All life long

David Hill

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with an introduction by Claire Mabey

Read NZ Te Pou Muramura Pānui



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Foreword

For more than fifty years, Read NZ Te Pou Muramura has worked to place reading at the heart of community. Established as the New Zealand Book Council in 1972, we have changed across those decades, but the conviction at the centre of our work remains: Reading makes life better.

Our role is both practical and ambitious. We work with tamariki and rangatahi, schools and kura, writers, publishers, libraries, booksellers and sector partners throughout the motu. Sometimes our work happens in a classroom or community centre when a writer or illustrator meets a group of young readers. Sometimes it takes the form of a national campaign, a new piece of research, an online resource or a public conversation about why

reading matters. The breadth of this work reflects the many things required to grow a reading culture.

Our newer initiatives carry this kaupapa forward. Pōkai Tuhi supports Māori and Pasifika writers to strengthen their professional practice and confidence working in kura and schools, helping a wider range of voices and experiences reach young readers. In 2026 we led the first nationally coordinated Children's Book Week in Aotearoa for decades. Children, whānau, schools, libraries, bookshops, writers and illustrators came together to celebrate reading around Aotearoa. It was an invitation to make space for stories and to recognise that raising readers is something we do collectively.

David Hill has been part of New Zealand's reading life for longer than our own organisational history. His writing has reached generations of young people, while his generosity has encouraged writers and strengthened our literary community. In the pages that follow, Claire Mabey writes personally about that generosity before David Hill turns his attention to reading itself. Together, their contributions show how a reading culture is sustained: through powerful stories, generous relationships and the simple but consequential act of a book fitting in someone's hands.

As Chair, I am proud to introduce this pānui and the two remarkable writers whose words it brings together.

He whakaihiihi, he whakaohooho i te ao mārama!
Tihei mauri ora ki te ao pānui pukapuka![1]

Ngā mihi,

Dr Willow Sainsbury
Chair
Read NZ Te Pou Muramura

Introduction

Since I can remember, I wanted to be one of those people with their name on the spine of a book in somebody's home library: a writer. When I was little, I had my books all lined up on my shelves in my bedroom, and I'd sit on the end of my bed and look at them, one by one, and feel the shape of them in my mind. Each book had a different weight to them. *The Worst Witch* by Jill Murphy was a bubble, shimmering and bobbing on the breeze; *Leaf Magic* by Margaret Mahy, a tremble, a trick; *Anne of Green Gables* by L. M. Montgomery, a hand on my shoulder, twinkling eyes meeting mine. But *See Ya, Simon* was a heartbeat. No; a throb. I would look at its spine and feel a rush of emotion that was somehow both very painful and wonderfully

expansive. That writer, that man David Hill, had made a story so real and so solid that as I had taken it up, fed it into my person page by page, I knew I had grown up—or not up, but grown in and out and all ways.

A few years ago, I took Kate De Goldi to a school for a festival event I'd arranged. She came armed with a handful of books to show to the children, who were all grouped in their classes on the chilly floor of their gym. They were a restless lot: whispering, side-eyeing, shifting their legs around. Kate, in wizard fashion, whipped out a book and started to read. I knew what was coming—I'd seen the cover and felt immediately the weight, shape and feel of the novel that had changed the shape and feel of my young self. The action of that soccer game. Nathan's voice. The knowledge that Simon—the terrifically alive and vibrant and funny Simon—was going to die. The squirmy mass of kids fell under Kate and David's spell: spindly legs still, eyes fixed on that marvellous middle distance as David's words unspooled in their mind's eye. Such writing, I remember thinking. Such storytelling. How the hell does he do it?

When you're a new writer, it's ruinously tempting to look at a book that has changed you—that is

perfect in the sense that you didn't really notice the writing because you were so absorbed in the characters and what was happening to them—and feel put off. My early reverence for the books in my bookshelf was as fundamental as it was daunting. For many years I hid my writing, mostly from myself, as I struggled to reconcile my messy, tentative scribbles with those perfect books. Even when the nagging urge to write, and write furiously, overcame my fear, I needed cures for my anxiety, lots of them, and one came in the form of an essay David published in *The Spinoff* in 2020.[2]

There were many things in that essay that surprised and comforted me. That David Hill published his first novel later in life, like I would. That Simon was based on a real person. And that David had been given advice by Graeme Lay. 'You just chuck everything down, he said; worry about shape and focus later. Graeme, you'll never know how much that heartened me,' wrote David.

