



# Judges' Commentaries on Finalists and Winners

12 August 2020

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**Ko te kakano o te wānanga ka whakatō ki te whenua haumako o te tangata. Ka tupu mā te wai o te kukune, ka hihiri, ka hinengaro, ka manako, ka ngākau aroha. Ka puāwai, hei hua mō te ao!**

*The seed of knowledge is sown to the fertile earth of a person. It grows with sustenance gained from the water of conception to become thought, to grow into consciousness, to desire, to empathy. It then blooms to yield the fruit of knowledge for all!*

This beautiful whakatauaikī was specially conceived for the New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults and gifted to us this year by its creator Ruki Tobin, Poutiaki Rauemi with the National Library's Services to Schools. It was narrated at the start of the 2020 virtual awards presentation by Jason Te Patu. In presenting the whakatauaikī to the New Zealand Book Awards Trust, Ruki provided this background:

“The symbolic idea of a seed being sown in the earth, is like an idea, a concept, a thought from an author being sown into the mind of a reader. That seed grows with the reader and develops and shapes their thinking. It gives them information, and with their experiences they gain the power to share that knowledge to another and continue that link from author to reader to the next generation. It highlights the power of knowledge and its use. In my mind, I felt that this encapsulated the kaupapa of the awards.”

Kia ora Ruki!

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## **Opening remarks by convenor of judges Jane Arthur**

Tēnā koutou!

The awards ceremony looks a little different this year, as do many other parts of our lives. We're lucky to have the technology that allows for mass connection these days.

I'm talking about books.

Books and stories have never lost their importance. I'd argue they're proving their worth more and more all the time – allowing us to affirm our identities through words, to learn about others; to discover histories and galaxies, mythologies and alternate realities; to lose time and grow wonder; to feel deeply and to laugh.

The judging process for this year's New Zealand Book Awards for Children and Young Adults has involved months of reading, piles of books, and a fantastic behind-the-scenes team.

Thanks to the other judges, including the skilled Te Kura Pounamu team, Moana Munro, Celia Joe-Olsen and Francis Leaf. Thanks for the energy, expertise and humour of the members of the English language category judging panel, of which I was convenor: librarian Alan Dingley; bookseller and editor, Briar Lawry; writer and reviewer, Steph Matuku; and bookseller, Charlotte McKay.

Thanks to the awards administrator Joy Sellen for navigating us through the process and publicist Gemma Finlay for helping spread the word about these excellent books.

There were 178 entries in this year's awards. The finalists represent the best of a very strong bunch, and many rigorous and impassioned discussions were had during the selection process. We judges took the task very seriously and are delighted we have the chance to help promote these very fine finalist books.

Thanks and congratulations to the authors, illustrators, translators, editors, designers, publishers – to everyone involved in making these books. You made our job a pleasure.

Mauri ora!

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## **Best First Book Award**

### **Speech by Alan Dingley**

This year's finalists for the Best First Book Award perfectly showcase the strength of New Zealand's emerging talent, with four of the first-time authors or illustrators also finalists in the main categories. From 36 eligible entries we selected a shortlist that is bursting with originality, fun, and engaging characters, and has something for everyone. Illustration, multi-media formats and some uniquely Aotearoa characters will capture the imaginations of young readers.

The finalists have belied their publishing infancy by producing vibrant, slick, thoroughly enjoyable books that will be devoured by an extremely broad audience. If these first offerings are any indication of what these authors and illustrators have stashed away, then New Zealand is in for some delicious samples to come!

**#Tumeke!** – A humble Community noticeboard gives life to an amazing, immensely recognizable New Zealand melting pot, with humour that hits on a variety of levels.

**Lizard's Tale** – An action-packed novel that rollicks through World War 2 Singapore, vividly reimagining the wartime genre

**Santa's Worst Christmas** – Santa battles across the pre-Xmas blues, and as it should be, kiwi kids save Christmas.

***The Smelly Giant*** – A kindly giant with smelly feet wins over his village, and the emotional layered illustrations win the reader over.

