to everyone who works so hard to share the magic of books and reading with our young people. What you do matters and should be celebrated every day, whether you win awards or not.

And finally:

I always feel a little sad when I hear young children say that reading is important because you need it to get a job. But reading is about so much more than becoming an economic unit.

Reading is also a powerful means of affirming identities, creating connections and experiencing magic in a very real way.

You can't see yourself in a book if you don't know it exists.

And even if the perfect book is right in front of you, you might not open it. Sometimes you need to be given a reason to do this.

That's why the sort of activities I've been talking about are important. They're about giving young people a reason to open books and to become readers.

It's really important that we're able to share books containing stories that reflect the identities, realities and aspirations of all our children and communities.

Because if they open even one book and find someone they recognise, then it might encourage them to open another book and discover someone who's a bit different (but maybe more like them than they thought). They might get caught up in a story and think hey, this is fun, I want to do this again. I'm going to read another book. And another. And another.

Every book they read helps them to understand a little more about themselves and also about the world around them. Through reading, they become involved in other people's stories, build connections and can feel empowered to share their own stories.

And then they really have found treasure, and it's a treasure that they can share with others.

Recommended reading:

Here are some of the treasures that I've discovered through my work with the awards, but there have been many, many others.

First up, one that I can't read yet, but hope to one day: *Ngake me Whātaitai* by Ben Ngaia/Laya Mutton Rogers (Huia Publishers) – telling Te Āti Awa's origin stories of Te Ūpoko o te Ika/the Wellington region. Yay for Huia and all they do to bring Māori voices to the fore, mahi that is more important than ever right now.

Next, glow-in-the-dark books – who doesn't love them, and these are both excellent examples: *I am Jellyfish* by Ruth Paul and *Lucy and the Dark* by Melinda Szymanik/Vasanti Unka (both published by Penguin Random House). I remember being scared of both jellyfish and the dark, but maybe I wouldn't have been if I'd had these books in my life.

Junior/Intermediate Fiction books that will make you laugh and cry, while also teaching about important periods in our country's history: *Nine Girls* by Stacy Gregg (Penguin Random House) and *Dawn Raids* by Pauline Vaeluaga Smith (Scholastic New Zealand).

If you prefer illustrated non-fiction for history, then Gavin Bishop's *Patu: The New Zealand Wars* and *Aotearoa: A New Zealand Story* are good starting points for explorations of our past (both published by Penguin Random House).

Memoirs can also be a good way into difficult topics: *Mophead* by Selina Tusitala-Marsh (Auckland University Press) explores difference (and racism) and *A New Dawn* by Emeli Sione (Mila's Books) provides a very personal account of the Dawn Raids.

Chanelle Moriah's *I am Autistic* and *This is ADHD* provide much needed windows into (or mirrors of) neurodivergent experiences (both published by Allan and Unwin).

Empowering books that show that people with disabilities as heroes: Tania Roxborogh's *Charlie Tangaroa and the Creature from the Sea* (Huia Publishers) and Arlo Kelly's *Echo* (Sparrow Press)

Some comforting picture books for children experiencing loss, showing how the tikanga of Matariki can help with healing and coming to terms with grief – *How My Koro Became a Star* and *Kua Whetūrangitia a Koro* by Brianne Te Paa/Story Hemi-Morehouse and *Riwia and the Stargazer* by Linda Tuhiwai Smith/Isobel Joy Te Aho White (both published by Huia Publishers).

In the YA Fiction space, the very real – and at times heartbreaking – portrayals of teens who are so like some of the lovely patients I met when I was working at Wellington Children's Hospital: Eileen Merriman's *Catch Me When You Fall* and *Catch a Falling Star* (Penguin Random House), and Erin Donohue's *Because Everything is Right but Everything is Wrong* (Escalator Press).

Two books that just make me happy that they exist: *Rere Aku Taku Poi! Let My Poi Fly!* by Tangaroa Paul/Rebecca Gibbs (Oratia Books) and *Things in the Sea are Touching Me* by Linda Jane Keegan/Minky Stapleton (Scholastic New Zealand). Please can we have more joyful books like these where rainbow characters get to do the things they love, and aren't treated as 'issues' that need to be dealt with.

And last, but definitely not least, *Te Tiriti o Waitangi |The Treaty of Waitangi* by Toby Morris/Ross Calman/Mark Derby/Piripi Walker (Lift Education). A great starting point for learning about Te Tiriti.

Most of these books have either been shortlisted or won awards at the New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults or have been included on Notable Books lists. *(Please note that I have deliberately left off any books that will be eligible for entry into the 2025 awards, even if I know and love them already).*