David Hill needed advice!

I chucked it all down. I finished the messy draft. I re-wrote it seven times. I worried about it. It got published and I still worried, was sick with worry, and the first review that came out was by the David Hill, author of the most perfect novel in the world

who had ever since continued to write novels with sentences so clear, with characters who were flawed, who had their feet on the ground, whose adventures were thrilling and expansive. This review was my first glimpse of David Hill the Generous and the Encouraging; the writer who would teach me that being a writer means much more than finishing and publishing things. It means working every single day, not just for your own improvement, but for the benefit of your entire community.

Over the past few years working at The Spinoff I have watched with a gathering awe and respect the way David works. His essays are frequent and beloved and anticipated; insightful, warm and ready with advice; and all written alongside his ongoing practice as a novelist. Generosity is rare, I think. True generosity at least. David Hill is often cited as one of the nicest men in Aotearoa literature and that is correct, but it is his generosity that matters most to me. You can see it in his books: the space he gives to mistakes and consequences, the architecture so sound you don't even consider the hours and hours of research that went into the plans. Real people walk in his pages.

There are more than 50 books out there with David Hill's name on the spine. That is testament

enough to an outstanding career. But what I treasure most are the cheery lines sent in emails to the 'young author'. To be young! To be an author in the eyes of the author! I hope you know how much you have heartened me, and all of us, David.

Claire Mabey
Author, founder of VERB Wellington and books editor at The Spinoff

All life long

Kia ora tātou. Thank you so much for coming.

I'd like to start with an anecdote. After all, most writers make their living from anecdotes, though we prefer to call them 'plots' or 'narratives'.

I was a high school English teacher for some fourteen years in Taranaki, Auckland and the UK. In each of those places, I watched teenagers sit in rapt silence, or rock with laughter, or eagerly point pages out to their friends, or try to hide their tears as they and I read, separately or together, and the pages built their effects.

One year, my Form 5—or Year 11—class included a boy I'll call Jarrod. Jarrod came from a dysfunctional home. Violence was his default setting, in class and elsewhere. On a good day, he

might yawn loudly and pointedly from his seat in the back row. On a bad day, and Jarrod had a lot of those, he was known to kick his chair over, swear at the teacher and storm from the room.

I was lucky. As an English teacher, I could tell stories to the class, and there were lessons when Jarrod would stay reasonably quiet, while I hoped that something might rub off on him. The class was studying Barry Hines' *A Kestrel for a Knave*, a poignant story about a boy from an industrial slum in Northern England who catches, tames and trains a wild falcon. The achievement gives him purpose, knowledge, hope and even love. Partway through the year, we were reading aloud the sections where the bond starts to build between boy and kestrel. The young protagonist, Billy, is glowing with happiness and a sense of accomplishment.

As we read, I'd occasionally glance towards Jarrod, to check he wasn't damaging any furniture or nearby pupils. But we were all becoming increasingly engrossed by the story. The class were silent and motionless, empathising with Billy, hoping for him. Their hearts were going out to him. So, it was some minutes before I looked in Jarrod's direction again. When I did, he was sitting quietly and listening. This feral sixteen-year-old, held in thrall by a story.

The book didn't lead to any movie-style breakthrough. At the end of the lesson, he shouldered out of the door as usual, leaving his chair lying on the floor. But I shan't forget that image of him transformed for a fleeting moment by words. I believe his heart had been touched, too. I think of that whenever anyone asks me, 'What's the use of books?'

* * *

I'm delighted to report that research supports reading's cardiac benefits. Google 'reading is good for your body', and you'll be given multiple reasons for opening a book. Reading for as little as six minutes a day lowers heart rate. It also reduces muscle tension and decreases stress levels by up to 68 per cent—I love those eerily precise statistics. It promotes better sleep and is linked to increased longevity, with studies indicating a two per cent lower mortality rate for regular book readers. And it strengthens brain connectivity. If only I'd known all this in boyhood, when one of my aunts found me immersed in a book and sighed before asking, 'Shouldn't you be out in the fresh air?' What a reply I could have given her!