***The Day the Plants fought back*** – A great read-aloud with quality rhyming, and a reminder ... if you don't look after your plants, they will fight back!!

There are tales told, lessons learned, and hearts won from the freshly-minted authors and illustrators in this fantastic category.

### **Citation for winner:**

#### ***#Tumeke!***

Written by Michael Petherick

Published by Annual Ink/Massey University Press

*#Tumeke!* is every bit as diverse as the Newtown community, which we see revealed piece by piece, flyer by flyer, as the fun, endearing mosaic that makes New Zealand the unique paradise it is. Michael Petherick tells a sweet and funny tale, with a creative multi-media format that engages the eye and challenges the brain. Ages and cultures merge in this story of a small community filled with huge heart. Readers will find themselves cheering on every new character, and will easily see themselves somewhere in this fantastic, genre-bending book.

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### **Picture Book Award**

#### **Speech by Charlotte McKay**

The art of creating the perfect picture book can seem deceptively simple: after all, you don't have to submit thousands of words, you are usually targeting an audience that seems easily decipherable...

However, as any author or illustrator who has ever attempted to create a picture book knows, or for that matter any parent or teacher who's tried to hold a young audience's attention with a picture book, it may be one of the most challenging jobs in literature! The skill of selecting which few words will convey an entire story arc, create whole and relatable characters, and then pair them with illustrations that complement, enhance, and develop these things is no small task.

The finalists in this category all demonstrated a magical mastery of this demanding art. They all beautifully achieve the elusive simple sophistication the best picture books have, and are as likely to make adults smile as children. These books deal with big questions, daunting adventures, relatable challenges, and zany situations – and all are stories that will invite fun and bring joy to the readers.

***Abigail and the Birth of the Sun*** – This beautifully woven mix of science and magic is a tribute to the endless curiosity of children at bedtime!

***How Māui Slowed the Sun*** – A playful retelling of a New Zealand classic that visually leaps off the page.

***Mini Whinny: Goody Four Shoes*** – A gentle tale that delights with both Mini Whinny’s petulant antics and her hard-learned lessons of friendship and jealousy.

***Santa’s Worst Christmas*** – A truly kiwi spin on Christmas, with text that bursts with joy and vivid illustrations packed with detail that will raise a new laugh on every read.

***The Gobbledegook Book*** – A selection of Joy Cowley’s wonderful and whimsical poetry for children is brought together with playful and creative illustration.

### **Citation for winner:**

#### ***Abigail and the Birth of the Sun***

Written by Matthew Cunningham, illustrated by Sarah Wilkins

Published by Puffin, Penguin Random House

This book ticks all the boxes for a great picture book. Abigail is a very real and relatable character: children will be able to see themselves in her, and adults will recognise her. Her curiosity is what drives the story, and is formed in a magical question of possibility. Her father tenderly cradles this curiosity, creating a beautiful narrative answer to her big question that is part magic, part science. The language is evocative and poetic at times, and yet still packed with facts. The illustrations support this gentle yet fantastical approach, with bold colours and big skiescapes combined with little touches like the ever-present family cat, and the astronaut teddy bear.

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## **Wright Family Foundation Esther Glen Award for Junior Fiction**

### **Speech by Steph Matuku**

Junior Fiction nurtures and develops a child’s love of independent reading. The longer works cover greater ground, with intricate plots, layered characters, exciting settings and diverse experiences, giving children new worlds to explore.

This category was one of the largest, with 34 wonderful entries. The five books that were selected as finalists epitomise the best of New Zealand junior fiction.

***#Tumeke!*** – Will Newtown’s first Waitangi Day celebration ever get off the ground? This ambitious multimedia mashup presents a fresh take on storytelling.

***Lizard's Tale*** – Set in Singapore's Chinatown during World War Two, Lizard finds himself embroiled in a world of spies, covert missions and danger.

