



Judges' Commentaries on Finalists and Winners

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BookHub Picture Book Award

Speech by Lauryn Urquhart

Picture books are powerhouses, they serve as a bridge between visual literacy and language acquisition while exposing young minds to new concepts, diverse perspectives, art, and the world around them.

As judges read through the entries for this category, we were impressed by the powerful blend of emerging and established voices providing both mirrors and portals for our rangatahi. The passion behind each creation was evident – it was not an easy job to narrow it down to five.

The shortlisted books stood out for their creativity and novel content. Through gentle handling of difficult emotions to brilliant world-building to absolute fun, these books prove that Aotearoa's storytelling is in a golden age.

A Guide to Rocks opens up space to begin conversations about emotional health, and empowers us to share our vulnerabilities.

Koro Wētā encourages curiosity about the natural world while masterfully balancing hilarity and horror in a uniquely New Zealand setting.

Left to Nowhere will linger in your mind with its haunting illustrations and reminders of the consequences of our actions.

Pūkeko Who-keko? stands out through its clever wordplay and interactive mystery, which is pure reading fun.

The Only Dinosaur in School captures imaginations by blending whimsy with self-worth in a relatable way

These are all books our youngsters will relate to and enjoy, which is important for building lifelong readers.

Citation for winner:

A Guide to Rocks

Written by Sacha Cotter and illustrated by Josh Morgan

Published by Huia Publishers

A Guide to Rocks explores the ways in which people deal with emotions and anxieties in an approachable and non-condescending way, and challenges typical masculine stereotypes with humour and tenderness. The quintessentially New Zealand text coupled with painterly illustrations helps to frame and drive the story. The characters are set to become icons, who will help to initiate many necessary whānau conversations around vulnerabilities and emotional health. This is a book that teaches, entertains and empowers – an impressive feat for this type of subject matter.

Wright Family Foundation Esther Glen Award for Junior Fiction

Speech by Simie Simpson

The books in this year's junior fiction shortlist accommodate a wide range of reading levels and the diverse interests of their readers – while also recognising the commonalities we all share as humans.

Threading through this list are themes of friendship, family, believing in yourself and finding your own path, while the vehicles for these stories cover art, music, the natural world, mysteries and fantasy, and highlight the importance of creativity and the world around us.

Detective Stanley and the Mystery at the Museum has an originality that never talks down, with a dry humour, a compelling art mystery, and the detailed and captivating illustrations.

Dreamslinger is an immersive fantasy that blends detailed world-building and characterisation with a page-turning plot, and deftly incorporates themes of acceptance, grief and kindness.

Kimi the Kekeno's Big Adventure shows a deep respect and admiration for the natural world – and emphasises the importance of friendship, family and finding your path.

The Terrible Trio: The (not so) Superheroes is a cleverly written and expressively illustrated story that turns the superhero trope on its head, with themes of self-belief and friendship – and a huge serving of humour.

Violet and the Velvets: The Case of the Angry Ghost brings together a symphony of friendship and competition in a school-based musical mystery that is inclusive, sassy and relatable.

All these books have been a pleasure to read, and we know the kids are in good hands with writing of this calibre on offer.

Citation for winner:

Dreamslinger

Written by Graci Kim

Published by Penguin, Penguin Random House

In ***Dreamslinger***, meticulous world-building and characterisation are expertly combined with a humming plot to create an engaging fantasy that readers will want to immerse themselves in. Graci Kim has created a world that is skilfully inclusive and peopled by characters from all around the globe, ensuring that all readers feel seen and represented. At the same time, issues of marginalisation and grief are deftly addressed, alongside important themes of self-acceptance, belief, trust, kindness, friendship and family – including the families we make for ourselves.

Wheeler's Books Award for Young Adult Fiction

Speech by Chris Reed

The finalists in this category show just how strong and varied contemporary New Zealand writing for young adults has become.

Each of these books takes its readers seriously, placing young people at the centre of stories shaped by identity, grief, danger, resilience, and self-discovery. Each author has created a compelling world and characters who readers can care about.

Hiva & Heartbeats is a lively celebration of Pacific identity, set against the music and energy of the Y2K era.

It's a Bit More Complicated Than That is a raw debut novel about two young people trying to make sense of shared loss.

Spider Games: In the City of Spies is a fast-paced spy thriller featuring a neurodivergent hero who is beginning to recognise his own strengths.

The Lost Saint is a time shift adventure involving sacrifice, identity, and the risks of the past.

And ***The Retreat*** is a tense psychological thriller exploring grief, safety, and the influence of a cult.

Together, these five shortlisted books reflect the ambition, range, and quality of writing being produced for rangatahi in Aotearoa today.

