



# Judges' Commentaries on Finalists and Winners

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## BookHub Picture Book Award

### Speech by Feana Tu‘akoi

Picture books are food for the mind, transporting and delighting the reader, while fostering language development, literacy skills, imagination and empathy. Creating a successful picture book may well be one of the most demanding roles in storytelling today, and yet this is the award category that consistently attracts the most entries.

Finalists range from a deceptively simple board book to more sophisticated picture books aimed at older readers. All focus on connection – connection with whānau and ‘āiga. Connection with culture, language, place and pets. Connection with the everyday wonder and joy of life.

***Beddy-Bye Time in the Kōwhai Tree*** is a beautifully considered bedtime romp, where satisfying rhyme, counting in threes and detailed, humorous illustrations combine to celebrate the exuberant chaos of preschooler bedtimes.

***Mataali’i*** tells a story infused with fa’a Sāmoa, showcasing the interconnectedness of ‘āiga from the past, present and future, and underlining the importance of alofa and service – not just for the good times, but for all times.

***Ten Nosey Weka*** is a joyful celebration of our indigenous languages, filled with striking illustrations and fun facts. Ta rē Moriori and te reo Māori take the lead in this Rēkohu Chatham Island retelling of a favourite countdown rhyme.

***Titiro Look*** is a cleverly layered board book which preferences te reo Māori. Arresting illustrations support a thoughtful mix of simple and more complex kupu, repeated in a range of contexts for deeper understanding.

***You Can’t Pat a Fish*** is a sparkling read-aloud, with perfectly pitched rhyme and a quirky premise: the fish won’t change, so be the change. Fresh, charming illustrations tell their own stories, delivering delight to every page.

This year’s shortlisted titles seamlessly integrate layers of pared-back poetic text and beautifully eloquent images, to create a compelling reading experience that will engage tamariki and adults alike.

## Citation for winner:

### ***Titiro Look***

Written and illustrated by Gavin Bishop and translated by Darryn Joseph

Published by Gecko Press, Lerner Publishing Group

This deceptively simple, beautifully produced board book is an absorbing exploration of reo Māori and reo Pākehā. A representatively diverse whānau member and a favourite toy gaze out from each spread, inviting the reader to interact, ask questions, point, talk and learn. A mix of both common and surprising kupu is repeated and built upon in various contexts, enabling a deeply powerful learning experience. The vivid colour palette and bold, uncluttered images are perfect for pēpē and highlight connection with the people and toys that fill their world. *Titiro Look* is a taonga of a board book from an acclaimed Aotearoa storyteller.

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## Wright Family Foundation Esther Glen Award for Junior Fiction

### Speech by Linda Jane Keegan

The books entered in the Junior Fiction category this year could not have been more varied, ranging from first chapter books for tamariki in the early stages of their reading journey through to complex middle-grade novels for pre-teens.

When reading and considering the entries, judges were looking for fresh, engaging and imaginative writing that would capture the hearts and minds of these very different kinds of readers.

Given the large number of high-quality submissions, it was exceptionally difficult to choose a shortlist of only five books – but these titles all stood out due to their compelling characters, solid storylines and spellbinding writing.

***Brown Bird*** is a quiet and gentle exploration of family, friendship and community from the viewpoint of an introverted eleven-year-old, told using heartfelt and expressive prose.

***Detective Beans and the Case of the Missing Hat*** features an affable feline detective, in a light-hearted, delightfully funny tale. Illustration and text are impressive in equal measure in this graphic novel for younger readers.

***The Apprentice Witnesser*** immerses readers in an exquisitely constructed post-apocalyptic world where so-called ‘witnessers’ are making meaning of strange happenings.

***The Raven’s Eye Runaways*** uses rich and evocative language to carry readers on a fantastical quest in a place where books and reading are restricted to the upper echelons of society.

***Velvet and the Violets: The Case of the Missing Stuff*** is more than a story about kids in a band – this riotously fun and brilliantly constructed adventure also provides an insightful depiction of the main character’s experience of ADHD.

