The Power of Story

Joy Cowley

The Power of Story

A NEW ZEALAND BOOK COUNCIL LECTURE

NEW ZEALAND BOOK COUNCIL
Te Kaunihera Pukapuka o Aotearoa

First published in 2018 by the New Zealand Book Council
Ground Floor, 79 Boulcott Street, Wellington 6011

A catalogue record for this book is available from the
National Library of New Zealand.
ISBN 978-0-473-44223-1

Cover photo © Weston Cowley, 2017
Cover design by Kalee Jackson
Printed by Wakefields Digital

This book was taken from manuscript to bookshelf by students of the Whitireia New Zealand publishing programme, who worked on editing, production, publicity and marketing. For more information about our editing and publishing training, visit www.whitireiapublishing.co.nz

FOREWORD

Kia ora tātou. Talofa lava. Malo e lelei. Bula vinaka.

Just under an hour's drive north of Wellington, over the spectacular Remutaka Pass, lies the small and vibrant town of Featherston, a working country town filled with genuine people and united by a strong sense of community.

I live in that small town. And so does one of our national treasures, Joy Cowley ONZ DCNZM OBE.

To me and the Featherston community, Joy is more than an internationally acclaimed writer for children and young people. She is, in Ezra Pound's words, a 'voltage of life' – generous, wise, energetic, joyful, welcoming and humble.

I remember giving her a lift to a literature event. The next day, Joy gave me a jar of home-made feijoa

chutney to say 'thank you' – very typical of Joy and the very reason why she is loved and admired in New Zealand and around the world, not simply as a celebrated writer but also as a wonderful person.

Each year, the Book Council Lecture provides an opportunity for one of our country's leading writers to discuss an aspect of literature close to their heart.

This year, Joy has chosen to write about the power of telling stories and reading stories – particularly when it comes to children and young people. As she writes:

> In a lifetime of writing I've created stories for adults and children of all ages. But my heart remains with the young children who are struggling readers, the children for whom a book is a closed secret, the children who see other children in a book but never themselves. This is my passion. It's not simply about children learning to read. It's about children learning to love reading.
>
> Whoever said, 'we only live once', was not a reader. As often as we open a book, we live new lives in new landscapes. This is what I want for every child.

Research carried out last year by the Book Council found that, while on average Kiwis devour 20.6 books per year – including at least one book by a New Zealand

author – almost half a million Kiwis are not reading, in particular boys and young men. This means that they are missing out on the positive effect that reading brings to people's lives and communities – as Joy says, the opportunity to 'live lives in new landscapes.'

There has been significant international research which shows that reading is the most effective poverty buster around. The OECD considers reading for pleasure to be the most important indicator of the future success of a child. In fact, research indicates that parental involvement in their child's reading and literacy is a more powerful influence on their child's future than other family background variables, such as social class, family size and level of parental education.

This is why the New Zealand Book Council seeks to build a nation of readers, leading to social, cultural and economic well-being.

Our message is that investing in promoting and advocating a national reading culture among New Zealanders will result in a better country for us all.

Joy's insightful, provocative and pragmatic 2018 Book Council Lecture is very much about how encouraging more New Zealand children and young people to read will shape a better country.

Let all of us who live in Aotearoa New Zealand heed that call to join in this vital effort.

Ngā mihi nui

Peter Biggs CNZM
Chair
New Zealand Book Council

THE POWER OF STORY

We are a story-making species. Story is how we document our lives. It is our history; it is our herstory. It is how we form our identities as families, as communities, as nations. It is how we shape what we do and it determines how we react to people with different stories. Story is communication, but it is more than that, it forms us.

Most of us have two memory files: one for fact and one for fiction. But in effect the boundary between the two is blurred. We know from our news items how fact encroaches on fiction when it is slanted or when important information is left out. I remind school children:

'When you watch TV news or a documentary remember that you are watching what someone wants you to see.'

On the other hand, we know that well-crafted fiction can hold emotional, cultural or social truths that are not so often found in factual writing. While factual writing may offer information, fiction can gift us with wisdom by unwrapping a deeper truth within us.

We are the adults. We are the educated ones. We have the skills that come with life and language experience and we know how to evaluate story, in whatever form it takes. But what about the children who don't have that experience? How do young people make meaning of their lives through story?