Citation for winner:

The Lost Saint

Written by Rachael Crow

Published by Allen & Unwin Aotearoa New Zealand

The Lost Saint is an odyssey that blends historical grit and adventure with a simmering, mature romance. The world that Rachel Crow has built is full of sensory detail and unpredictable peril, and readers will be transported to a brutal 14th-century Germany, a place where no character is safe. With sharp dialogue and well-crafted character arcs, this immersive and compelling adventure fantasy grips the reader right from its explosive start. Balancing high-stakes tension with a profound exploration of the concepts of sacrifice and identity, ***The Lost Saint*** marks a thrilling beginning to a new series.

Elsie Locke Award for Non-Fiction

Speech by Lucy Black

Non-Fiction is a big category, and Aotearoa is full of big thinking book creators.

The creators of the five shortlisted books all know young readers well, and treat them with the respect and grace they deserve.

In ***Hooked: Learning to Fish***, Al Brown weaves memoir, guide book, lists and cookery into a colourful and whimsical book that challenges young people to get hooked on the craft of fishing.

Omnibird: An Avian Investigator's Handbook will inspire readers to take notice of our feathered friends, with its clever mix of fun facts, identification tips and breathtaking bird portraits.

Survive Aotearoa is packed to the brim with meticulously researched and absorbing stories of tenacious New Zealanders who have somehow survived dangerous and bizarre adventures.

Taniwha is an action-packed tour of the taniwha of Aotearoa that also tells us a lot about who we are and how we live our lives alongside these secretive creatures. Every page is a work of art.

Whenua: Māori Pūrākau of Aotearoa uses detailed illustrations and beautiful word-craft to delve deep into the land beneath us and tell stories of how the mountains and rivers were formed and how it came to be our place.

These five special books assume that young readers are up for a challenge. They inspire fun, and call on young people to go out into the world with curiosity and optimism.

Citation for winner:

Whenua: Māori Pūrākau of Aotearoa

Written and illustrated by Isobel Joy Te Aho-White

Published by Little Moa, Hachette Aotearoa New Zealand

Whenua: Māori Pūrākau of Aotearoa is an all-rounder of a book that will appeal to all ages. Written with casual confidence, the text feels alive, like a story told by a family member. Each pūrākau incorporates well researched little details that, together with the masterful and dynamic illustrations, make the characters feel familiar and relatable – brave explorers are featured, but so too are cheeky siblings and gossiping whales. **Whenua** is an instant classic, a treasure for all homes in Aotearoa, a beautiful tool that ties us to our land.

Russell Clark Award for Illustration

Speech by Cassie Hart (read by Lucy Black)

The breadth of illustration talent we have here in Aotearoa is phenomenal, and judges loved the way illustrators' skills were on display in books across all categories.

From fun to serious, light illustrative touches to deep detail, there was definitely something to appeal to every taste – and this made it exceptionally difficult to decide a shortlist, let alone a winner.

Each of this year's finalists has demonstrated remarkable mastery of their skills, and has brought unique, fresh imagery to the pages that their illustrations grace.

For ***At Home on the Farm***, Ned Barraud has combined an understated colour palette with loose yet controlled linework to create a New Zealand gothic feel and evoke the challenges of farm life.

In ***Folk Remedy Book 1: The Hidden World of the Yōkai***, Jem Yoshioka's exuberant illustrations and cleverly differentiated colour palettes create a great sense of movement and mystery to draw in readers.

For ***Kupe and the Great Octopus of Muturangi*** Mat Tait uses bold, dramatic colours and illustrations reminiscent of whakairo/carving in a fresh and vivid depiction of a familiar pūrākau.

Gavin Bishop's ***Taniwha*** is a gorgeous, large-format book full of luscious artwork that uses a stunning range of compositions and styles, where every detail feels intentional.

And in ***Whenua: Māori Pūrākau of Aotearoa***, Isobel Joy Te Aho-White's beautiful, painterly illustrations have a cinematic quality that supports and embellishes the pūrākau within the pages.

From the overall vision, to the small details, these five books sing loud and true.

Citation for winner:

Kupe and the Great Octopus of Muturangi

Illustrated and written by Mat Tait

Published by Allen & Unwin Aotearoa New Zealand

The bold illustrative style of ***Kupe and the Great Octopus of Muturangi*** adds drama to this vivid retelling of the pūrākau of Kupe and his people chasing a great octopus across the ocean to Aotearoa. The words, illustrations and design work as one – with hand-rendered typography adding dramatic emphasis to the storytelling and illustrations, and shifts in colour from spread to spread carrying the mood and pacing of the pūrākau. This is a skilfully designed and engaging book that maximises use of vibrant colour and illustration to make the story pop off each and every page.

