



Judges' Commentaries on Finalists and Winners

10 August 2023



Picture Book Award

Speech by Daniel Buchanan

Picture books offer so many different possibilities to tell a story, and play a vital role in helping young readers navigate and understand the world. They can often be the first time we begin to explore complex topics, whether independently or while being read to, and can leave a strong, lasting impression.

The best authors and illustrators are able to impart lessons, values, or morals seamlessly into a story, without being didactic, and guide their readers through a journey of self-discovery. If that combo is from an Aotearoa New Zealand perspective, the impact is even more powerful.

There were 53 entries in the picture book category, and the task of narrowing these down to a shortlist of five books was not easy. Judges consulted the criteria with frequency, and had long and robust discussions about what it is that tamariki of Aotearoa New Zealand want to read and see represented in their stories. It was a happy coincidence that after establishing the finalists, we seemed to have covered a significant spread of themes and topics.

When ***Duck Goes Meow*** during the animal sound song, all the other animals are startled. With their expectations baffled, the story rhymes its way to an enlightening end.

We bid ***Farewell, Anahera***, a wairua who shares an uplifting and reassuring story as they make their final journey to Hawaiki.

How My Koro Became a Star shows how the strength and resilience of a loving whānau can help a young mokopuna heal by keeping tradition alive.

In ***Roo and Vladimir: An Unlikely Friendship***, Roo is able to overcome adversity and embrace who he is, thanks to his new, small friend, when a big heart meets an even bigger dog.

And ***The Lighthouse Princess*** tells an empowering story of an independent and confident – though never lonely – princess, who discovers having a friend around is kind of fun too.

Whether they are told with lyrical or rhyming flair, or the pictures get to tell a thousand words, the finalists we've selected have all done tremendous jobs in telling their unique stories and making accessible topics for discussion amongst young readers, nurturing a desire for answers, and redefining their experiences.

Citation for winner:

Duck Goes Meow

Written by Juliette MacIver and illustrated by Carla Martell

Published by Scholastic New Zealand

Bold, munificent colours saturate the page, with animals rotund and lively, their hand lettered animal sounds seamlessly blending into a flawless rhyming text. Readers are taken on a hilarious jaunt as these animals negotiate and encourage Duck to say the right thing, anticipation and humour building with each page turn. The little duck plucks at the heartstrings by being true to itself, and challenging our assumptions.

Duck Goes Meow distills all the elements of a great picture book into a celebration of the unexpected, with a conclusion that surprises the animals and readers alike.

Wright Family Foundation Esther Glen Award for Junior Fiction

Speech by Feana Tu'akoi

Junior Fiction caters for a wide readership, from mid-primary, right through to the beginning of high school and beyond. Though its key focus is entertainment, it plays a vital role in growth and development, building cognitive skills, imagination, emotional intelligence and empathy. It is interactive, rather than passive. It demands that readers think.

This year's finalists, chosen from a strong field of 24 entries, do all this and more. Whether contemporary or historical, serious or playful, rooted in te ao Māori or te ao Pākehā, all are examples of the vibrant, authentic storytelling that helps to forge a life-long love of reading.

Below is a compelling, suspense-filled survival story set in a catastrophic tunnel collapse, which trusts readers to handle big environmental ideas and come to their own conclusions.

Children of the Rush is a gritty, exciting adventure that accurately portrays part of Aotearoa's grim colonial past, as a pair of unusual children face off with a violent goldfields gang.

Jason Mason and the World's Most Powerful Itching Powder is a hilarious, page-turning race against time to stop arch-villain, Hugh Jarse, unleashing his diabolically itchy masterplan.

Masher is a highly imaginative, laugh-out-loud romp through the mayhem created when a papier-mâché puppet takes on a life of its own.

Pipi and Pou and the Raging Mountain is a dynamic, action-packed quest, where wise-cracking cousins use heroic super-powers to restore the mana of a disrespected maunga.

Though the finalists run the gamut from gripping disaster and adventure, to exuberant, irresistible comedy, all have something to teach us about life in Aotearoa New Zealand and the power our rangatahi have to effect change in our complicated world.

Citation for winner:

Below

Written by David Hill

Published by Puffin, Penguin Random House

From the squeeze of the hourglass on the cover, to the story's heart-thumping climax, a gripping sense of claustrophobia pervades this novel. The restricted point of view, oppressive setting and accelerating sense of danger conspire to close the reader in, yet the writing feels expansive.

Relationships, reactions and conflicting environmental positions are skilfully drawn, as two pre-teens rely on ingenuity and analytical thinking to help them survive in the collapsing heart of a mountain. As the stakes get higher and the chances of survival lower, the reader is left gasping.