Each of the five junior fiction finalist books has its own distinctive character – and tonight we recognise and celebrate every one of them.

### **Citation for winner:**

#### ***Detective Beans and the Case of the Missing Hat***

Written and illustrated by Li Chen

Published by Puffin, Penguin Random House

*Detective Beans and the Case of the Missing Hat* is a delightful feline-fuelled mystery where a kitty detective earnestly goes about trying to find his hat. This book is both literally and figuratively colourful – Beans interacts with a cast of entertaining characters on his sleuthing mission, which his Mum is fine with as long as he’s home by 8pm. The graphic novel format is expertly used to capture the character expressions, tone, and movement of the narrative. This is a skilfully crafted work, an all-ages book that is both fun and funny, with humour that hits on multiple levels.

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## Young Adult Fiction Award

### Speech by Mero Rokx

Young Adult Fiction is aimed at readers who are grappling with the big questions: Who am I? Where do I fit? How can I make a difference?

With nuanced characters and authentically relational world-building, it provides a safe space for rangatahi to explore challenging realities and think critically about their own responses and choices.

The best Young Adult titles capture the urgency of youth, the thrill of discovery and the boundary pushing that are quintessential to the teenage experience. They provide validation, connection and inspiration with very real and relevant contexts –while also engaging and entertaining readers in an increasingly distracted world.

This year's finalists do all this and more.

***Bear*** tells a darkly funny, haunting tale of finding a way through darkness to hope. A fresh and powerful take on an all-too-common teenage experience, this deftly executed story is both confronting and validating.

***Gracehopper*** provides an insightful exploration of personal identity, complex relationships and the healing power of love. Well-drawn, multi-faceted characters and sharp, realistic dialogue make this a compelling read for older teens.

***Migration*** is an exciting action adventure set in a flawlessly constructed, futuristic world infused with kaupapa Māori. Enduring themes of colonisation and enforced migration are expertly handled and appropriate in these current times.

***The Mess of our Lives*** tells a heart-breaking story of compulsive hoarding, child neglect and the anger and frustration of those caught in the wake. This is a poignant tale about mental illness and its impacts on whānau.

***The Paradise Generation*** is an exhilarating dystopian adventure, set in a future that has overcome climate change and disease – but at what cost? This smart, high stakes novel raises thought-provoking questions about injustice and inequality.

This year's shortlisted titles are fresh, unflinching and, like rangatahi themselves, ultimately filled with hope and resilience.

### **Citation for winner:**

#### ***The Paradise Generation***

Written by Sanna Thompson

Published by umop apisdn press

This expertly crafted, very Wellington resistance narrative urges readers to think critically about where humanity is headed by probing ideas of autonomy, prioritisation of the 'greater good' and what happens when systems fail. Though set in the future, it reflects contemporary concerns around invasive technology, inequality and societal division. Rangatahi lead the charge throughout, thinking for themselves, challenging norms and breaking rules to right wrongs. They are – as in life – bold, heart-led, and capable of shaping society. *The Paradise Generation* is an extraordinary novel that balances both heart-pounding tension and emotional depth, from a highly talented, self-published, first-time author.

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

#### **Speech by Don Long**

Artificial intelligence "reads", but it isn't a reader. It "writes", but it can't write. In the emerging age of AI, the complex and difficult craft of writing authentic and engaging non-fiction for young people has never been more challenging – nor as important.

This year's entries showcased the sheer quality of research and synthesis; illustration, design and age-appropriate presentation; and engaging appeal that exemplify non-fiction publishing for young people in Aotearoa New Zealand.

***Black Magic*** tells a New Zealand story that highlights heroes we are at risk of forgetting. It explores the fascinating history behind the black uniforms with silver ferns that our sportspeople wear.

***Dear Moko: Māori Wisdom for Our Young Ones*** is a deeply engaging exploration of whakataukī that speaks directly to mokopuna from a place of warmth and kindness. Here is wisdom presented as never before, proverbs interwoven into deeply meaningful stories.