This, dear friends, is what my essay is about. In a lifetime of writing I've created stories for adults and children of all ages. But my heart remains with the young children who are struggling readers, the children for whom a book is a closed secret, the children who see other children in a book but never themselves. This is my passion. It's not simply about children learning to read. It's about children learning to love reading.

Whoever said, 'we only live once', was not a reader. As often as we open a book, we live new lives in new landscapes. This is what I want for every child.

My early reading experiences are contained in three memories that still evoke strong feelings. The first memory is negative. I was a six-year-old in a New Zealand classroom during World War II struggling with an old British phonics programme and failing miserably. The second came two years later as an eight-year-old 'failed' reader who encountered the picture book *Ping* and discovered, with excitement and wonder, the world of story. The third memory is of when I was aged ten or eleven in a small town library. This library didn't have a children's section, but I was directed by a kindly librarian to the classics – to the books that might interest me. How I loved that place! I remember the smells of dusty sunlight and old books. In those days, animal glue was used to bind books, and insects called silverfish used to eat the glue. Often, I'd open a book and find a squashed silverfish as a bookmark. Some of you may remember that experience.

My fascination with story made me an avid reader and I began to recycle the stories I'd read into my writing. Children do that, and I beg teachers not to discourage derivative writing. It leads to the real thing. If children are affected by what they are reading, they will recycle the story, adding their own details.

At Palmerston North Girls' High School teachers

encouraged my creative writing. When my parents wanted me to leave school at the beginning of the 6th form my teachers found me an after-school job as editor of the children's page at the *Manawatu Daily Times*. I could stay on at school and also take money home to my parents.

At twenty I married, lived and worked on a dairy farm and had four children in four and a half years. I used to write in the evenings; I wrote short stories for the *New Zealand Listener* and the *School Journal*. Both publications were a hothouse for new writers, and the editors were very encouraging. My growth as a writer owed much to Monte Holcroft at the *New Zealand Listener*, and Brian Birchall, editor of the *Junior Journal*.

My second child, Edward, didn't like reading. His struggle was different from mine. He was sandwiched between two girls who could read before they started school, and he wasn't going to compete. He didn't relate to fiction. He had manual dexterity, was good at making things with his hands. Books and reading, he believed, belonged to his sisters.

It was his teacher, Gladys Thorley, who suggested I write material that would interest Edward. She held up the *Janet and John* texts and said, 'There is no reason

why any child should want to read this.' She then gave me the Dolch 100 Sight Words list and I wrote little stories about Edward's interests. This boy, who didn't like stories that were not 'true', never objected to tales in which he was a hero: Edward puts out the fire in the hay shed, Edward saves his father from the shark, Edward gets the cow out of the swamp, Edward fixes the tractor. I made a whole series of these stories. His language skills developed and with some help he was able to read chosen books from the library – books about volcanoes, dinosaurs, electricity, shipwrecks, planes and submarines. After a year, he was ready for his own subscription to *Popular Mechanics* magazine.

I still say to parents who tell me their child, more often a boy, doesn't like reading:

'What is their favourite hobby?'

Whether it be soccer or skateboarding, I suggest they get the child a subscription to a magazine on the subject.

During these early years other children who were reluctant readers were brought to me after school. Most of them had met failure too many times to put themselves at risk again and there was no point in showing them an early reading book. I started with questions and story-talk. The child would answer a

simple question such as:

'Is there a vegetable you don't like?'

Then I would ask more detailed questions:

'Leeks, what's so revolting about leeks?'

'What will happen to all the leeks if no one eats them?'

'But what if the cows don't like leeks?'

'Will their milk turn green?'

The story could become absurd and the child would be fully engaged in extending it. At this stage I would type it on my old Remington portable. The story would be written down in the third person with the child's name in the title and throughout the text. I would keep a carbon copy and give the original to the child to take home. Parents would read the child their story, and before the next visit I would make a small stapled book with reduced text and simple drawings. No child was reluctant to read their own story. But it wasn't only the children who were learning. I also learned something from each session.

I quickly realised that reading has to have meaning for the child. Confidence in reading comes from empowerment and pleasure – humour is a great tool. Children aren't tense when they are laughing. If they stumble over a word, it is always the word's fault.

