



Judges' Commentaries on Finalists and Winners

7 August 2019

Opening remarks by convenor of judges Crissi Blair

E te whānau, nau mai, haere mai ki tēnei whakanuitanga ki ngā pukapuka tamariki rangatira o te tau.

Welcome to you all, it is such a thrill to be here in this room full of people from all aspects of the world of publishing for children and young adults, from those who write and illustrate, to the publishers, the booksellers, promoters, librarians, and of course the readers.

It has been a remarkable experience to be a judge this year for these New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults. It is a team effort and it has been a privilege to get to know and work together with the judging panel.

Firstly, thanks to Moana Munro, convenor of Te Kura Pounamu Award, and her fellow judges, Anahera Morehu and Jacqueline Joyce Snee.

And thanks to my fellow judges:

- Tania Roxborough for sharing her experience as a writer, and a teacher and her capacity with te reo Māori;
- Raymond Huber for his editorial expertise, skills as a writer, and always being on the side of the readers;
- Simie Simpson for her wisdom and perspective gained from years in the publishing world and as a librarian;
- And to poet, editor and commentator Jane Arthur for her fresh take and ability to capture the essence of a book.

We also offer our appreciation to Joy Sellen, awards administrator, for her guidance through each step in the judging process, and Gemma Finlay for her super-smart publicity skills.

Thanks too, to all those who have promoted these awards, shared through your workplaces, social networks, in the media, bookshops, libraries and schools, and of course thanks most of all to the readers!

The voice of the readership of these awards was very important to us, and it was a privilege and pleasure to share the submissions with children and young adults, to be informed about their youthful responses to the books. Thanks to those schools who assisted with this process. I personally found it added extra depth to my consideration of each title as I shared them with the students at my own school. They also, along with hundreds of thousands of others, took part in the Hell Pizza Reading Challenge, prompting students to embark on some extreme reading to earn their pizza wheels – 29 so far for my top reader!

There were 164 books submitted this year, with a satisfying range in each category. They came from mainstream, indie and self-publishers, all of whom are represented in our finalists. From the best-known of our experienced authors and illustrators, to those first-timers in our Best First Book category – thank you for your creativity, your determination, your craft. We loved your books and can't wait to present these awards.

Best First Book Award

Speech by Jane Arthur

More than 30 books were eligible to be considered for this award, and competition was fierce to make the shortlist. Many of these first-time writers and illustrators are producing work that is indistinguishable in quality from those who have been published many times. This shows us that publishers are rightfully willing to foster new talent, and that the future of children's books is in great hands.

It was tricky to narrow down the list to only five finalists, but these made the cut due to how each of them go straight to the heart of what being a young person is about – in very different ways.

Sarah Pepperle's writing in ***Art-tastic*** is highly entertaining and equally informative – a rare combo.

Bullseye Bella is the work of a writer skilled at creating vivid characters and an oddball yet realistic plot.

Children of the Furnace is a poetic and tense novel in part about rebuilding the world post-climate change disaster.

Slice of Heaven is a slice of reality, infused with humour and affection, about life for South Auckland teens.

And Miriama Kamo's writing in ***The Stolen Stars of Matariki*** shows a talented, evocative storyteller, unafraid of using rich vocabulary for younger readers.

We're looking forward to discovering what these finalists do next.

Citation for winner: *Art-tastic*

Even in a less visually stunning setting, the writing here would shine. The author has an out-of-this-world talent for presenting information – both factual and abstract – in a digestible, hilarious, approachable way. She’s ticking all the boxes for non-fiction writing, and breaking all the rules at the same time – there’s a rare instinct on show here for how children work. This writing is addictive and we can’t wait to read more work from this highly talented writer.

Picture Book Award

Speech by Simie Simpson

A great picture book needs to defy the laws of time and space. It requires all the elements you would find in the best dramatic novel and it needs to do this with a light hand, a well-paced story arc and a challenging word limit. It also needs illustrations that respond to the text. The illustration must have a life of its own, expanding on the story and drawing you in in equal measure. The best picture books do all of this seamlessly.

We were lucky enough to read many amazing picture books this year. These books covered a range of issues and reflected the diversity that makes up our country. Their fully formed characters took us on journeys and reflected on both the joys and anxieties of childhood. However, the finalists’ books were the ones that defied gravity. They were both simple and sophisticated in their message and illustration. They had some serious child appeal and yet they delighted us as adults.