Wright Family Foundation Te Kura Pounamu Awards

Speech by Te Wairere Ngaia

He puāwai au nō runga i te tikanga, he rau rengarenga nō roto i te raukura. Ko taku raukura he manawanui ki te ao e! Paiheretia te rangi, paiheretia te whenua, paiheretia te pou herenga tangata o te motu, Te Arikinui Kuini Ngā wai hono i te pō, rire hau Paimārire ki a koe. Otirā, Paimārire ki a tātou katoa.

It is an absolute honour to stand before you tonight to celebrate all of our shortlisted and winning authors, including our finest original and translated works written in te reo Māori.

This year, the calibre of entries has been nothing short of extraordinary. We have seen storytellers push boundaries and tackle profound and diverse subject matter, while capturing the rich essence of our reo and tikanga.

The 2026 shortlist includes two books originally written in te reo Māori/ takea mai i te reo Māori:

Kupe me te Wheke nui a Muturangi is a modern retelling of a pūrākau, brought to life through engaging storytelling.

Te Onehaumako is an exciting and thought-provoking time travel adventure for young adult readers.

The other three shortlisted books are translated works/ whakamāoritanga:

He Taonga te Toka is a clever story tackling important themes of emotional literacy and modern masculinity in Aotearoa.

Matariki ki te Ao provides a comprehensive guide to Matariki and its meaning, including histories from around the world alongside Māori knowledge,

And ***Taku Ikura Tuatahi*** provides a clear and accessible guide to practices related to ikura in a way that is both informative and empowering.

From a judging perspective, these books blend rich curriculum-aligned knowledge with striking visual appeal. But most importantly, the books have an undeniable reading appeal that mesmerises our tamariki and taiohi. Not only do these books just teach our young people how to read; they inspire them to feel, to imagine, and to connect deeply with their identity and heritage.

To all our shortlisted authors, illustrators, and translators: your dedication to nurturing Te Reo Māori through literature is shaping the future of Aotearoa. My strongest recommendation to you tonight is simple: please, keep writing. Your voices are vital, and your stories are needed now more than ever.

Kei ngaku rangatira, tēnā koutou, mouriora ki tātou katoa!

**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:**

Kupe me te Wheke nui a Muturangi

Written and illustrated by Mat Tait

Published by Allen & Unwin Aotearoa New Zealand

Kua whakatakotoria anō te pūrākau o ***Kupe me te Wheke Nui a Muturangi*** i tēnei pukapuka, e noho nei hei pūrākau tūāpapa mō Aotearoa, ā, e kōrero nei i te hekenga a Kupe mō ngā reanga me te hunga pānui o ēnei rā. Kapi katoa ana te pukapuka ki ngā mahi mātātoa a Kupe, ā, kei roto katoa i te reo Māori. E whakaahua ana te pukapuka i te māia, i te hiranga, i te ahurea, i te whakapapa hoki o ngā mahi hōpara a Kupe. Ka mutu hoki te ātaahua o ngā toi, e whakarākei ana i te mana o te kupu, e pōhiri hoki nei i te taiohi ki te pānui i a ia. Ko te reo, he kounga, he ātaahua, ā, nā te toki ngao matariki i tārai. Kua eke ki ngā taumata hirahira o te ao tuhituhi mā ngā Tamariki. Ka mutu pea.

Kupe me te Wheke nui a Muturangi is a compelling retelling of one of Aotearoa's foundational narratives, bringing the legendary voyage of Kupe to life for a new generation of readers. Rich in action, adventure, cultural significance and te reo Māori, the story captures the determination of Kupe and the importance of exploration, courage and whakapapa. The illustrations are stunning, deepening the impact of the text while remaining inviting for younger audiences. Written in lyrical and engaging te reo Māori, this beautifully crafted book is an outstanding contribution to Māori children's literature.

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

He Taonga te Toka

Written by Sacha Cotter, illustrated by Josh Morgan, and translated by Kawata Teepa

Published by Huia Publishers

Kātahi te pukapuka whakaahua mīharo ko tēnei, arā ***He Taonga te Toka***. He tauira rawe o te kōrero paki, ā, e mārama ana, e māori ana, e ngāwari ana te whai i te rere o tōna whakamāoritanga. Ka aro atu te pukapuka nei ki ngā kaupapa hirahira o ngā kare-ā-roto o tētahi tama me te tau o tōna māramatanga ka māmā ake ai te taumahatanga o ngā kare a-roto ki te whakapuaki ērā ki ētahi atu. He rawe, he hōhonu hoki te whakaritenga o te toka hei kaupapa kōrero mā te whānau. He pukapuka ātaahua ka maumahara tonutia ana, ā, e tika ana tōna whiwhi a ia i tēnei hōnore nui.