Words are tricky. Some words try to hide themselves by making a different sound. I also learned that putting a joke or surprise at the end of a story was like pudding after vegetables: it encouraged the child to read to the last page.

In all the stories I wrote, the child is the hero, and if the story is not about children it is still Small who is the winner. Small is powerful. Big is not allowed to solve problems for Small, but Small may solve problems for Big. Small always wins. The story loves Small.

For thousands of years researchers have been able to study dead brain tissue. It is only since the advent of modern technology that scientists have been able to study live brain function. The research found that people learn most effectively and efficiently through pleasure. This is what is commonly known as the pleasure principle. Yet the results of this research only prove what is common knowledge among educators. Teachers who work every day in a child-centred way don't need scientific evidence. We know that our brains are hot-wired for pleasure. Everything we learn is in the context of emotion and when we recall the learning

the emotion is attached. Pleasurable learning leads to pleasure in learning. We can also learn in fear, but this means we teach children to read and to hate reading at the same time. The learning experience becomes meaningless and disempowering.

MRI scans show that the human brain resists disjointed and meaningless information. Yet in the past, that is how we taught children to read and many of us have seen the way adult-centred systems, like the one I was taught by, can deaden a young child's enthusiasm and appetite for learning.

I knew that when I started school I would be able to read books. That didn't happen. Instead I got isolated letters, marks on the blackboard that I needed to remember. After that came two letters together, then short words. This learning had no meaning for me. I was one of three children in the class who saw themselves as 'bad readers'. We stood by the teacher's chair, a finger on a word and when our guess was wrong, the ruler hit our legs.

Reading must have meaning for a child.

We have seen how children open up like flowers to learning through pleasure. By pleasure I don't mean learning by osmosis or through random hit and miss. That is not what learning is about. Once children

are engaged in books, once they have an image of themselves as successful readers, their confidence and natural curiosity makes them open to learning the language skills inherent in the book. The children will want to take the story apart to see how the words work, to see how they sound. Recognising letters and chunks is an exciting challenge, if it is in the context of pleasure. In other words, if it feels good.

At conferences I sometimes ask teachers to observe the effect of learning through pleasure in their own lives. I ask them to try and remember an ordinary evening at home on a given date about a month past. They find this difficult. The details are fuzzy, if they are remembered at all. And when they try to recall it there is usually no feeling attached. Then I ask them to go back a year or more to some fabulous dinner party with friends. They remember details such as what they were wearing, what they ate, what they talked about. Their faces will be bright with pleasure as they recall the details.

The next memory exercise for teachers is to go back to an unpleasant experience in which they felt they lost their authority. Maybe they were in a situation where they felt embarrassed or powerless to help themselves. Perhaps they suspected they were being judged by

others. As they remember the experience I ask them how they feel. What is happening to their breathing, to their stomach? Yes, we also learn through fear but fear is not conducive to growth. Fear diminishes us. Fear sets us up for failure.

How can we use pleasure to encourage a love of reading and storytelling in our young children? What we sometimes miss is that storytelling is natural to children. They find meaning in the stories they hear and they make meaning with the stories they tell. I am very interested in the stories made up by preschoolers. All story has an autobiographical element and, while children need to know the difference between fantasy and reality, their inventions need to be valued as 'stories' and not denigrated as 'lies'. Parents can encourage creativity by saying something like:

'Now that's a wonderful story. Let's write it down and then you can tell me what really happened.'

Many years ago, I had a neighbour whose four-year-old child regularly lost articles of clothing. His mother told him that if he lost his new sandals, a proposed trip to see Father Christmas would be cancelled. A

couple of days later, the boy came back from Playcentre with bare feet. He told his mother this story – a big monster had taken the shoes, but then a policeman came and took the shoes from the monster, but then the policeman wouldn't give the shoes back to the boy. The mother repeated the story to me, worried that her son was becoming a pathological liar. I thought it was a very clever story because the boy thought his mother would not argue with a policeman. And, while the child created the story, the mother had created the need for it. After all, the threat of cancelling a trip to see Father Christmas is very serious. The boy had made up a story that was appropriate for the situation he was in. As for the sandals, they were found the next day in the Playcentre sandpit.