Things in the Sea Are Touching Me deals with the fear of the unknown and yet the enveloping warmth of family make it ultimately a reassuring read.

The Bomb was another summery story that has high drama and humour in equal measure. The judges loved the degree of child agency combined with the safe adult presence.

Mini Whinny is pitch perfect for its age group, joyous and mischievous. It teaches us that things really are better shared and even a slightly eaten birthday cake is a good birthday cake.

Puffin the Architect is both nostalgic and full of technical details. It is a book about home with oodles of heart, humour and exceptional illustrations.

Who Stole the Rainbow is a fluorescent, detective delight that has a firmly contemporary illustrative style and is a rare mix of book that manages to be educational and whimsical at the same time.

Citation for winner: *The Bomb*

When the judges were discussing this book the energy in the room was palpable, there was much waving of hands and laughter. We were all equally captivated by the spell this book had cast on us: it gave us goosebumps. Every reread had us seeing something different in the illustrations and there was still anticipation and concern for the protagonist even when we knew the outcome. The joyful rhythm and perfect pacing of the text combined with risk taking design and movement took this book to the next level. This book is magic and in short it is most definitely THE BOMB.

Wright Family Foundation Esther Glen Award for Junior Fiction

Speech by Crissi Blair

Books in this Junior Fiction category must earn their keep. From the youngest independent readers to tweens, we rely on these books to forge a lifelong love of reading. The rich range of stories submitted in this category are guaranteed to captivate with their vivid, realistic characters. The tantalising storylines invite the readers on a journey to the past, present or our possible future. They explore rich emotional and physical landscapes.

I had the pleasure of sharing these books with students at my intermediate school library, and hearing their varied responses to the fun, the thrills, the adventure and the challenges they encountered in the diverse range of books submitted in this category.

Our finalists have each taken us on a journey:

- into the past through the eyes of a telegram girl during World War 1, in *The Telegram*, with its clean, clear and well-edited writing;
- into a dramatic fast-paced and authentic New Zealand adventure in *Search for a Kiwi Killer*.
- a magical, rattling-good tale in *Whetū Toa and the Magician*.
- to a frightening future with two remarkable heroes in the beautifully written – *The Dog Runner*;
- and take an exhilarating journey through uncharted territory with the brave youngsters of *The Mapmakers' Race*, with its delicate illustrations.

These finalist books enrich the lives and expand the horizons of those who read them and any of these would make a marvellous read-aloud as well as captivating individual readers, and you are all to be congratulated on the impact you now have on your youthful readership.

Citation for winner: *The Dog Runner*

This enthralling eco-drama transports us to a future without grasses, leaving the population starving and desperate. Siblings, Ella and Emery, flee the crumbling city with their magnificent doggos, in the hope of reaching their destination where family and indigenous knowledge are the key to a hopeful future. The unique voice and characterisation ensure the reader is emotionally invested, debating alternatives to the sometimes-violent measures taken to ensure survival. The action-packed storyline and convincing scenario will have you cheering on our young heroes and their mission.

Young Adult Fiction Award

Speech by Tania Roxborough

Teenagers are awesome. And scary. And very, very hard to please. To capture this special audience and hold their attention requires the talent of a master magician, the wisdom of Solomon, and the humour of Taika Waititi. They will throw their hearts and minds behind a text which inspires and entertains but just as quickly spurn a book if they detect even a whiff of insincere and didactic preaching. Thankfully, our NZ writers for young adults are producing works which are the former so our rangatahi benefit from the exceptional quality of authors writing for them. These shortlisted titles take the quality to next level genius.

The characters that people the stories of these shortlisted titles are the kind you want to have at your side, fighting for you, encouraging you, challenging you to remain steadfast, hold onto what matters most, or showing you better ways of being. With superb writing, realistic interactions, insightful social commentary and satisfying dénouements, whether looking to the past, the present, or an imagined near future, each novel holds its own in this stunning field of finalists.

Ash Arising, a dark, political thriller, is a convincing and action-packed story which leans into using non-violent solutions for a possible almost future;

Children of the Furnace is exciting with credible and sympathetic characters who, though flawed, push on to make amends for their faults;

Invisibly Breathing explores authentic relationships and has writing that is intense and accessible;

Legacy taught us about a time in our history through a new lens. The writing is sparse yet the descriptions of time and place vivid and fascinating.

The Rift is brilliant and unputdownable; a pacey supernatural story with likeable protagonists.