***Ruru, Night Hunter*** is a thrilling blend of story and science, with poetic writing and captivating illustrations that sweep readers away on an immersive journey with ruru: flying through the dark, hunting, evading threats and predators, and feeding their young.

In ***The Treaty of Waitangi***, the complexity of our founding document is explained in an accessible way without simplifying or leaving out critical aspects. This is compelling and essential reading about something that has never been more important.

***Tui Pea Luva*** is a collection of poems rich in the language of identity and the lived realities of tangata moana. Visually woven together by beautiful design and illustrations, this is an invitation to absorb the wisdom of Pasifika women.

All of this year's shortlisted titles explore important and fascinating topics with freshness and integrity, in ways guaranteed to have the maximum impact on tamaraki and rangatahi as they seek to understand our natural environment and our society – and their place within them.

### **Citation for winner:**

#### ***The Treaty of Waitangi***

Written by Ross Calman

Published by Oratia Books

This book is a must-read condensing of an extraordinarily complex and difficult subject, now made accessible to young people. It doesn't simplify or leave out key parts of the history or the origins of our founding document, nor the implications of what te Tiriti can mean to all of us. Imagine how difficult it must have been to distil so much information – information so important to our sense of who we are – but this is precisely what Ross Calman has done. *The Treaty of Waitangi* is a deeply important book at a crucial time, a book that will give young people the courage they need to explore this part of our history and identity.

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## Russell Clark Award for Illustration

### Speech by Mat Tait

This is the second year in a row that I've been privileged enough to be asked to present the Russell Clark Award for Illustration, and the temptation to recycle my comments from last year is great, primarily because an observation I made last year will remain true every year: the subjective nature of judging this type of creative work makes it very difficult to come to a consensus.

But there is something else that is consistent from year to year, and that's the judges' unfailing surprise and delight as they experience the enormous diversity of work entered into this category: from books by new talent putting everything they have onto the page to books showcasing a development of style by older faces looking to push the waka out.

In ***Alice and the Strange Bird***, Isaac du Toit's meticulously handmade dioramas-as-illustration make a bold and innovative visual accompaniment to an intriguing story.

In ***Hineraukatauri me Te Ara Pūoro*** readers may almost feel they can hear a distant melody as the evocative power of illustrations flows beyond the boundaries of the page.

In ***Poem for Atahua*** Sarah Wilkin's lyrical and sensitive art shows an unerring sense of colour, and a compositional flair that makes it an absolute delight to turn each page to reveal a new spread.

In ***Sad Sushi*** Anna Aldridge's artwork has a deftness of touch, marrying delicacy and beauty with endearing character design, and striking the exact tone required to deliver the serious subject matter.

And in Ruth Paul's ***You Can't Pat a Fish***, the illustrations have an effortless charm and sense of fun that only a master of the form could bring. They're completely irresistible.

While all of our shortlisted creators have approached the art of illustration in very different ways, every one of them has created something unexpected and wonderful for our tamariki to discover. They should all be very proud of what they have achieved.



## Citation for winner:

### ***Hineraukatauri me Te Ara Pūoro***

Illustrated by Rehua Wilson

Published by Huia Publishers

*Hineraukatauri me Te Ara Pūoro* tells the pūrākau of the becoming of Hineraukatauri, from chrysalis to atua of taonga pūoro – and Rehua Wilson's illustrations embody the kaupapa with a breath-taking synaesthetic skill that seems quite magical. There is an innate musical quality in the light and shade, the stabs and washes of bright colour, the delicate linework tracing a visual melody. Familiar atua are encountered in perhaps unfamiliar forms, the line between the literal and the figurative is always permeable, and the relationship between te Ao Wairua and te Ao Kikokiko is reflected in a way that feels right, feels tika.

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## Wright Family Foundation Te Kura Pounamu Awards

### **Speech by Justice-Manawanui Arahanga-Pryor**

Ki te kore te pūtake e mākūkūngia, e kore te rakau e tipu.

If the roots are not watered, the tree will not grow.