Reading also helps with cognitive longevity and appears to reduce the risk of dementia. It leads to increased grey matter in the left temporal cortex of the brain—and I'm sure you all came along today already knowing that the left temporal cortex is the area associated with language comprehension, auditory processing, social cognition and, yes, the development of empathy.

Those of us over a certain age may remember an advertisement for Heineken beer, which claimed 'Heineken refreshes the parts other beers can't reach'. I believe the same is true of reading. It reaches, develops and strengthens parts and features of us in a way very few other activities do.

* * *

I also believe that the mental and emotional benefits of reading—reading by ourselves as well as being read to—are even more marked and important.

Reading offers the chance of quiet, long-term focus in a world of increasingly noisy, distracting, short-form media. Reading helps us develop empathy, not only for those who are alive now, but

also for those no longer with us. Books are a way we can communicate with, and try to comprehend, the dead.

And, of course, books help us communicate with those who are fictional, entirely imaginary! I'm sure we can all remember coming to regard some characters in books as acquaintances, as friends and sometimes as ourselves. I think this happened fleetingly for Jarrod with Billy and his falcon. And it happens to me any time I re-read Jane Austen. In an essay on Austen, E. M. Forster talked of the pleasure he felt whenever he brought one of her shy, proud characters to the centre of his mind. That 'hello again' feeling is one of the rewards I take away from re-opening her books.

Do I sound smug? Well, I'll change one letter and say that, to me, reading is about being *snug*. When I'm with a rewarding book, I feel enclosed, supported and secure, both physically and emotionally. I sit in a warm cone of silence. What I'm reading may challenge, or even distress me, but I'm safe and adventuring at the same time. On the best occasions, I'm taken deep into myself as well as into the pages.

I received a letter once from a girl aged ten or eleven, who'd read one of my books. She wrote,

'After finishing *See Ya, Simon*, I felt all kind and good.' How could I possibly forget that letter and its tribute to reading? It's enough reason to be an author.

Over a lot of years, I've scribbled down a lot of other authors' excellent words on reading—words far better than mine. Janet Frame wrote that reading great literature was 'like being in love. One walks on air.'[3] Franz Kafka talked of fiction being 'the axe that breaks the frozen sea within us'.[4] Douglas Adams had an intriguing metaphor: 'Books are sharks,' he said. 'Because sharks have been around for a very long time … the reason sharks are still in the ocean is that nothing is better at being a shark than a shark.'[5]

And I must mention an author felicitously called Shannon Reed—with two *e*'s. She was first motivated to try reading as a teenager because a local promotion meant that the more titles you worked through, the more free takeaways you got from Pizza Hut. She gives more reasons in her hugely engaging book *Why We Read*, with chapter headings such as, 'To break the rules', 'To feel less alone', 'To see ourselves across time', 'To be shocked', 'To save my life'[6]—the potency of that last one.

I'm aware as I say all this that I'm preaching today, not to the converted, but to the crusaders. You're here because you already believe in reading. You work on its behalf. But I want to mention these basics. You—we—are like any in-group. We can easily forget how alien, how forbidding reading can seem. One of the issues we face these days is how to inspire people to read. The phrase 'back to the basics' usually makes my shoulders slump. But reading does seem to be facing challenges, and it's always timely to remind ourselves of the bedrock reasons why we believe in books so very much.

I'd also like to mention the autonomy that reading brings. I find it puts me in a place that I've chosen, where I'm free from the demands of the outside world—at least temporarily. Curiously, at the same time as I'm claiming this autonomy, this independence, I'm surrendering myself to whatever it is I'm reading—to its intellectual stimulus, its emotional impact. This singular fusion of simultaneously distancing ourselves from the world and immersing ourselves in it, this balance of states, is something that reading and the other arts seem uniquely able to provide.