These finalists are the very best – beautifully presented, well-polished, masterfully crafted. What a great range!

Citation for winner: *Legacy*

Legacy kept rising to the surface and we are unanimous in our appreciation for this book: Whiti's writing is assured, the story structure cleverly constructed (and a second reading rewards with clues hidden in plain sight). The hard and terrible truth of war is perfectly balanced with the hopes, dreams and antics of a young man who finds himself living in the world of his ancestor. Riki's voice is authentic as he navigates this paradox of going back into his past and there is much to learn about life as a WW1 Māori soldier but these gems of historical detail only enhance the adventures. The historical rendering is pitch perfect and this novel is definitely one of those that teens will love.

Elsie Locke Award for Non-Fiction

Speech by Raymond Huber

Great non-fiction creates a sense of wonder; it deepens our thinking; and sometimes it can inspire us to act. That's easy for me to say but it's a lot of work to achieve. Non-fiction authors and illustrators face many challenges: to be creative while staying true to the facts; to explain concepts without over-simplifying; and to select the juiciest facts, without overloading.

The finalists have done all these things, using their expertise in writing and illustration to make the facts 'sing'. They've also been blessed with the support of talented designers, editors, and other specialists.

The standard of entries was high this year and it is a real pleasure to read them. Shortlisting wasn't easy, and each judge had to let go of a much-loved book or two. The final five are a stunning bunch.

Backyard Beasts is perfectly pitched science writing, with rich illustrations that make even the maggots look elegant.

Go Girl skillfully captures the inspiring moments in a life without shying away from the hard bits; and has a wealth of affectionate portraits.

Art-tastic connects us with art through its playful writing and innovative design; making entertainment and education one and the same.

Ko Mauao te Maunga has expressive illustrations, bilingual text, and detailed research, combining to reveal the truth in the myth.

Whose Home is This? shows the importance of habitat, with word, image and design; crystallizing into a gem for young children.

All of these books connect us with the living planet and the human spirit. And in doing so, they enlarge our minds and our hearts. Thank you, authors and illustrators.

Citation for winner: *Art-tastic*

This is a rare book that makes art accessible and fun for young readers and shows how it can touch all aspects of our lives. The book has so many wonderful design features: generous format and layout, bold images, and funky graphics. And the writing is outstanding: instantly engaging, slyly educational, and peppered with a sense of humour that sometimes (to quote one of the judges) “just goes full dork”.

It’s a wonderful hands-on book which will inspire self-expression for all ages.

Art-tastic is a work of art.

Russell Clark Award for Illustration

Speech by Jane Arthur

When it’s done well, children’s book illustration is a high form of art – it combines technique, taste and vision with the ability to tell a story, and not all artists can do that. We were pleased to see that there are many illustrators working in this country who can, though.

We were also heartened by the number of entries in this category – it showed that many publishers are standing behind their illustrators, recognising the talent, time and expertise required to illustrate books for children. We would encourage even more entries in future years.

When it came to narrowing down the entries, the devil was in the detail. The books we chose to shortlist were those that rewarded multiple viewings, where layers of meaning and detail were revealed time and time again – even if the artwork gave the appearance of simplicity. Everything included and everything left out has been chosen with the greatest of care.

The Bomb is a humorous, lively feast of colour and empathy.

Cook's Cook incorporates imagery from around the Pacific in a work rich with symbolism and skill.

Helen and the Go-Go Ninjas is visually dramatic, with incredible energy, emotion and drive.

Oink bursts with masterly drawn characters and subtle, funny pacing.

Puffin the Architect combines cute animal characters, architecture and a nod to Renaissance composition.

At first glance, the finalists in this category could hardly be less alike. But what they have in common is a respect for the visual literacy of young people – that they're capable of discovering hidden details and reading between pictorial lines to pick up narrative and symbolism. Our finalists didn't dumb anything down. On an artistic level, these five illustrators have mastered their media, with each decision of placement, pacing, line, characterisation, emotion, colour and light working perfectly together. Thank you to the finalists for their care and hard work.

Citation for winner: *Puffin the Architect*

"It glows!" we judges said in unison, when discussing the remarkable rendering of light in ***Puffin the Architect***. These illustrations show a deep understanding of a number of crucial elements: scale and perspective, colour and characterisation, the print process, and the audience. We couldn't quite work out how to explain why or how the art here manages to be both classic and modern at the same time, but that's what it is. Kimberly Andrews is an early-career treasure trove of talent, and New Zealand children are lucky to have the rest of her career to look forward to.

