



Judges' Commentaries on Finalists and Winners

14 August 2024

Picture Book Award

Speech by Kitty Brown

In a world often filled with noise and distraction, picture books stand as quiet beacons of clarity and meaning.

A good picture book is like a big awahi, embracing the reader with inviting illustrations and a captivating narrative, wrapping you in warmth and comfort, and offering a safe place for the imagination to open and for the heart to be nourished.

This year there were 59 entries in the picture book category, and the judges had a very difficult task to shortlist only five beautiful books. In the end we made our choices based on mastery of storytelling, illustrative genius, and production values as well as many other criteria.

We had lots of hearty kōrero and heaps of fun examining this exceptional range of Aotearoa picture books. Our shortlisted books foster a sense of connection and belonging, celebrate diversity, and encourage understanding of different perspectives.

At the Bach transports us to an idyllic and iconic kiwi beach holiday with its combination of carefully chosen words and nostalgic, dreamy illustrations.

In ***Dazzlehands***, a farmer has firm ideas but Pig sees things differently. “Smooth hands, groove hands, got to liberate these Dazzlehands” became an anthem for picture book lovers this year.

Hatch and Match combines joyful, colourful illustrations, expert rhyming and rhythm and lots of interactive egg matching fun for chook lovers everywhere.

Lucy and the Dark take to the night, exploring scary spaces with friendship and light to inspire us all, and sending a positive message to anyone who has ever been afraid of the dark.

Paku Manu Ariki Whakatakapōkai speaks to us from the unique perspective of a child, and through this poetic story we all see something of ourselves.

Each of these five worthy finalists weaves together art and storytelling in a way that will leave a lasting impression. Their readers will be left feeling inspired, understood, and keen to revisit their pages time and again.

Citation for winner:

Paku Manu Ariki Whakatakapōkai

Written by Michaela Keeble with Kerehi Grace, and illustrated by Tokerau Brown

Published by Gecko Press

Paku Manu Ariki Whakatakapōkai is groundbreaking, deeply creative, and completely original. The story comes from the mouth of a child, and the illustrations are a direct window to the imagination, or maybe to the reality of a child's mind as they make sense of their identity, whānau, culture, and other big questions.

This is a sophisticated picture book that can be enjoyed by all ages. An inspirational read that will encourage our tamariki and mokopuna to tell their own stories, with their own voices, it deserves to become an Aotearoa bookshelf classic.

Wright Family Foundation Esther Glen Award for Junior Fiction

Speech by Maia Bennett

Junior fiction is crafted to captivate and engage tamariki, from early readers to pre-teens. As judges considered the 30 entries in this category this year, we looked for books that entertain, educate, and inspire. We sought titles that nurture imagination and empathy while also being appropriate in language and content for our audience of emerging readers. The five finalist titles embody all these qualities and more.

Variouly showcasing tender, character-driven humour, friendship goals, madcap antics, activism, mythical creatures, and magical realism, these books are a testament to quality storytelling and are sure to create lifelong readers.

DoubleDippers! is a delightful graphic novel that combines gentle humour with charming illustrations, as penguin pals explore the depths of friendship between the tides.

Lopini the Legend is a realistic and relatable read about overcoming overthinking, as star student Lopini discovers the meaning of resilience and perseverance.

Nine Girls is a compelling coming-of-age story that intertwines an exciting quest for buried treasure with a moving exploration of identity and belonging.

Take Me to Your Leader is a fantastically funny adventure about the chaos created when small-town friends fake alien encounters to try and save their school.

The Grimmelings is an immersive, dark and dangerous tale of shape-shifting and the power of words, steeped in ancient Scottish folklore and set in the South Island high country.

Sharing common themes of identity, belonging, community and connection, these finalist books all offer insights into the human experience, resonating with young readers as they navigate their own journeys of self-discovery.

Citation for winner:

Nine Girls

Written by Stacy Gregg

Published by Penguin, Penguin Random House

Using the thread of storytelling, *Nine Girls* weaves together an exploration of the complexity of identity, the resonance of history, and the transformative power of friendship. Comic action, magical realism, and social history are skilfully combined in this captivating coming-of-age story. Vivid and well-developed characters populate a fast-paced, eventful narrative as we follow the young protagonist's journey to discovering her Māori identity. Te ao Pākehā and te ao Māori are equally uplifted as the text explores our bicultural history.

Poignant and profound, affirming and authentic, this book is rich with themes of identity, friendship, and cultural heritage – a taonga from a masterful storyteller.

Young Adult Fiction Award

Speech by Belinda Whyte

Writing for young adult readers is a unique challenge, as this age group is still learning to understand themselves and the world, yet often feel they already know everything.