My own children made up stories about characters that lived in various parts of the house. There was a whootle bird that lived in the chimney and sang when the wind blew. It was the tiger in the bathroom that was responsible for the towels and toilet rolls that ended up in the bathwater. My children's beds were burrows where rabbits lived and they could nibble your toes if you weren't careful.

What about parents' stories? These are treasured by children! When we are telling children stories without

a book we remember fairy tales, jokes, and riddles we enjoyed when we were young. What family stories were handed down to you when you were a child? These are important. When I was young I loved the story of my grandfather who gave up his horse and cart to buy his first motor car. When he reached town he forgot about the engine and brakes and started yelling at the car, 'Whoa boy! Whoa boy!' as he drove up the footpath and into a shop window.

It's good to have a story place away from television, a corner somewhere with cushions, where parents and children can share stories from life and books. I encourage parents to be actors when reading books to their children. They can dramatise the story, make up different voices for the characters and emphasise the dramatic parts. Some parents practise on their own to get the right effect. They are rewarded with rapt attention and squeals of delight.

So what makes a great book for a young child? I've made a few notes about book elements that work for children.

1. The book is child friendly, child empowering and entertaining without being preachy.
2. The book has action and a defined plot.

3. Children enjoy dialogue in a story. If there is too much narrative, they say:
   'There isn't enough talking in it.'
4. They also enjoy humour.
5. Young children like stories with quirky language, rhythm and rhyme.
6. Some children enjoy factual stories – tales of heroes, accounts of shipwrecks and volcanic eruptions, stories of car races, marathons and extraordinary feats. Remember that not all children relate to make-believe.
7. Ultimately, it is the reader who will make the book great with the telling.

I would remind parents that a love of reading is caught rather than taught. Children will follow the parents' example, and research shows that this is gender related. If the mother reads to her children at night but the father doesn't then it's the girls in the family that are likely to become readers. This, unfortunately, has become a pattern in Aotearoa New Zealand. Both parents need to be aware they are role models. Children who are enthusiastic readers develop skills that are important in higher education. I've known bright university students who have not been able to

keep up with the reading required because they haven't developed the necessary reading comprehension speed.

In the 1960s I was writing for the *School Journal*, working with children in a serendipitous way, and also writing some early reading books for the *PM Readers* series published by Price Milburn. In classrooms teachers were making big books from my stories, pages of brown paper or card with children's illustrations. These teachers wanted me to get some of the stories published. In the 1970s I sent sample stories to children's publishers and they were rejected. My then husband, Malcolm Mason, suggested we publish them ourselves. I was not confident about editing and layout so I asked June Melser, a retired reading teacher and editor of the *School Journal*, if she would help me. She introduced me to the extraordinary Wendy Pye, an Auckland publisher. What June didn't tell me was that she had already sent copies of my stories to Wendy, who had taken them to the educational gurus in Auckland and gained approval to publish.

This was the beginning of *The Story Box Reading Programme*. Finding illustrators for our books was a

challenge. But we found some wonderful illustrators who learned to show the required meaning through their pictures. Because of this they essentially acted as co-authors. My original collection of shared reading titles was designed to fill a gap for Aotearoa New Zealand teachers until the new official *Ready to Read* books came out. Neither June nor I realised that Wendy would take these 24 shared reading books around the world to countries which saw them as a taste of something much bigger.

Writing for early reading became my full-time work. I relied on June's editorial advice but also felt I needed to test the stories in schools. If a story didn't engage the class, it was trashed. In a Blenheim school the class fidgeted during a story I particularly liked.

I asked, 'What was wrong with that story?'

The boy in front of me didn't bother to put up his hand. 'It was boring.'

I thought maybe I could rewrite or recycle it, so I said, 'What part of it was boring?'

'All of it,' the boy replied. So that story went in the bin.

I also did a lot of research into early reading in the schools I visited. I learned that five- and six-year-olds are not reflective and can't talk with clarity about their

feelings. But if I asked questions of children aged seven and eight they could freely tell me how they felt when they were five, what they liked and disliked, what their favourite jokes and toys were, and what dreams they had.

By the 1990s, I was getting invitations to conferences and schools in many countries. The experience was diverse. I worked all through the USA, and in Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Hong Kong, Germany and Iceland.