Below is a white-knuckled, powerful read, from one of Aotearoa's most exceptional storytellers.

Young Adult Fiction Award

Speech by Maia Bennett

Successful Young Adult Fiction must attract and engage our rangatahi who are navigating complex realities while dealing with modern distractions and multiple disruptions.

There were fourteen entries for the judges to consider in this category this year, and all five of the shortlisted books are highly appealing, as well as being extremely original, authentic and credible. With settings reaching across time and space, these are well-crafted stories with engaging plots and satisfying story arcs.

The finalist authors all display a deftness and dexterity with language, creating characters who are realistic and relatable while exploring themes of family, relationships, and growing independence.

Andromeda Bond in Trouble Deep takes us to the very near future and inner space in a pacey, gripping techno-thriller with compelling characters and an all too believable villain.

Eddy, Eddy is a slow burn with a strong sense of place. The author's love of language and literature and the city of Christchurch shine through in this moving meditation on love and loss.

Indigo Moon is wildly creative and cleverly crafted. Multiple timelines and two distinct narrative voices are skilfully woven together to create a compulsively readable action-adventure set in a scarily plausible future.

Iris and Me is an amazingly inventive novel in verse with a unique and unexpected narrative voice, that illuminates the life of one of Aotearoa's most significant writers.

Miracle is filled with vividly drawn, complex and interesting characters. It is a cleverly plotted, funny and touching mystery with a wholly relatable protagonist.

These five finalist books all offer readers insight into the unique perspectives of diverse characters, while their common themes highlight the universality of the human experience.

Citation for winner:

Iris and Me

Written by Philippa Werry

Published by Ahoy, The Cuba Press

Iris and Me is audacious and daring, much like its subject Iris Wilkinson, who wrote poetry, fiction and journalism using the pen name Robin Hyde. This exploration of Iris' life is astonishingly original. Written in verse with a unique narrative voice, this is heartbreaking yet hopeful historical fiction. The book is impeccably researched and exquisitely written, and its quality is clear from its charming cover through to its extensive end notes. The many hardships that Iris suffers – including mental health issues, disability, and poverty – are sensitively handled and give insight into the life of an important New Zealand author while being relevant to rangatahi today. This is poetry our young people can relate to.

Elsie Locke Award for Non-Fiction

Speech by Nicola Daly

The Elsie Locke Award Non-Fiction Award celebrates the presentation of fact in a wide range of forms, this year including biography and pūrākau.

As we considered the 22 submissions for this year's awards, we were looking for excellence in the way facts were presented, from the use of graphics, to clear illustrations and appropriate language for the intended audience. When we know that all readers can look up facts easily on devices, it is the curation of those facts in eye-catching and well researched formats that contribute to their excellence.

This year's non-fiction finalists introduce readers to a range of people and new ideas, both inspirational and educational.

A New Dawn is an important contribution to our understanding of Aotearoa's history. Black and white illustrations emphasise the cold hard facts of the Dawn Raids in 1970s Auckland, turning to colour to signify hope as the author shares her journey of recovery.

Freestyle: the Israel Adesanya Story tells the story of New Zealand's own UFC middleweight world champion Israel Adesanya. Powerful illustrations and creative layouts and typography add impact to the written word.

Sylvia and the Birds uses a varied and engaging design incorporating graphic novel techniques, photos and diagrams, to tell the life of 'Bird Lady' Sylvia Durrant, and to encourage readers to become backyard bird heroes themselves.

Te Wehenga is an immersive and sophisticated retelling of the pūrākau explaining the beginning of the world, which pushes boundaries with its poetic bilingual text integrated into the dark artwork.

Weather and Climate New Zealand guides readers through an astonishing range of facts regarding weather and climate, while also encouraging readers to contribute to reducing the climate crisis.

Citation for winner:

Te Wehenga: The Separation of Ranginui and Papatūānuku

Written and illustrated by Mat Tait

Published by Allen & Unwin

Te Wehenga: The Separation of Ranginui and Papatūānuku presents a well-known creation story from te ao Māori in a ground breaking bilingual format, incorporating text into illustrations in an exciting design, reflecting the darkness, the pain and the hope inherent in this pūrākau. It brings mātauranga Māori into our understanding of how the world began, using tohu Māori or Māori design elements appropriate to the story. Judges were awestruck by its production qualities and by the bold, dark and fully immersive design, which will draw readers into a story that is so fundamental to Aotearoa.