And of course there's another, physical satisfaction associated with books and reading. I have places

where I habitually read. The seat. The corner of the back concrete wall where the morning sun reaches. The particular table at the library—and how I resent it when someone else has dared to claim it. There are places in our house and elsewhere that fill me with anticipation and satisfaction whenever I see them, even if I'm not intending to read just then, because I know the pleasure I'll feel when I do sit down there.

* * *

Do any of the multifold benefits of reading also apply to writing?

Indeed, they do. For me, and I'm sure for many, many others, reading and writing are reciprocal activities. Reading of course informs my writing, and writing also informs my reading. When I'm writing, I often—too often—have the cadences of favourite authors in my head. There was a story I wrote rather a lot of years ago of which I felt quite proud. I showed it to a colleague. 'Good!' they said. 'So much like Maurice Gee.' It was said meaningfully as much as flatteringly, but I did a fair amount of rewriting.

Writing can boost self-understanding and a sense of clarity and balance. Some years ago, inspired by a column I thought particularly ill-informed, I began developing an idea for a junior novel into which I could build a character who was a conservative columnist. A carefully constructed character who would be presented as fractious and foolish. However, as I started working out the character's motives, background and values, I found myself becoming increasingly accepting of them, even sympathetic. 'Only connect!' E. M. Forster famously wrote in *Howard's End*.[7] Only understand, only build fellow feeling with others. It seems so clear that both reading and writing can do this.

Yet, strangely, we still have to defend reading. People say it's passive, solitary, antisocial even, and somehow unhealthy. In the words of my affectionate and well-meaning aunt, young people especially should be out in the fresh air, doing something active.

I hope I've already refuted this idea of reading being passive or unhealthy when I talked about its physical and mental benefits. Solitary and antisocial? Nonsense.

I'm part of a quartet of geriatric males who meet weekly for coffee. You can recognise us from 50

metres away by the rhythmic shaking of our heads as we discuss young people today. Some years back, my friend Rod found himself facing the unnatural fact that his adult son was dying. To try to comprehend this, he wrote a narrative of what turned out to be their last meeting. One Thursday, he handed each of us a couple of typed pages, saying, 'Guys, I wonder if you'd like to take this away and read it sometime.'

I did, and I remember—how could I not remember—the passage where, since his son was in too much pain to embrace, Rod leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. Being New Zealand males, we didn't say much about it the next time we met, but the emotional heft, the sense of Rod's reaching out to us … it remains one of the most communal moments that reading has ever brought me.

I remember how not long after Beth and I were married, one of our jauntier friends dropped in and, seeing her reading, said, 'Got your nose stuck in a book again, I see.' I instantly thought 'yes, and aren't I lucky!' because it confirmed that I had a partner who would stay interested, interesting, alert and responsive—a partner with whom I could share so much, both because of who she was

and because of her joy in reading. Reading as an antisocial activity? Come on …

It's curious, though, that 'nose stuck in a book' concern. I wonder if it reflects a sort of Pākehā settler mentality from a time when people had to be up and doing to survive, when sitting and reading bespoke laziness or shiftlessness. Or perhaps it's a strange side effect of Kiwi egalitarianism, where literature is somehow seen as the preserve of leisured classes and therefore viewed with suspicion. But I'm so grateful that Beth and I were both encouraged by our emphatically working-class parents to read.

* * *

My father spent most evenings working through the *Napier Daily Telegraph*, a substantial broadsheet that landed on our front veranda with a *thwack* at 4 p.m., Monday to Saturday. He would sit at one end of our kitchen-cum-dining-room table and work his way from the packed classified ads of the front page to whatever was on the back of a small city paper in the 1940s and 50s.

He would read bits aloud to my mother, who sat at the other end of the table: sentences about the

National Government, accompanied by snorts of derision on his part, and accounts of the Korean War, in which my mum's brother Lance was fighting.

My mother, meanwhile, was also reading. In her case, it was often a week's worth of copies of the British tabloid, the *Daily Mirror*. Every seven days, the yellow paper-bound volume arrived, two months out of date, by sea from England, from 'home' as my mother called the UK. It went first to my godmother, Cissie Meechan of the glorious Dundee accent, who would then pass it on to Mum. The *Daily Mirror* in those days had significant content. There was a columnist called Cassandra who wrote narratives of life in Northern England. In one of those bizarre shafts of memory from childhood, I know he used the words 'promulgate' and 'eschew'. I looked them up, and marvelled.