Wright Family Foundation Te Kura Pounamu Award

Speech by Moana Munro

E āku iti, e āku rahi, rau rangatira mā, ki ngā manukura Ko te Whānau Wright, ki ngā manutaki mo te hauora o te reo Māori, Te Rōpū Whakahau rāuā ko LIANZA tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.

Wright Family Foundation Te Kura Pounamu Awards for Te Reo Māori 2019, Tohaina ō painga ki te ao: sharing your gifts with the world.

The best storytellers know that words carve memories, steeped in Te Reo, whakapapa and mātauranga, these stories enthral audiences at home, in schools, on the marae, in fact everywhere.

In ***Te Haka a Tānerore***, the strength and art form of haka history is captured well in both the use of colour and te reo Māori. The reo encapsulates the need to help youthful ideas come to fruition as well as expanding upon their current level of te reo Māori.

Te hinga ake a Māui i te ika whenua plunges knowingly into te reo Māori, building connections of traditional and modern language that are sustained through the retelling of this well-loved purākau of whakapapa, mātauranga and that Fish.

Ngā Whetū Matariki i whānakotia uplifts the essences of Te Reo. This pakiwaitara gently builds language confidence in storytelling, creating new traditions which shimmer brightly like those amazing stars of Matariki.

These books express all those bi-cultural sentiments of sharing stories rich in inspiration and joy, they welcome curiosity and a special kind of connection to our homeland Aotearoa New Zealand. Te reo Māori, he kupu tuku iho, ko te reo Māori te tatau o te Ao, nō reira tēnā koutou katoa.

Citation for winner: *Te Haka a Tānerore*

E tu i te tū a Tānerore, E haka i te haka a Tānerore, Kua tu te haka a Tānerore

Māori legend tells us that the sun god Tamanuiterā (Rā) had two wives: Hine Takurua and Hine Raumati. Rā and Hine Raumati had a son named Tānerore, who became the atua of haka. ***Te Haka a Tānerore*** tells the story of the origins of haka, capturing the mauri (essence) with Te Reo, clearly narrated within each page kia mau te ihi, te wehi, te wana. It enhances readers' understanding of Māori performing arts, and its close connection to identity and heritage is illustrated with exceptional artwork.

Margaret Mahy Book of the Year Award

Speech by Crissi Blair

And so, we come to the final award of the evening, the supreme award, the Margaret Mahy Book of the Year.

I've been thinking about Margaret and what she would have considered important in this top-of-the-heap book. She would have talked about the importance of rich language, about an element of cleverness that young people would appreciate. She would have urged us not to underestimate children and teenagers and what they understand, value and recognise in the books they read.

Margaret once said that "Nobody reads quite the same book because everyone receives it differently according to their age and experience and a whole lot of other things". She talked about the book being not quite complete until it was in the hands of the reader so they could add their own perspective to their reading experience.

All our finalists, but especially the winners in each of the categories here tonight, have brought, and will continue to bring, a wealth of character and experience of the world as it is, or of the imagination.

The Bomb dives into the Kiwi summer and an individual's identity; ***The Dog Runner*** has us running for our lives with those magnificent doggos; we see into the Māori soldiers' experience in ***Legacy***; discover the heritage of a mighty haka in ***Te Haka a Tānerore***; splash out with our artistic selves in ***Art-tastic***; and design the perfectly detailed home in ***Puffin the Architect***.

These books will all bring delight, imagination, knowledge and thrills to our young readers.

I am delighted to announce, and hope that Margaret would approve of our choice – the winner of the New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults' Margaret Mahy Book of the Year 2019 is ***The Bomb***, written by Sacha Cotter, illustrated by Josh Morgan, and published by Huia Publishers.

Citation for Margaret Mahy Book of the Year: *The Bomb*

No matter who we are or where we're from, we can all see ourselves reflected in this timeless and sparkling story of courage and transformation. Joy and humour permeate the story and illustrations of ***The Bomb***, and we're rewarded with each encounter – we see a new layer, another detail is revealed, fresh energy bubbles up. The rhythm and journey towards expectation, the interactivity as your perspective changes; the shaping of the central character and his omnipresent supportive Nan, packaged together with language that naturally incorporates te reo, and the illustrations which celebrate our multicultural community.

Together they make this the very worthy winner of the Margaret Mahy Book of the Year Award.