Russell Clark Award for Illustration

Speech by Ruth Paul

Coming up with a shortlist of five from the 34 entries in the Illustration category was no easy task for the judges. Entries covered a wide range of styles, illustrating varying complexities of text intended for differing age-groups. Like all good art, book illustration can speak to the reader in a very individual way, so finding consensus amongst five judges means that the illustrators who made the shortlist have exceptional qualities in their work that all judges agree on.

The judges were looking for illustration that demonstrated consistency of quality across the many pages and spreads of a book, an eye for composition and colour, drawing and technical skills, a focus on fully communicating and enhancing the text, and originality of thinking. All of this needs to add up in such a way that the illustration becomes a seamless part of the storytelling.

A Portrait of Leonardo displays a fresh and youthful approach to biography, with visual humour, puns and puzzles, and technical agility, all underpinned by solid drawing skills.

Dynamic and detailed, ***Four Yaks and a Yeti*** gives us larger-than-life characters with a varied colour palette and vibrant pacing, the illustrations racing alongside the text to their eventual reckoning with a Yeti.

The illustrations in ***Roar, Squeak, Purr*** allow space in the readers minds for the poems to flourish and create their own images. This is a great example of how the choice of backgrounds, layout and subject in illustration can perfectly support the writing while not overwhelming it.

Te Wehenga cleverly and bravely illustrates a tale submerged in darkness, while allowing in just enough light for it to be told, producing a compelling piece of work with fluency and skill.

And ***The Lighthouse Princess***, with its strictly controlled colour palette, bursts with life as the Princess and the boy slide down banisters and fish up chocolate fish, supported by thoughtful and witty background details.

Each of our shortlisted illustrators should be proud for having contributed something new and wonderful for the eyes of Aotearoa's tamariki to feast on.

Citation for winner:

A Portrait of Leonardo

Written and illustrated by Donovan Bixley

Published by Upstart Press

Donovan Bixley excels in this illustrated biography of Leonardo Da Vinci. Relishing the challenge, he plays joyously with puns and puzzles while demonstrating masterful use of tools that were developed by the great artist himself. Composition, perspective, light and colour are used to great effect, with a strong underpinning of drawing and digital skills, creating a vibrant historical read that is also a fluent and delightful feast for the eyes. *A Portrait of Leonardo* is enticing and accessible to young readers, a great example of words attributed to the master: "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication".

Wright Family Foundation Te Kura Pounamu Award

Speech by Ruki Tobin (read by Mihi Te Rina Henare)

Ahakoā he iti, he iti māpihi pounamu.

Although small, it is still of great value

This whakatauki epitomizes this year's entries to Te Kura Pounamu award. Although the number of entries was small, just seven in total, the mana of each book is significant. Their contributions to the resurgence of te reo Māori in story telling will resonate through time.

The three shortlisted books all have strong themes of mātāpono and mātauranga Māori and demonstrate high levels of expertise in te reo Māori, whether originally written or translated. They ground their stories in te ao Māori while also allowing readers of all backgrounds to connect and immerse themselves in the stories.

These special characteristics, as well as the quality of the storytelling, means that this year's judges for Te Kura Pounamu are proud to have these books represent the standard of excellence for this category.

He Raru ki Tai is set in Tāmaki Makaurau before the arrival of Pākehā. Referencing mātauranga Māori of the region's iwi, the story follows the journey of cousins Te Kawenga and Kakati as they challenge their leaders and try to save the taniwha of Hauraki iwi.

Kua whetūrangitia a Koro is a beautiful story that emphasises the importance of intergenerational connections and tikanga as it tells of a young boy's desire to honour his Koro's teachings about Matariki, and how this helps him come to terms with his grief at the loss of his Koro.

Te Kōkōrangī: Te Aranga o Matariki follows Te Kōkōrangī as she searches for four paruhi or apprentices to pass on her knowledge of Matariki, and provides an opportunity for people of all ages to immerse themselves in a story centred on mātauranga Māori.

Citation for winner:

Kua whetūrangitia a Koro

Written by Brianne Te Paa, illustrated by Story Hemi-Morehouse

Published by Huia Publishers

Matariki te tohu o te maharanui

Matariki te tohu o te pito mata

Matariki te tohu o te ao hou

Kua Whetūrangitia a Koro is a traditional Māori narrative tailored to fit a new world and a new audience. The significance of this story, its context, and its poetic use of te reo Māori place it in a stratosphere of its own. Much like Matariki, *Kua Whetūrangitia a Koro* represents authentic Māori stories being told in te reo Māori that will inspire and educate Māori, Pākehā, and all people of New Zealand and the world. Haramai tētahi āhua!

NZSA Best First Book Award

Speech by Ruth Paul

31 books were eligible for this year's NZSA Best First Book Award. Everyone who has ever won a prize in all New Zealand's children's book awards past and present – a list that includes some hugely recognisable and lauded names – started in this exact same place, taking their first brave, tender, and terrifying steps with the publication of a first book.