My parents must have read other books or magazines, at least I suppose they did, but what I remember is not so much the material, but the implication, the conviction that reading was worthwhile, that a wool-classer and a tobacco factory worker could profitably spend a whole evening doing so. There was financial stress for them; there was chronic ill-health in one case, yet

I sensed that reading gave them solace, gave them help in ways I could only partly comprehend then.

My mother would sometimes laugh out loud at a sentence, endangering the security of her ill-fitting dentures, and in turn, she would read something to my dad. Reading for them was sharing—it was not an isolated, antisocial activity, but a social one. I'm sure I absorbed that, too.

And naturally—so naturally that I hardly noticed—from early on I saw reading as an integral part of family life. I sat and read throughout those evenings as well, on the scruffy old sofa near that kitchen table, or sprawled across the bed in my room.

What was I reading then? I can't recall the earliest titles. But they were nearly all stories set in England, or occasionally in its more interesting colonies, like Canada or Australia. For Christmas and birthdays, my parents and godparents gave me books, usually anthologies of English public school stories, with covers of smiling chaps in cricket whites, or wearing furs and smiling even more cheerily as they drove sleds across the Yukon. I still have *The Boys' Bumper Annual for 1951*, inscribed 'To David, from Mr and Mrs Meechan' (my godparents). I was nine, and I read like a drain.

My parents also bought me a subscription to

The Champion, a weekly British comic where the stories were columns of closely packed print. Later, there was *The Scout*, another UK weekly, where I swallowed descriptions of international scout jamborees, learned how to tie a clove hitch, was confused but intrigued by a long harangue against 'beastliness', something I didn't understand at all, except that it apparently made you walk with hunched shoulders and your hands in pockets.

So yes, I seem to have been reading all life long, and I'll always be grateful to my parents for their example and acceptance. I hope children still get such loving support in seventy-plus years' time.

* * *

Reading has its pains as well as its pleasures. For me, they include that wrench of closing a book and having to return to what may seem to be the drab, ordinary world. Rudyard Kipling appeared to find another downside when he fulminated 'Books used intemperately to excess become most dangerous drugs'.[8] You'll be relieved to know that Kipling was writing specifically of *Deadwood Dick* or *The Terror of Bloody Gulch*.

But the negatives are surely greater for those who can't or won't read. Does it sound too arrogant to say that I see them almost as afflicted? Those of us who do read know what dimensions they're missing. When I was a high school teacher, I would sometimes come up against teenagers who didn't read. Predictably, depressingly often, they were boys, for whom reading wasn't seen as manly, as staunch.

Are we getting more of those kids—and adults? Is it more of a challenge in 2026 to ensure that New Zealanders read? Well, yes—obviously.

Electronically, recreationally and socially, people live more fragmented lives. T. S. Eliot wrote in 1944 about humanity being 'distracted from distraction by distraction'[9] and his line is prescient when applied to our present. Reading can be easily shunted into a small room at the end of a corridor, while noise and superficiality take up more and more space.

I don't want to be the resident grumpy old fart, but we have something of a fight on our hands to help others find their ways to the joys and benefits of deep, sustained reading. I thank Read NZ Te Pou Muramura, I thank the librarians and teachers and publishers and bookshops and other authors, and I thank *you* for your work in the cause.

I've heard people refer to their favourite books

as 'escapes'. The fellow reader who has been consuming pages alongside me for over sixty years now calls them 'comfort blankets', which I think is an excellent image. I sometimes use the term 'oases'—quiet places in a shrill world, places where you restock, refresh and then go forth again. We need to keep emphasising the ways reading helps us face the world, comprehend and deal with it, not flee from it.