In the United States it was very special to be invited to schools on First Nations reservations. The children from these cultures taught me a different way of seeing the world. On a Tohono O'odham school near the Mexican border I saw how children answered questions by consensus. I would ask a child something and she would consult with those around her and then give an answer. That was a valuable teaching for me, creating awareness of connection and respect in a tribal situation.

In a school outside of Las Vegas I was facilitating a writing class for nine-year-olds. A Navajo boy whispered to me, 'I can't read or write.' I patted the seat beside me. 'Would you like to sit here and tell me about that?' He sat down and said something in his

own language. Then he added, 'Did you understand that?' I shook my head and he translated for me. 'When I try to read or write I stand outside of myself.'

I realised that this was a profound truth. He came from a great oral tradition and reading and writing was not authentic for him. I realised that for me reading is defined by my culture and is usually a solitary experience. Oral traditions are shared and use voice instead of books.

Working in schools in Alaska, in the Bering Strait villages and in Barrow, showed me how children are conditioned by their environment. Girls learned the protection value of different furs and how to layer them for winter warmth. They stitched moccasins from reindeer hide. Boys used what is called a 'killing room', a stainless steel area that is for the gutting and processing of seals and walruses.

In Barrow young children think that the trees they see on TV are 'make-believe' because trees don't grow where they live. People are also very afraid of polar bears, which do not hibernate and see people as meat. A large upright male can reach 12 feet high and can easily push down the door of a house. Barrow has a polar-bear patrol and sometimes a bear has to be killed. Teachers in Barrow school were concerned about

children's books that depicted polar bears as cute and cuddly.

In schools in South African townships I felt helpless and hopeless before bright classes of 90 children who had no books. They wrote on torn sheets of newsprint paper with very short pencils. The teacher had an allotment of 30 pencils to a class and these had to be chopped in three. In the United States at question time, children wanted to know how old I was and how much money I made. In these township classes the question was always the same:

'How can I get a job?'

In some countries I was aware that children were learning English with books that were alien to their way of life. Teachers were also aware of this and everywhere I went there was the same plea:

'Please, will you write books for us.'

Of course, I couldn't do that. I have to write what I know. But what I could do was recycle some of my income to go into these countries to facilitate writing workshops. That happened in Brunei, Singapore, parts of the United States, Hong Kong, Iceland, South Africa, and in Aotearoa New Zealand from the 1990s until 2010. The workshops were called 'Writing workshops for people whose culture is not adequately represented

in their children's reading'.

Most of the people who came to these were not writers, but they all had stories in them. We did meditation exercises to take them back to their own childhood and they selected positive or humorous memories that still had a lot of feeling attached to them. The selected stories were edited to simplify language, professionally illustrated, and then published. The writer received a payment and retained ownership of their original story.

At a book conference in Singapore, a Malaysian woman showed me a little book that had come from one of these workshops. She was crying. 'This is the first time my son has seen himself in a book.'

Back in Aotearoa New Zealand I was also writing books for older children – picture books, junior chapter books and novels. In this too, I was learning from children about their needs at various levels. Writing books for adults is easy. I simply write for myself and my peers. But writing for children I have to be aware of a specific readership. When someone tells me they've written a book for children and they want to get it published, I ask:

'What age?'

Usually the answer is vague:

'Oh, from about six to twelve.'

My advice to any such writer is:

'Write for one child you know very well and you will probably get it right.'

Finally I have some general comments about children's literature in Aotearoa New Zealand today. This is a phenomenon that has grown in the last forty years. Before the 1980s an occasional children's book was published. But for many people who wanted to write and illustrate for children the only outlet was the *School Journal*. In fact, writing for children was considered to be the occupation of people who had failed at adult writing. In the 1960s and 1970s I wrote five novels for adults, and in the 1980s, when I was having children's books published, people would ask me:

'When are you going to get back to real writing?'

I don't need to comment on the present state of children's literature. It is very healthy and recognised internationally. It has its roots in the Aotearoa New Zealand school system, which encourages creativity. As a patron of Storylines, I'm aware of all the ways the Storylines Children's Literature Foundation nurtures future authors. While this country is known for

excellence in sport, it is also a hot-house for the arts.