In *Echo*, Arlo Kelly creates a strong sense of place and mood, a complex task when visually imagery isn't available to the protagonist. He has written an engaging story with believable and well-drawn characters, and recognisable family dynamics.

In *He Raru ki Tai*, Jane Cooper's expertise in te reo Māori is evident as she entices the reader to follow her main characters through the geographic landscape of Tāmaki Makaurau before the arrival of Pākehā. This is a great new addition to Māori literature.

Holding the Horse is a well-researched historical tale, moving in its presentation of post-war PTSD. The writing is so evocative you can almost see the steam rising off the horse as it gallops along the beach at night.

In *Kidnap at Mystery Island*, Carol Garden cleverly manages to draw us into a world that is both fantastic and recognisable at the same time, packed with vibrant action sequences, while exploring what it means to be family.

And *The Lighthouse Princess* – a first book for both writer and illustrator – combines a poetic and beautifully written story with detailed and magical illustrations. There is much to explore and discover in this picture book.

We look forward to seeing much more from all of these writers and illustrators in the future, and I don't doubt we will see them at future awards evenings.

Citation for winner:

The Lighthouse Princess

Written by Susan Wardell and illustrated by Rose Northey

Published by Puffin, Penguin Random House

The Lighthouse Princess stands out as a picture book that combines poetic writing and whimsical illustration to create a sum that is greater than its parts. This clever alchemy is all the more astounding considering it is both the writer's and the illustrator's first foray into publication. With details that draw a child's eye into the world of the Lighthouse, and language that lures us from page to page, Rose Northey and Susan Wardell take the reader to an escapist hideaway on a rocky coast inhabited by creatures both real and imagined. Like the boy in the story, once invited in, many will choose not to leave.

Margaret Mahy Book of the Year Award

Speech by Nicola Daly

When children's literature is created, it is imbued with our hopes and dreams for the future. We want generations to come to know our stories, our heroes, our values as they move through to shape the future.

All of you here tonight are involved in this important creative industry in some way, whether as publishers, writers, illustrators, librarians, book sellers or readers. It is wonderful to have an opportunity to honour you all and the work that you do to shape the minds and imaginations of our tamariki through children and young adult literature.

Now, let us remind you of the category winners who are contenders for the Margaret Mahy Book of the Year, our supreme award.

Using bold colour and a deceptively simple and humorous story, in ***Duck Goes Meow*** Juliet MacIver and Carla Martell explore issues of belonging, and the limitations of expectations.

In ***Below***, David Hill uses the voices of two pre-teens to explore conflicting environmental positions in a high stakes and dangerous setting.

Iris and Me is a well-researched and beautifully written novel in verse with a unique narrative voice, telling the life story – and many hardships – of writer Iris Wilkinson (Robin Hyde).

Te Wehenga: The Separation of Ranginui and Papatūānuku is an immersive and engaging retelling of the pūrākau explaining the beginning of the world, with a poetic bilingual text.

A Portrait of Leonardo is an exceptional illustrated biography of the most famous artists of all time, with illustrations that demonstrate superb technical skills.

Kua Whetūrangitia a Koro allows readers to immerse themselves in te ao Māori and connect to an authentic story of a whānau looking to the knowledge of Matariki to help them heal and grow. Mānawa maiea te putanga o Matariki. Mānawa maiea te ariki o te rangi. Mānawa maiea te Mātahi o te tau hou!

Judging the best of the best is never easy. Our discussions compared the merits of each book in terms of their category criteria, and then the overall impact of the book in relation to its contribution to New Zealand national literature for children and young adults, including the extent to which it will encourage further readings and exploration of books.

We were looking for excellence and a book which exemplifies the industry's highest standards, providing an aspirational incentive to publishers, authors and illustrators. Given the calibre of the category winners, the decision was by no means an easy one.

Citation for Margaret Mahy Book of the Year:

Te Wehenga: The Separation of Ranginui and Papatūānuku

Written and illustrated by Mat Tait

Published by Allen & Unwin

Te Wehenga: The Separation of Ranginui and Papatūānuku presents the Māori creation pūrākau in a bold design using universal elements recognised across iwi. The bilingual text is poetic, and integrated into the artwork on each page in a way that draws readers into an interactive experience, inviting them to turn the book as they become immersed in the darkness of the space between Papatūānuku and Ranginui. The production values are exceptionally high, and the result is a book that is – like the story – a taonga, to be shared, closely read and enjoyed in both te reo Māori and te reo Pākehā.