***Moonlight the Unicorn's High Tea Hiccup*** – Cute illustrations and engaging characters turn a glamorous high tea into a big mess.

***Prince of Ponies*** – Two characters, two time periods and two unforgettable horses. Historical fact and thrilling fiction make for one satisfying story.

***Time Machine and Other Stories*** – A collection of short stories that takes the reader on unexpected journeys – with plenty of twists to keep it interesting.

Kids, teachers and parents will love this year's Junior Fiction finalist books! The works are engaging, relevant, clever, and entertaining. And with a mix of short stories, novels and multimedia, there really is something for everyone.

### **Citation for winner:**

#### ***Lizard's Tale***

Written by Weng Wai Chan

Published by Text Publishing

*Lizard's Tale* is a standout not only for its gripping storyline, but for its convincing characters and historical detail. Set in the crowded slums of Singapore's Chinatown during World War Two, *Lizard's Tale* tells the story of a young teenage boy who is offered big money to steal a mysterious box – and finds himself drawn into a dangerous world of espionage, kidnapping, daring escapes and covert missions. Readers are given a tantalising insight into a culturally diverse world, and a glimpse of history seen from a new, exciting angle. Fast paced and assured, this is a confident debut from an exciting new talent.

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### **Young Adult Fiction Award**

#### **Speech by Briar Lawry**

Young adults are a discerning audience that varies wildly in interests and tastes. The best books for young adults speak to the teenage experience in a way that is fresh and arresting. The 2020 finalists in this category do just that, in a wide range of ways that befits the amazing array of perspectives present in today's rangatahi.

Societal and peer pressure is a frequent theme in young adult fiction, and each of these books deals with exceptionally unique examples of this. Each and every one of the finalists could equally be picked up and enjoyed by a teenager at their local bookshop or library – or explored as a set text in a high school setting.

These books also demonstrate a trust in the maturity of teenagers. Some could be equally at home on adult shelves, but the spirit of the books still speaks to teenagers in a specific and vital way. They are never dull. Every story has layers to unpick and examine, each book is confronting in its own way – and they always keep you turning the page.

***Afakasi Woman*** – A powerful collection of short stories that handles difficult topics with a strong series of Polynesian voices for readers to relate to and learn from.

***Aspiring*** – Artful and sophisticated use of language and storytelling delves into the mind of a 15-year-old growing up even faster than the world around him.

***The History Speech*** – A dive into a grimy side of 1960s provincial New Zealand life, with a main character perched on the difficult precipice of innocence and childhood.

***Ursa*** – Issues of privilege and power are explored in a way that can be interpreted either as fantastical alternate history or dystopia.

***Wynter's Thief*** – This slice-of-medieval-life historical fiction shows how strong two outsiders can be when chance throws them together in a world unwilling to accept them for who and what they are.

## **Citation for winner:**

### ***Aspiring***

Written by Damien Wilkins

Published by Massey University Press/Annual Ink

*Aspiring* demonstrates a stunning insight into the teenage mind, both in its exploration of character and its respect for the intelligence of its audience. In Ricky, the book has a kind, thoughtful main character, even as he towers over those in his life and deals with difficult memories of family trauma. Books like this can provide a bridge from young adult reading to feeling confident to start tackling literary books for grown-ups. There are plenty of teens out there like Ricky, and it is to be hoped that seeing themselves reflected on the page in all their uncertain, wildly imaginative glory will remind them to stay true to their thoughtful and inquisitive selves.

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## **Elsie Locke Award for Non-Fiction**

### **Speech by Briar Lawry**

The world of children's non-fiction is ever-growing and developing, and there's never been a more exciting time to be a young reader on the hunt for facts or true stories. This is the case all over the world, but the top non-fiction offerings from Aotearoa really do rank up there with the best. The best non-fiction for young people injects fun and/or fascination into topics or true tales, and seamlessly brings research and work to life, whether simply through words or through a visually decadent experience.