I would, however, like to comment on three areas of writing for young readers. The first is the picture book. Some believe that this is the easiest genre for a new author. It isn't. It's the hardest. The competition is huge and the story needs to be outstandingly different. There is better chance of publication with an easy-read chapter book.

Publishers could look again at the size and format of junior fiction works. A novel of 35,000 words is good for the avid reader, but many young people might not persist with a big book. For the emerging reader well-researched, well-written and well-produced chapter books of about 3,000–10,000 words would be ideal. Too many of the short chapter books I see have what I would call a 'disposable' look.

I'm pleased to see fine writing and illustration for children coming from Māori and Pacifica people. There was a time when Pākehā writers used Māori characters to make their work more colourful, and the result was frankly embarrassing. I think there is room for more support and expansion of ethnically authentic books.

Concern has been expressed about the number of boys who are not reading. There are probably a number of reasons for this. I've already mentioned the lack of

a male role model in the home, who demonstrates enthusiasm for books. Another reason that has come to my attention is that some boys are not being given books that tie in with their interests. There are a lot of good action books for the accomplished reader, but a variety of material to engage emerging readers is lacking.

Why is this?

I think a big factor is that the writing, publication and distribution of children's books in Aotearoa New Zealand is done by women. I can't and won't complain about this. But it makes me aware that men need to be more proactive in these processes. It would be good to have an equal number of men and women selecting stories for publication, choosing books for schools and libraries, and judging books for awards. A good source of masculine input could come from male teachers and school principals who have the experience and awareness that is needed.

Action books for boys don't have to model violence. Many boys are interested in heroism, and there is room for what we call faction books: fictional heroes in a true historical setting. Examples: a boy sailing on the Titanic, a boy rescuing family after an earthquake, a boy riding his dad's motorbike through a storm to get

help, a boy living in a war setting, a boy saving a family from a car accident. Then there is dramatic non-fiction that might interest some boys. This is factual news and events told in an engaging style.

Many boys also like true sports stories. Maybe a writer could work with a national sports hero documenting *The Scariest Moment in my Life* or *My Greatest Achievement*. Readers want to know personal details about the people they admire and boys are no different. Boys who are sports fans want to know about those who shine in sports like football, yacht racing, Formula One, mountain climbing. The story needs to be alive and real with detail – not told in a flat journalistic style.

My own children were very close but had very different interests. I had two girls and two boys, all in four and a half years. One summer my husband presented the family with a new gadget – a radio tape recorder. The girls and I got up early in the morning to tape the bellbird chorus in the Marlborough Sounds. That meant a lot to us. We would play those tapes back in Wellington to remind us of our holiday. What did the boys do with the new gadget? For breakfast they ate three cans of baked beans, waited until late afternoon and then tried to fart an SOS in Morse code into the recorder. I might add that the girls were not amused.

I'd like to round off this talk by answering a question that is sometimes put to me in various ways:

'What is my main concern or focus when writing for children?'

Many elements are important in a story: a well-designed plot, voice, empathy and perhaps some message or teaching, but these are not my main concern. My number one obligation is to entertain: everything else has to come under that umbrella.

AUTHOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

All my writing comes from lived experience, and I am deeply grateful to the children who taught me how to write books for them, and to the teachers who welcomed me as an adult learner into their classrooms.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The New Zealand Book Council would like to express our warmest gratitude to Joy Cowley for delivering the 2018 lecture.

Our thanks go to Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa for allowing us to use Te Marae for this event.

We wish to thank Weston Cowley for providing the cover photo.

We are grateful to the students of the Whitireia publishing programme for their work in producing this book. Thank you Jess Hubbard, Vanessa Ward and Anja Groth.

BIOGRAPHY

Joy Cowley is a prolific, widely-published and much-celebrated writer of fiction for adults and children. Cowley began her career writing short stories and novels before moving into the realm of children's literature. She has published numerous novels, as well as short stories that have featured in journals, anthologies and book-length collections. She has written a remarkable range of children's books and stories, often illustrated by renowned artists. Cowley was awarded an OBE in 1992 and made a Distinguished Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to children's literature in 2005. She has also received an Honorary Doctorate in Literature from Massey University in 1993 and she was awarded a Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement for Fiction in 2010. In 2018, Cowley was made a member of the Order of New Zealand.