A well-written young adult fiction book appeals partly because it doesn't mess around when dealing with tough topics. These books provide a space for teenagers to experience and explore subjects they are worried about or dreaming over.

The shortlisted books have this appeal in abundance. Our five finalists' books – selected from a strong crop of 18 entries – were hard to put down. Each of these authors drew us deftly into the world of their story with care and precision, offering a masterclass in storytelling.

Catch a Falling Star provides an insightful glimpse into the life of a boy spiralling out of control. With frantic energy building throughout, it leaves you holding your breath until the climax.

New Dawning is set in a dystopian New Zealand drastically affected by climate change, with convincing and immersive world-building providing a strong sense of place.

The Sparrow is a superbly crafted and impeccably researched historical novel that provides a compelling depiction of Auckland's and Aotearoa's history.

Tonight, I Burn is an unforgettable and inventive fantasy that sweeps readers up in an enthralling tale of deception and betrayal. This novel is a slow and satisfying burn.

Tsunami is deceptively simple in style, but exceptionally executed. A tragic story of alienation and difference is portrayed through both the words and visuals of this gripping graphic novel.

These five books address important – and at times harrowing – topics, but always in an interesting way. With fantastic writing, convincing characters, and fast-paced, action-packed plots, every one of them is a riveting read.

Citation for winner:

Catch a Falling Star

Written by Eileen Merriman

Published by Penguin, Penguin Random House

Catch a Falling Star is a masterclass in writing that bravely tells the story of Jamie Orange, a complicated and endearing young man who struggles with mental health issues while juggling school work, relationships, and performing in the local musical.

Eileen Merriman has skilfully and sensitively captured Jamie's journey, allowing readers to step in and experience it alongside him. The result is a remarkably authentic portrayal of his escalating problems, fraught with frenetic energy and leading to a horrifying climax. This book is significant for teens today who may relate to the issues Jamie faces, and better understand them through reading his story.

Elsie Locke Award for Non-Fiction

Speech by Helen Wadsworth

Chosen from 25 entries, the five books on this year's shortlist for the Elsie Locke Award for Non-

Fiction vary significantly in topic, style and tone, but all share the essential ingredients that make a great work of non-fiction for children.

They are well researched, written with carefully chosen words which are presented in such a way that engages the intended audience. The words fit well with and are enhanced by deft and distinctive illustrations. These books also share an instant pick-me-up appeal that draws the readers in so they are itching to find out more.

Patu: The New Zealand Wars is a comprehensive history of the wars in this country. Gavin Bishop's masterful illustrations of people, battles and other small but important details deepen the impact of the text.

The Observologist invents a whole new branch of science – Observology – and uses scientific-ish illustrations and fun facts to encourage children to look closely at the world around them.

Tuatara: A Living Treasure follows the life of a tuatara from the moment she pops out of her egg until many years later when she lays her own eggs.

Ultrawild: An Audacious Plan to Rewild Every City on Earth is indeed audacious in the subject matter it tackles – rewilding cities in order to save the planet – and in its boundless inventiveness.

Wot Knot You Got: Mophead's Guide to Life is a book for everyone with knotty problems. Often poetic and always playful, Mophead shows readers how to begin untangling some of those knots.

The children of Aotearoa are indeed lucky to have such relevant, informative and creative non-fiction books to pore over, read, learn from, re-read and keep as life-long friends.

Citation for winner:

Ultrawild: An Audacious Plan to Rewild Every City on Earth

Written and illustrated by Steve Mushin

Published by Allen & Unwin

In *Ultrawild*, Steve Mushin leads us on a deadly serious quest to design our way out of climate change. He presents out-there concepts that are ingenious, technically plausible and often humorous – but it's the way they are communicated that gives this book the wow factor. Pages

are filled to the brim with detailed illustrations of his designs, speech bubbles, arrows, calculations, and full-page spreads that show what these rewilded cities could look like. This book about futuristic design is itself an object of outstanding design.

Ultrawild encourages readers to see the explicit connection between creativity and science, and as Steve Mushin puts it, to think ludicrous thoughts and have revolutionary ideas.

Russell Clark Award for Illustration

Speech by Mat Tait

There is always a certain amount of subjectivity when judging creative work, and there might be no category in these awards where this is more apparent than the illustration category. Standards for what is visually appealing, beautiful, powerful or striking vary so widely that finding a consensus might seem insurmountably difficult.

But regardless of personal taste, there is some work that shines too brightly to be put aside, and that succeeds in its aims so fully that it demands our attention.