Reading from screens or reading from pages? I don't want to judge. I'm no expert. Research has indicated that reading from screens can be a less immersive, more easily distractable process than reading from the printed page, but I acknowledge its benefits for some. Those of us steeped in hard copy know the immense pleasures it gives—the heft of the book, the smell of the paper, the previous library borrower's parking ticket left between the pages. But I want to give a nod to audiobooks. They've helped keep reading a pleasure for several friends of mine whose eyes are no longer as hawk-like as they were 65 years ago.

* * *

On school visits, I occasionally encounter boys who say 'nah, I'm not into reading'. A couple of times I've been guilty of replying 'I hope you get well soon'. But now I use a sneakier technique. I say something along the lines of 'yeah, reading's pretty hard, eh? Not everyone can handle it. You've gotta have guts to keep going.' If I'm lucky, I'll see the boy's eyes narrowing into a glare, and I hope I hear an interior voice saying 'I'll show this old … person! I'm gonna—I'm gonna read a book!'

Probably I'm deluding myself. But I've also been known to tell teenage boys that joining a book group or a writing group at school is a good way to meet classy girls. There's no approach too low for me to stoop to, if it may encourage young males into words.

I'm aware that some boys put reading on hold during adolescence, when hormones and other distractions swarm to the forefront of their minds. I understand that many of them return to printed or screen pages when they're older. But I still lament the years they miss out on. Some, of course, don't come back.

I've ranted on several occasions about the time I heard an All Black being interviewed on radio. He was asked what he planned to do during the summer holidays. Did he have any books lined

up for the beach? He sneered—I'm sure it was a sneer—something about 'having better things to do'. I remember shouting at the radio. I thought, 'You're in a position where you can influence, inspire so many young guys, and you come out with irresponsible idiocy like that.'

I have to tell you that the following season, the same non-reading player was dropped from the All Blacks, which proves three things: (a) there is a God, (b) she supports your local library and (c) we still face the challenge of voices like that. We have to keep fighting the good fight.

* * *

As I've said, I read omnivorously when I was a boy. And yes, reading gave me words and a growing sense of their power. Those words buttressed me against an outside world in which I was inclined to feel inept, inadequate. I kept my place in our neighbourhood conclave of kids by telling anecdotes and making jokes. My sportier, physically more competent friends seemed willing, in a puzzled sort of way, to grant me a licence, a position in our group because of the ways I could use words.

Later, at university, what I can best describe as cities of books began to spread ahead of me, and I still recall the flame of excitement when I thought as I walked up Salamanca Road in Wellington one day 'I can go on reading for ever!' I know I stopped and stood grinning foolishly at the sheer bliss of the vision.

Ever since then, books have strengthened me in difficult times—my mother's protracted dying, career difficulties and periods of low self-esteem, the growing awareness of mortality and the dwindling powers that accompany growing old. I don't 'escape' into reading at these times. I find myself gaining perspective and companionship from the activity. Books continue to strengthen and console me, and I feel confident that they always will.

I suspect my reading-advocate parents may have been in the minority as far as their families were concerned. I know that some of my uncles as well as my aunts had their doubts about my verbal skills. 'Oh, David can talk his way out of anything,' I overheard one of them say when I was ten or so. It wasn't meant as a compliment, but I take it as one now. Words have helped me not just understand issues but resolve them.

* * *

A particular benefit that reading brings to young people is the sense of discovery, of wonder. I've been lucky enough to see this happen on my Read NZ Writers in Schools visits.

Of course *all* readers can feel that sense at the ways Whiti Hereaka, Lani Wendt Young and Patricia Grace have mythologised landscapes; at how Eleanor Catton turned our West Coast into an epic setting; at Catherine Chidgey, Owen Marshall and Ingrid Horrocks in their probing stories, all revealing the universal within individual lives; at the drama and emotional sweep of Elizabeth Knox's visionary imagery in her *Night, Ma* memoir; at Bill Manhire, Elizabeth Smither and Tayi Tibble performing alchemy with poetry; or at Vincent O'Malley's and Richard Shaw's revelations of history.

But I believe that, for young readers, books and stories and poems can provide their first meetings with something almost transcendental. These are readers for whom so much is still fresh and unrealised, for whom reading and being read to can be an initiation into the rich world of imagination. I think of Margaret Mahy's *A Lion in the Meadow*,

Joy Cowley's *Mrs Wishy-Washy*, Gavin Bishop's emblematic animals, young Claire Mabey's speculative fiction.