It is very exciting for the judges to have the Kura Pounamu award split into two different categories for the first time this year – recognising that while translation into te reo Māori and writing originally in te reo Māori are both crucial, they involve very different skills.

The health of te reo Māori literature lies in the continuing encouragement and growth of works written first and foremost in te reo, and we hope that the recognition that this additional prize in the category provides will in some small way contribute to the reo prospering.

This year's Wright Family Foundation Te Kura Pounamu Awards shortlist includes two books originally written in te reo Māori/ takea mai i te reo Māori:

***Hineraukatauri me Te Ara Pūoro*** uses lyrical language and evocative illustrations to tell the pūrākau of the becoming of Hineraukatauri and how she brought music into the world.

***Ngā Kupenga a Nanny Rina*** uses an authentic and enjoyable story to celebrate the tikanga of weaving and how this is passed from generation to generation.

The other three shortlisted books are translated works/ whakamāoritanga:

***A Ariā me te Atua o te Kūmara*** is an inspirational adventure story that incorporates pūrākau and the mātauranga of kūmara growing.

***Ka mātoro a Whetū rāua ko Kohu i Rotorua*** introduces tamariki to the significant places and stories of the Rotorua area with the use of fun facts and whimsical illustrations.

And in ***Ko ngā Whetū Kai o Matariki, ko Tupuānuku rāua ko Tupuārangi*** a playful tale highlights the importance of the stars Tupuānuku and Tupuārangi and the tikanga of food growing and gathering in the Matariki season.

All five shortlisted books show great understanding and engagement with te ao Māori as well as fluid, sophisticated use of te reo Māori.

**Citation for winner of Wright Family Foundation Te Kura Pounamu  
award for a book originally written in te reo Māori / mō tētehi  
pukapuka i takea mai i te reo Māori:**

***Hineraukatauri me Te Ara Pūoro***

Written by Elizabeth Gray and illustrated by Rehua Wilson

Published by Huia Publishers

In *Hineraukatauri me Te Ara Pūoro*, the kupu take the form of an oriori, a chant, a lullaby. The words' gentle rhythm invites readers to find their own intonation, melody, and voice, as Hineraukatauri finds hers. This is a book meant to be read aloud *in te reo Māori* – it is the poetry intrinsic to the language itself, so skilfully composed by kaitito Elizabeth Gray, that allows us to fully inhabit the kaupapa. While a translation would no doubt enchant readers in English as well, something beautiful would necessarily be lost. There could not be a more deserving first recipient for this award.

## Citation for winner of Wright Family Foundation Te Kura Pounamu award for a book translated into te reo Māori / mō tētehi pukapuka i whakamāoritia

### ***A Ariā me te Atua o te Kūmara***

Written by Elizabeth Gray and illustrated by Rehua Wilson

Published by Huia Publishers

Ariā and her fellow apprentices face many challenges as they climb to the stars in search of Whānui, to save the world's dying kūmara crops – but Matariki is already rising. Master storyteller Witi Ihimaera brings the wisdom of traditional pūrākau to life in an inspirational tale that has been translated expertly by Hēni Jacob. Meant to be read aloud, the smoothly flowing reo and captivating illustrations will draw tamariki in, so they feel they are travelling alongside Ariā on her quest. This pukapuka will also provide a platform to spark conversation about the significance of Matariki.

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## NZSA Best First Book Award

### **Speech by Stacy Gregg**

By definition, all books that are eligible for this award will be by talents who are considered 'newly minted'. Despite this, however, the judges felt that all of this year's shortlisted works presented as accomplished and wonderfully self-assured.

There is a unifying and profound commitment to pushing the boundaries of creative endeavour that underpins and connects these five titles – and every one of these writers and illustrators has very deservedly earned their place on this shortlist.

***Brave Kahu and the Pōrangī Magpie*** is a heartfelt story of sibling connection – and the importance of accepting differences – which follows three young hawks as they navigate their personal flight paths in a dangerous world.

***Play Wild*** creates brilliant opportunities to get kids off their screens and out exploring, creating and connecting with the natural world, with its enticing, fresh and modern options for activity play.