All the finalists in this year's Russell Clark Illustration Award have produced work of this quality. While the five shortlisted books differ greatly in style, each of them demonstrates great skill and grace in performing the tasks required of the very best children's book illustration.

In ***Dazzlehands***, Josh Morgan's technicolour illustrations burst and fizz with rhythm. Every page is a fabulous, oversaturated visual delight, in perfect alignment with the comedic beats of the story.

In ***Paku Manu Ariki Whakatakapōkai*** the vibrant, sophisticated illustrations by Tokerau Brown leap off the page and demand the reader's attention, while at the same time being thoughtful and considered.

For ***Patu: The New Zealand Wars***, Gavin Bishop's wide-screen mixed media artwork makes full use of the book's large format to deliver complex information clearly and with impact.

In ***Samples from the Lab***, Rob Foote turns diary entries into a hilarious ride with his queasily detailed and technically accomplished depictions of the outer reaches of genetic experimentation.

And in *The Dream Factory*, the deep blues and glowing pinks Zak Ātea's of gorgeous illustrations invite readers into a fantastic world packed with lush visual detail.

In every case, the finalists have succeeded in creating illustrations that don't merely serve the narrative of the text – they are an integral part of each of these books, making a whole that is so much more than the sum of its parts.

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:

Patu: The New Zealand Wars

Written and illustrated by Gavin Bishop

Published by Puffin, Penguin Random House

In *Patu: The New Zealand Wars*, Gavin Bishop has brought everything in his considerable artistic arsenal to bear on this most difficult and fundamental part of our colonial history, with the ambition and control of an illustrator at the height of their mastery.

A complex and wide-ranging story is told clearly and accessibly at least as much through the illustrations as it is through the words, and most importantly it is told with power. In what is not just a historical recounting, the stark compositions and limited colour palette speak to a deeply personal tale; one of *mamae* discovered, *mamae* long felt, and *mamae* yet to be healed.

Wright Family Foundation Te Kura Pounamu Award

Speech by Lawren Matrix

Toku reo tōku ohooho

Toku reo tōku māpihi maurea

My language is my awakening, my language is my cherished taonga.

This whakataukī acknowledges the uniqueness of Te Kura Pounamu and its inherent value in elevating our reo rangatira. The creative talent demonstrated within the nine entries gives

mana to te ao Māori and showcases the beauty of te reo Māori as a medium for captivating imaginations.

The five shortlisted books are flawlessly crafted stories that will resonate across ages and generations. They are a reflection of a thriving indigenous language, examples of how we honour te Tiriti, and hallmarks of the standard we expect to see in this category.

He Tārū kahika explores relationships, using our taiao as the backdrop. It cleverly introduces complex language to little minds to explain science and to articulate the feeling of discovering joy when we least expect it.

Nani Jo me ngā Mokopuna Porohianga guides us through the journey of life. The purposeful blend of simple sentences and reo respects the mana of young readers and their ability to understand and accept life's challenges.

Te Pīkari Pipi is a playful jive of fond and familiar whānau activities. Written with finesse, rhythm and rhyme, this story sings to the haututu nature of tamariki and harnesses the joy and excitement of read aloud pukapuka.

Te Pukapuka ka kore e Pānuihia is a voice for reluctant readers with busy minds. Thoughtfully written and curiously delightful, its use of visual language brilliantly commands the attention and imagination of young people.

Te Rā Kura Ki Aotearoa is the gift that keeps on giving. In this visually exciting pukapuka, deliberate layering of text allows our youngest readers to see themselves and their world, enticing them to enjoy books and explore language in all its forms.

Translating complex themes into stories that tamariki, taiohi, and whānau can enjoy both independently and together is no easy feat, yet these kaituhi and kaiwhakamāori have achieved this with phenomenal skill and grace.

Citation for winner:

Nani Jo me ngā Mokopuna Porohianga

Written by Moira Wairama and illustrated by Margaret Tolland

Published by Baggage Books

Nani Jo me ngā Mokopuna Porohiānga is a beautifully written story about the special memories and bonds that are made when we are intentional in our relationships. Opening with childlike bubbly energy and using repetitive language to capture younger audiences, Nani Jo and her mokopuna guide us through the spiritual and emotional experiences of life.

This taonga uses inclusive language to convey the significance of stories, their role in helping us make sense of our world, and the importance of poroporoaki to the grieving process. It is in itself a journey of creating and sharing stories that will live on in generations to come.

NZSA Best First Book Award

Speech by Mat Tait

The Best First Book category is a measure of the creative health of children's literature in Aotearoa. The quality of this year's 25 eligible books, and the diverse range of voices, subjects, and approaches coming through, point to not only robustness, but vigour and growth.