The field for the Elsie Locke Award for Non-Fiction this year was absolutely loaded with options, and the titles picked as finalists are truly something special. All five demonstrate highly skilled writing, whether the work itself is poetic prose, candid storytelling, compelling reportage or carefully chosen and translated words and phrases.

All the finalists are visual in some way – and more importantly, they all use design and either illustration or photography to better articulate their messages.

Each of these books is more than just a sum of its parts, and they were a joy to experience, from the first read to every reread that followed. Every single one of these books will be a valuable and treasured addition to any home bookshelf or school library collection.

***Kuwi & Friends Māori Picture Dictionary*** – A vibrantly illustrated and thoughtfully constructed language learning tool that will help engage reo Māori learners of all ages.

***Mophead*** – A genre-defying little book that tells one woman's story while also providing a dose of creative inspiration and hope for budding artists from all walks of life.

***Te Tiriti o Waitangi / The Treaty of Waitangi*** – This reorua flip book combines the best in carefully pitched educational writing with the engagement of comic-style illustration.

***The Adventures of Tupaia*** – Beautiful prose, poetry and pictures combine to tell the important story of arioi and navigator Tupaia in a sophisticated yet accessible way.

***Three Kiwi Tales*** – Readers are taken behind the scenes of ensuring the wellbeing of Aotearoa's national bird with a readable and enjoyable combination of science and history.

## **Citation for winner:**

### ***Mophead***

Written and illustrated by Selina Tusitala Marsh

Published by Auckland University Press

This book is a taonga. In *Mophead*, Selina Tusitala Marsh shares her own journey, from a self-conscious child unsure of her place in the world, to Poet Laureate rubbing shoulders with world leaders and literary luminaries. It is educational, it is inspirational, it is encouraging. The writing is masterful – accessible to any young reader, while still sparkling with personality and verve. It's impossible to imagine the text without the illustrations and indeed vice versa. This is a



whole package that should be placed in the hands of every child in Aotearoa, especially young Pasifika children who might not yet know their own creative power.

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## Russell Clark Award for Illustration

### Speech by Jane Arthur

We were delighted to see a record 34 entries for the Russell Clark Award for Illustration this year, which made for some tough decisions.

Our five outstanding finalists seem to have little in common at first – their style, mood and subject matter almost couldn't be more varied. There are a mix of newcomers and others who've been nominated for this award in the past.

But they all show great skill in texture and colour, and what those qualities can evoke in the reader or viewer. They grab us by the amygdala and make us laugh, cry or feel wonder.

***Dozer the Fire Cat*** – Dry, smoky, funny, scary and cute – with understated illustrations that exploit the properties of pencil and watercolour.

***Santa's Worst Christmas*** – Lively and inclusive festive fun gorgeously composed, child-friendly illustrations that are uniquely reflective of Aotearoa.

***Song of the River*** – Detailed illustrations exude a love for nature and beautifully explore how nature and humans interact.

***The Adventures of Tupaia*** – Stunningly pared back and powerful, the limited colour palette of this large format book serves as a shortcut towards drama and emotional impact..

***Wildlife of Aotearoa*** – Big and beautiful, Bishop's inimitable watercolour style inspires readers to fall in love anew with this country's natural world.

### Citation for winner:

#### ***The Adventures of Tupaia***

Illustrated by Mat Tait

Published by Allen & Unwin with Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland War Memorial Museum

Mat Tait's illustrations reach the reader on an intellectual, gut and aesthetic level. They teach us about our history in part by engaging our emotions, via dramatic perspectives and powerful colours. We witness a battle for power as we journey through the Pacific, and are struck by confusion and grief. A clever combination of modes is used: comic strips, vignettes, full spreads of starry skies, and symbols from throughout the Pacific. The pared back, simple lines and

limited colours give us the sense that history isn't merely something from the past – it's still happening now. These illustrations are modern and cool – but with an urgent fire in their belly.