***The Raven's Eye Runaways*** is spellbinding and skilful in its world-building. This adventure set in a realm where books and reading are forbidden puts the power of language at the heart of the story.

***The Witch of Maketu and the Bleating Lambs*** refuses to kowtow to the norms of the picture book genre. Unpretentious, irreverent words combine with illustrations that are both lush and distinctive.

And in ***The Writing Desk***, the graphic novel format is used to create a compelling narrative that melds historical fact with fictional licence in a deeply personal story.

The creators of these five remarkable books all know precisely how to excite, enthrall and engage young minds. We look forward to seeing much more from them in future.

### **Citation for winner:**

#### ***The Raven's Eye Runaways***

Written by Claire Mabey

Published by Allen & Unwin

Rich, atmospheric prose propels this beautifully-inked fantasy quest, set in a medieval realm in which reading and writing are forbidden arts restricted strictly to the elites. Contemporary concerns are given profound, allegorical parallels and resonate on the page. Claire Mabey's genuine love of language shines brightly and her ability to craft pacy narrative sweeps you up and away into this dark, dangerous world where young bookbinder Getwin, her friends and a one-eyed raven seek to unravel the mysteries of Prime. *The Raven's Eye Runaways* is the work of a writer who wields her words with exquisite care and understands the power of great storytelling.

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# Margaret Mahy Book of the Year Award

## Speech by Mat Tait and Feana Tu'akoi

Creating a book is hard. This work can be painful, lonely and full of self-doubt – and it never ever feels quite finished.

So, to all the creators here, we want to acknowledge your graft and fortitude, and the courage it takes to relinquish your work to the world, knowing it'll never truly be yours again.

To all our finalists, and to editors and publishers who support you, we say congratulations.

The legendary Margaret Mahy, for whom our supreme award is named, once said, “I think it is most important that a local literature should exist, so that imaginations of children are colonised in the first instance by images from their immediate world...”

Whether aimed at pēpē or rangatahi, or somewhere in-between, all of our category winners reflect something of what it is to live in Aotearoa today.

***Titiro Look***, though simple on the surface, is an expertly layered exploration of first kupu, in reo Māori and reo Pākehā.

In ***Detective Beans and the Case of the Missing Hat***, hard-boiled-detective meets kitty-with-a-curfew in a gloriously illustrated madcap mystery.

***The Paradise Generation*** is a dystopian rollercoaster ride, where rangatahi fight to uncover what's really going on in their seemingly utopian society.

***The Treaty of Waitangi*** is an immersive, extensively researched dive into the histories surrounding te Tiriti and their importance for all New Zealanders today.

***Hineraukatauri me Te Ara Pūoro*** is an exquisitely illustrated, poetic pūrākau, which follows the atua as she finds her voice through taonga pūoro.

***A Ariā me te Atua o te Kūmara*** is a beautifully translated magical adventure, that skilfully blends both contemporary and traditional storytelling.

All of these books are superb examples of the fresh and intelligent literature written for our tamariki and rangatahi, but the Margaret Mahy Book of the Year Award recognises something more – an aspirational book of outstanding overall excellence and significance.

After extensive discussion with both panels, we agreed unanimously on one book that will not only have enormous impact on readers, but is particularly important for our time.

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

### ***The Treaty of Waitangi***

Written by Ross Calman

Published by Oratia Books

Ross Calman introduces this book by acknowledging that history is not one but many stories, told by a multiplicity of voices, each with their own cultural, political, and personal context. This idea may be new to readers, and it's presented with great honesty – yes, this history too has a viewpoint, and perhaps an unfamiliar one.

*The Treaty of Waitangi* is a miracle of concision without sacrificing complexity. It is written clearly and inclusively without avoiding uncomfortable truths; multiple sources are cited so that young readers are able to continue their learning about this important topic. At a time when the relevance of te Tiriti is being questioned, Ross Calman makes the case for its enduring power as this country's founding and legitimising document with refreshing integrity.

This book, like Te Tiriti itself, is for us all.

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