He Taonga te Toka is an outstanding example of picture book storytelling, with a translation that is fluent, natural and accessible. Tackling the important theme of emotional literacy with humour, sensitivity and imagination, it follows a young boy's journey to understand that the big feelings he carries will become lighter when shared. The inventive rock metaphor is both accessible and profound, creating opportunities for meaningful conversations within whānau. Striking illustrations work in perfect harmony with the text, adding layers of meaning and emotional richness.

NZSA Best First Book Award

Speech by Chris Reed

Each of the finalists for the NZSA Best First Book Award demonstrates the confidence, imagination, and cultural richness of new voices in children's and young adult literature in our country.

These five books range across graphic novels, picture books, and young adult fiction, yet each introduces readers to a distinctive world and a story told with genuine assurance.

Folk Remedy Book 1: The Hidden World of the Yōkai is an energetic graphic novel that brings together family history, folklore, and adventure in 1920s Japan.

Hiva & Heartbeats captures the humour, uncertainty, and intensity of adolescence through the lively diary of a Tokelau teenager growing up in 1990s New Zealand.

Hunt for Niu Tupu is a warm and quietly affecting story about a child, a grandfather, and the knowledge shared between generations.

Te Onehaumako is an ambitious young adult adventure in te reo Māori, taking its protagonist through time to encounter his ancestors and understand the connections between past and present.

And ***The Lost Words*** celebrates te reo Māori in an imaginative story of a mother and daughter gathering words so they can be treasured and carried into the future.

Taken separately, each of these books is a taonga and highly worthy of praise; however, taken as a group, these finalists reveal the continuing strength of emerging writers and illustrators in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the many and varied forms a first book can take.

Citation for winner:

Te Onehaumako

Written by Zeb Tamihana Nicklin

Published by Huia Publishers

Ko ***Te Onehaumako*** he pukapuka kua tuhia katoatia ki te reo Māori. He pūrākau whakaoho hirikapo e aro pū ana ki te ao o te rangatahi. Ka mau ngā whatu o te kaipānui ki ngā whārangi o te puka nei. He ngāwari te whai hononga ki ngā kiripuaki nā te ngahau o ngā nuka reo. Waihoki, e kaha whakatauiria ana a ***Te Onehaumako*** i ngā mātāpono me ngā tikanga hei ārahi i te taiohi i tēnei ao hurihuri. He pukapuka whakahirahira a ***Te Onehaumako*** e whakakao ana i ngā kawenga tiaki i te taiao me te ānamata o te tangata.

Te Onehaumako, written entirely in te reo Māori, is an original and thought-provoking novella aimed at young adult readers. The engaging story pulls in readers from the start, and sustains their interest throughout with thoughtful pacing, relatable characters and clear themes. It follows a heartfelt journey of discovery, gently guiding readers to understand that to truly thrive, we must respect, nurture, and protect the natural world. ***Te Onehaumako*** is an

important book that will spark meaningful conversations about sustainability and our shared environmental responsibilities.

Margaret Mahy Book of the Year Award

Speech by Simie Simpson and Te Wairere Ngaia

“E ngā iho pūmanawa - rehe ake nei, rehe ake nei”

To all of our role models (authors), you are all truly talented.

Writing and illustrating is often viewed as a solitary exercise, however, the creation of a book requires a community to bring stories into the light - from the initial inspiration to the final physical creation and most importantly, it needs readers who make these books their own.

We want to thank all the writers and illustrators for their talent, courage and mahi in bringing their stories into the world, and to our most important readers: tamariki.

To everyone else in this room and across the country: let us continue to uplift, encourage, and actively support the talented authors of Aotearoa. Encourage them to create, guide them to enter these awards, and help us foster the exceptional homegrown talent we are so privileged to have.

There is no doubt that the finalists in this year's awards reflect our communities, and the world we live in. But it is the range and quality of so many of the books submitted this year that stood out to the judges.

The Margaret Mahy Book of the Year Award, however, acknowledges a book that stands out for its writing, significance, production and overall excellence. After extensive discussion with both panels, it was unanimously agreed that this year's winner exemplified all these qualities.

Citation for Margaret Mahy Book of the Year:

A Guide to Rocks

Written by Sacha Cotter and illustrated by Josh Morgan

Published by Huia Publishers

A Guide to Rocks is storytelling at its finest. It is layered and emotionally intelligent, challenging us to think about stereotypes and to look after our emotional wellbeing, while also entertaining the youngest of readers – and their wider whānau as well. The rhythmic language guarantees that it will be a popular read aloud, while the detailed and evocative illustrations ensure close visual readings. With ***A Guide to Rocks***, Sacha Cotter and Josh Morgan have created a book that tackles a serious topic and yet maintains a sense of humour and joy, without a hint of glibness. This captivating book belongs in every home, school and library in Aotearoa.