* * *

What has reading other Aotearoa authors given *me*? It has brought me an awareness, a reassurance that I live and work in a country with its own, specific history, attitudes, tones, nuances, relationships, language. This is something we perhaps realise most when we're overseas. I strengthen my sense of identity by reading our writers.

From the children's authors I've mentioned, and others—Pippa Werry, Steph Matuku, Jack Lasenby, Fleur Beale for example—I also get that sense of comradeship, of enrichment, a reassurance that there are so many stories to be found in our end-of-the-world culture. I also get many examples of how to do it better.

From New Zealand authors in general, I get moments that enter and extend my life. Apirana Taylor's freezing worker orating on a marae; Emily Perkins' refined and sometimes ruthless women; Steve Braunias on the seamy, steamy sides of our

semi-underworld; Dominic Hoey's unflinchingly, splendidly subversive narratives of society's fringes; the diametrically different fiction of my fellow Taranakians Jacqueline Bublitz and Mikaela Nyman, which whips you from Brooklyn to Reykjavík.

It's vital that our schools keep students aware of our own writers. I went through five years of high school and four years of university knowing only of Katherine Mansfield and some bloke up in Auckland called Sargeson. Vital also that Read NZ, Creative New Zealand and our publishers receive support. Creative NZ's funding always seems precarious, and I note also the impoverishment of Radio New Zealand, which was once a major outlet for our fiction. We seem to have a political climate that sometimes displays almost an indifference towards the arts, including literature, writers and readers.

* * *

I'm not going to talk about *what* anyone should read. I think that issue is neatly covered by a comment from Richard McKenna, who said he thought any

book is good for a child: 'Any book that helps him to form a habit of reading, that helps him to make reading one of his deep and continuing needs, is good for him.'[10]

Maurice Gee went straight from Zane Grey to Charles Dickens. I moved from *The Champion* to Biggles to the Saint. Those over an uncertain age may remember Leslie Charteris' suave, cocktail-imbibing crime fighter Simon Templar, initials S. T., hence the Saint. He was a sort of lower-case James Bond, who began each day by drawing in the clean, crisp, carcinogenic smoke of a Gauloises cigarette, then despatching four villainous swine before elevenses. I swallowed him in great draughts. In the process, I also absorbed all sorts of literary conventions and writing tricks.

Nor am I going to talk about reading for moral instruction. It is something that authors of children's and YA books need to bear in mind, because we're often critiqued not only in terms of literary skills, but also for the perceived moral content of our work. I've been accused of 'corrupting our young people', 'stealing their childhood', even 'pushing woke agendas'! It comes with the territory. I note that I've never received such complaints from my target audience; they've all been from adults. And

indeed, I'd far sooner parents be involved in what their children are reading than uninterested.

However, *should* we read—and write—for moral instruction? Well, the moment young people sense they're being preached to, their eyes glaze over. They all seem to have the built-in bullshit detector that Ernest Hemingway claimed authors need. Assimilating moral concepts and precepts by osmosis as you read—fine. But if I felt my writing should push such precepts, I'd have become a social influencer. And can you imagine anything more grotesque than me as a social influencer?

* * *

Should we aim to act as mentors, as advocates for reading? I suggest we're already doing so, just by who and what we are. We indicate through our own satisfaction, our discourse, our habits and our health that reading is a Good Thing. In other words, we're taking the classic rule of writing—show, don't tell—and applying it to reading.

For what it's worth, I also give book vouchers to my grandsons. In my conversation, I'm constantly saying 'I read this great account of … there's this

brilliant story about …' I'm vocal in my approval of book groups for blokes and book groups in general. I've written to the media and to our local council, defending and praising librarians, and asking that our council never, ever cuts library hours. I make sure I buy at least one title a month from New Plymouth's best, privately owned bookshop. I talk with my Thursday geriatrics' coffee quartet about reading and rugby in the same half hour. You'll have your own, better approaches to fighting the good fight.

* * *

What does reading mean for me now, when I'm at the age where checkout operators no longer ask to see my Gold Card?