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## Wright Family Foundation Te Kura Pounamu Award

### Speech by Moana Munro

He mihi kau ana ki a koutou ngā uri o ngā hau e wha, arā, ngā mātāwaka o te motu, o te ao whānui, he waka eke noa, Tēna koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa

We have come through unprecedented times together, on many occasions reaching for a book to ease those unusual moments. These Te Kura Pounamu te reo adventures slot comfortably into the extraordinary.

These finalist books hold that special glow, they're the stories that keep your heart warm, they're the soft welcoming little embers ... rekindled.

Intriguing kupu tickle the tongue and prompt tears of elation, while poignant illustrations are effective in tugging at the heartstrings

Encouraging the reader to explore both the normal and the uncomfortable, these books all share the kaupapa of kindness, respect, forgiveness – and also a little bit of cheekiness.

***Arapū toi*** – This peacefully appealing book is bathed in the gentle rhythm of te reo Māori, as it teases out everyday events.

***Ko Flit, te Tīrairaka me ngā Hēki Muna*** – Te reo Māori breathes naturally and rhythmically as we revisit familiar avian characters in a cosy and welcoming way.

***Ngā hoa Hoihoi o Kuwi*** – Witty reo is used to mimic sounds and situations, and curious readers can search and make new discoveries at every story time

***Te Kirihimete i whakakorea*** – Beautifully illustrated and cleverly translated to rhyme, a story that is rooted firmly in Aotearoa.

***Tio Tiamu*** – This ageless and weighty story deals with universal themes, but at the same time reeks of whakaaro Māori.

### Citation for winner:

#### ***Tio Tiamu***

Written by Kurahau, illustrated by Laya Mutton-Rogers

Published by Huia Publishers

Tio Tiamu, aka Toe Jam – what a dreadful predicament, oh the humiliation! Tio Tiamu is a gigantic character with the kindest heart and genuine love for his hapū. He overcomes many challenges and deliberate acts of nastiness, only to be shunned. There are mixtures of ‘if only’ moments, cautiously laid like an absorbing tangi the senses of the reader are tuned in to. ‘He aha te mea nui o te ao, he tangata’ – it is known the most important thing in the world is its people. This te reo journey exudes manaaki tangata with generosity, benevolence, and grace.

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## **Margaret Mahy Book of the Year Award**

### **Speech by Jane Arthur**

Margaret Mahy once began a poem with: “If you don’t believe in fairy tales / The world will break in half”, which is one way of expressing the profound importance of stories. Without them, we can’t know ourselves.

The category winners this year present a snapshot of New Zealand in 2020, which is a country firmly expressing and exploring itself – and its complex history – while always maintaining its quirky sense of humour. These books are world-class.

*Abigail and the Birth of the Sun* has us discovering the universe with a sense of wonder; *Aspiring* makes us squirm in recognition of awkward, though sweet, adolescence; *Lizard’s Tale* is a fascinating and compelling historical adventure story; *Tio Tiamu* is a stunning and smelly tale of acceptance; *Mophead*, too, fights for our right to be unique; and *The Adventures of Tupaia* points out where we’ve come from.

Our books for children and young adults tell us who we are and why – and reassure us that it’s okay to be who we are. They tell us to keep striving, keep questioning, to laugh, to keep our eyes open and not be ashamed.

And the book that encapsulates all these qualities – and then some – is our supreme winner this year.

### **Citation for Margaret Mahy Book of the Year:**

#### ***Mophead***

Written and illustrated by Selina Tusitala Marsh  
Published by Auckland University Press

This magic book reaches past our brains and squeezes life into our hearts and imaginations. *Mophead* places its writer at the centre of her own story, but also draws lines out to all the stories and histories that make up an individual: cultures, literature, family and education.

With exquisite design and production, it is part picture book, part graphic novel, part memoir, part poem – its form is exactly what it wants and needs to be, which is the message of the book too.

*Mophead* is clever and joyful and inspiring, with not a smidgen of pretension or condescension. It is – dare it be said – perfect.

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