While doing the difficult job of deciding the shortlist of five, judges looked for work of a high technical quality that used that facility to bring something new, exciting, and vital to the form.

The title of the category might misleadingly suggest that this is an award for potential, for showcasing talent in its raw, early stages. But while the names may be new, every one of the works gifted to us by our finalists is the result of a lifetime spent finding their voice and honing the skills needed to express it.

New Dawning uses deep, measured world-building, compelling characters and impeccable pace to present a familiar place in a thrilling and unsettling new context.

In ***Paku Manu Ariki Whakatakapōkai*** Tokerau Brown's joyful, fearless illustrations so perfectly embody the book's title character that it feels as though no one else could possibly have illustrated this book.

Tangaroa Paul's bilingual ***Rere Atu Taku Poi/Let My Poi Fly!*** wraps an enormously appealing story of triumph and adversity overcome around a warm and affirming Kaupapa of gender identity and non-conformity.

Tsunami displays a sophisticated understanding of the comics form, telling an often-disturbing story of a troubled and bullied boy with skill and a complexity that trusts readers to meet the book's challenges.

And with *Ultrawild*, Steve Mushin has made a visually dazzling debut, with an absorbing and inspirational book that is a celebration of human creativity and problem solving.

All of these books stand in their own right alongside any of the other books nominated tonight. And they all promise more fabulous work to come.

Citation for winner:

Tsunami

Written and illustrated by Ned Wenlock

Published by Earth's End Publishing

As a graphic novel *Tsunami* is exemplary, with the language of comics intrinsic to its understanding and impact. The toy-like characters with their clean simple lines invite readers to identify with them, even as their diagrammatic performance of the story's central tragedy distances readers from them – thus seamlessly reflecting the book's themes of alienation and the need for connection.

Tsunami respects the ability of its audience to handle ambiguity, to rise to meet its challenges and to find its rewards, however unsettling the journey may be. This is a book that lingers after the reading, and seems destined to be studied and discussed for a long time to come.

Margaret Mahy Book of the Year Award

Speech by Lauren Matrix and Maia Bennett

To the dreamers who build arks for us to journey across the chapters of life;

To the thinkers who illuminate our imaginations with breathtaking worlds;

To the creatives who weave pages bound with wisdom;

Our authors, illustrators, translators, publishers,

you carve monuments out of ideas,

and we get to marvel at them until the end of time.

Aotearoa and the world is blessed for your talents.

Thank you for sharing your gifts, for they empower us all.

Margaret Mahy, the iconic storyteller for whom our supreme award is named, saw writing and reading as different aspects of a single imaginative act. One is not whole without the other. As we acknowledge the finest books for young readers, we celebrate both.

The Margaret Mahy Book of the Year Award recognises one book that embodies outstanding overall excellence. Here are the category winners contending for the supreme award:

Paku Manu Ariki Whakatakapōkai is a bold and original riff on identity, colonisation, and culture through a child's eyes.

Nine Girls explores personal and national identity in a fast-paced narrative carrying significant emotional heft.

Catch a Falling Star authentically portrays a teen's mental health crisis through a skilfully paced story with believable characters.

Ultrawild juxtaposes big ideas and intricate illustrations in an inspiring call to action on climate change.

Patu: The New Zealand Wars is an ambitious examination of our country's complex history and a visual storytelling masterclass.

Nani Jo me ngā Mokopuna Porohianga is a simple yet profound story of love and loss flowing with the rhythms of the reo.

Determining which of these six books is the epitome of excellence this year was a challenging task given the outstanding quality of every one of the contenders.

Together, both judging panels considered each book's potential impact on young readers and how it might stand the test of time.

After careful deliberation, we came to a unanimous decision on a book that not only exemplifies the highest standards, but that we believe will make a lasting contribution to Aotearoa's national literature for children and young adults; and as such, deserves the accolade of supreme winner.

Citation for Margaret Mahy Book of the Year:

Nine Girls

Written by Stacy Gregg

Published by Penguin, Penguin Random House

In *Nine Girls* Stacy Gregg masterfully weaves comedy, fantasy and history together in a profound exploration of the complexity of identity in Aotearoa New Zealand through the experiences of a young Māori girl finding her place in the world. Historical events are woven into the fabric of the story, grounding her personal journey in a broader socio-political context. Vivid characters animate a fast-paced, eventful narrative with plot twists and emotional highs and lows.

This book celebrates Māori identity, pays tribute to Aotearoa's rich history, and testifies to the power of storytelling. *Nine Girls* is a taonga for readers of all ages, resonating long after the final page is turned.