It means peace with myself and with the world. At the same time, it means stimulus, an awakening and invigoration that becomes more vital as time passes. It means comprehension and sympathy, which are so important to cultivate in older age.

It means coherence in a world that often seems incoherent. It means satisfaction—I've been fortunate enough to spend almost half a century

working with words, and I'm so pleased, so privileged to have done so. I think of that nine-year-old boy sprawled with a book across his bed at 37 Napier Terrace, Napier, and I think, 'We're still going, mate.'

* * *

One of my friends regularly asks, 'What are you reading at the moment?' He assumes that I *am* reading and will continue to do so. I have the same assumption. I also confess to an intermittent fantasy where a voice from on high announces 'Your time is up, David,' and I reply, 'Oh, can I just finish this chapter?'

I have an appallingly anally retentive structure for reading. Most of my writing is now done in the mornings only. If I do pick up a book during that time, it's nearly always one where images—photographs, painting, diagrams—are the dominant feature. In the early afternoons, I mostly read non-fiction. That includes a lot of science, at least 30 per cent of which I understand. (This pānui, incidentally, has been delivered by a committee member of the New Plymouth

Astronomical Society, and I can tell you that I am the nation's greatest bore on the subject of globular star clusters.)

Then from late afternoon, I sprawl with fiction. I do mean *sprawl*. My body relaxes; my limbs extend. I tend to discover an author and read everything I can by them. This year, it's been Anne Enright, to whom I've come unforgivably late, and Willy Vlautin, who writes lean, compassionate novels of marginalised people in the American Midwest. I learn something from every author. I talk out loud to them all.

* * *

I've loaded this lecture up with anecdotes. I believe such distilled narratives are the scaffolding on which we build so much of our social and private discourse, our lives and identities. Our wellbeing, even.

I'll end with yet another, very brief one. Virginia Woolf, in her essay 'How should one read a book?', describes Saint Peter waiting with—I imagine—his clipboard, outside the pearly gates, checking to see who will be rewarded and allowed in. A group of

arrivals appear, with books under their arms. As the saint is about to check their eligibility on that clipboard, God taps him on the shoulder and says, 'Look, these need no reward. We have nothing to give them. They have loved reading.'[11]

But I hope all of you who've been kind enough to come along this evening continue to enjoy *your* reward. The reward of that great pleasure, that great virtue, that joyous pulse in *my* life called reading. I hope you enjoy it all life long.

Thank you, and kia kaha.

Endnotes

1 The last two lines of Read NZ Te Pou Muramura karakia, written by Dr Darryn Joseph.

2 David Hill, 'David Hill on the story that started it all', *The Spinoff*, 25 October 2020, https://thespinoff.co.nz/books/25-10-2020/david-hill-on-the-story-that-started-it-all

3 Janet Frame, *An Angel at My Table: An Autobiography, Volume Two* (Hutchinson, 1984), 153.

4 Franz Kafka, Letter to Oskar Pollak, 27 January 1904, in *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Schocken Books, 1977).

5 'Douglas Adams made me a writer: Neil Gaiman salutes his friend and inspiration', *The Guardian*, 4 March 2015.

6 Shannon Reed, *Why We Read: On Bookworms, Libraries, and Just One More Page Before Lights Out* (Hanover Square Press, 2024).

7 E. M. Forster, *Howard's End* (1910; Project Gutenberg, 2001), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2946/2946-h/2946-h.htm

8 Rudyard Kipling, 'The Uses of Reading', speech to the Literary Society, Wellington College, Berkshire, 25 May 1912, in *A Book of Words: Selections from*

Speeches and Addresses Delivered between 1906 and 1927 (London: Macmillan, 1928).

9 T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', in *Four Quartets* (Faber and Faber, 1974), 17.

10 Richard McKenna, *New Eyes for Old: Nonfiction Writings* (John F. Clare, 1972), 26.

11 Virginia Woolf, 'How should one read a book?', in *The Common Reader, Second Series* (The Hogarth Press, 1953), 258–270.

Acknowledgements

David Hill

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Read NZ Te Pou Muramura

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