



New Zealand Post  
**BOOK AWARDS**



**JUDGES' REPORT**  
**2009**



## **New Zealand Post Book Awards for Children and Young Adults**

# **Judges' Report 2009**

For the judges of this year's awards the sound of an engine idling on the driveway signalled the arrival of a courier-delivered package of New Zealand books – and the start of a summer of reading for the 2009 New Zealand Post Book Awards for Children and Young Adults.

There were more than 130 books, many with a colourful and intriguing cover, and strong production values. These promised the consolations of literature both great and good. Others hinted at considerable work undertaken but, at the same time, these seemed unlikely candidates for high honours. 'Never judge a book by its cover' . . . well, no, but sometimes a cover is a good indicator of content to come.

Such was the range and diversity of books published for young people in New Zealand in 2008. New authors finding and making a voice for themselves and, at times, making their own books as well. Self-publishing was alive and well even if the results were, more often than not, rarely as good as their creators intended.

Books from mainstream publishers continued to grow in confidence in design, typography and subject matter even if editorial glitches, which should not have been inevitable, still inevitably occurred. Mistakes in orthography, sequencing (for picture books particularly) and even in matters of fact were dishearteningly frequent; all suggesting various pressures and economies at work including, perhaps, lack of time and specialist editorial skills.

Interesting to see was the number of titles originating offshore. One first time author was published in luscious hardback by a major US publisher; another writer was published simultaneously in various countries including initially in the US; a number of books by local authors and illustrators were first published in Australia and at least one in England. Concomitant to this development was the fact that the settings of several books by New Zealand writers were not in New Zealand at all. Writers and their agents are casting their nets wide and making very successful catches.

Another trend, if a trend it can be called because the pattern is a very old one, was series publishing. Horse stories and spy stories in series, by New Zealand writers, achieved top sales here and overseas from where, once again, their books originated. Sequels and parts of trilogies were present in the submissions as well and both of the latter are represented in the list of finalists.

Paperback publishing continued to be dominant in the market and while this is understandable with respect to fiction the justification is less apparent when it comes to picture books. Skimping on content-integral endpapers, for instance, may save money but ultimately this does the book, the reader and, indeed, the publisher, a disservice. Wouldn't it be a nice irony if, in these days of economic hardship, quality hardbacks were to regain some greater intrinsic value on the part of the buyer as well as the publisher? After all, who ever regretted buying quality?

As judges we thoroughly relished the opportunity to read nearly everything that was published for New Zealand children and young adults in 2008. We applaud the authors, illustrators and their publishers for continuing to strive for stories that stimulate, excite, take risks, inspire and, ultimately, become part of the fabric of a reader's memory. The importance of an early engagement with books, stories and reading, cannot be underestimated.

In the list of nominees and finalists this year we recognised stalwart veterans of the art and craft of writing and illustrating, and celebrated the emergence of new voices whose words and images will ensure that writing for children and young adults in this country remains in fine shape for the foreseeable future.

Bill Nagelkerke (Convenor), Jenni Keestra, Rosemary Tisdall  
Judging Panel 2009

# Picture Book Category

Picture books came in all shapes and sizes this year. With some notable exceptions, the majority were in paperback format, serviceable in themselves but lacking that *sine qua non* of the classic picture book, namely the durable hardback that is still prevalent in many other countries and is so much more useful for group and individual story sessions.

That said, picture books were the second largest category of nominees and many were perfectly acceptable examples of the genre, although there were a few in which the judges failed to find very many redeeming features.

At this level of readership, especially where discrimination is usually in the hands of parents and caregivers, young children deserve the very best. There seems little point in producing inferior books when so many overseas, commercially-focused imports already flood the market. Even very good local picture books often need better production and editing so why not channel the costs incurred in publishing lesser material into making the good even better?

On the positive side, the judges this year noted an improvement in the textual success of rhyming books, books from Māori publishers that evinced some exciting new potential, possibly the first portrayal in a New Zealand picture book of a gay couple with a child, and some innovative design. On the negative side, was some pandering to nostalgia and the tourist market, and an overall lack of sophistication and *frisson*.

Many picture books from Australia, the United States and Europe offer these two last qualities as a matter of course; witness the translated picture books coming from Wellington's Gecko Press.

## Picture Book Finalists

***Duck's Stuck!*** Written by **Kyle Mewburn**, illustrated by **Ali Teo** and **John O'Reilly** (Scholastic New Zealand)

The dictum 'less is more' can be perfectly applied to this word-fest. Short, snappy alliterative rhymes combine with clean, well executed retro-style art, perfectly capturing the dire situation in which Duck finds himself. Greedy for grain, Duck's head becomes stuck in the barn wall and it needs all the help of his farmyard friends, plus one unexpected and diminutive character, to help set him free. This is a great read aloud, and great fun as well.

***Every Second Friday*** written by **Kiri Lightfoot**, illustrated by **Ben Galbraith** (Hodder Children's Books)

Margaret (Margi) and Thomas (Totty) go to stay with their eccentric, collector father for the weekend where they enjoy an imaginative time amongst all the 'bits and bobs' at his house. Digital technology is used with panache and polish to represent this book's cornucopia of images. The book's endpapers also give an added dimension to the straightforward and positive narrative. Readers will have lots to look at, and for, as they return again and again to this impressively produced hardback.

***Piggity-Wiggity Jiggity Jig*** written by **Diana Neild**, illustrated by **Philip Webb** (Scholastic New Zealand)

New author and veteran illustrator give a virtuoso performance in rhyming text together with heart-warming watercolour illustrations in this tale of a young pig with a long name. This story of self-acceptance will resonate with children and adults alike, the sophistication of the language blending effortlessly with the well-realised emotional accuracy of the words. The book cries out to be read aloud and will, indeed, withstand a multitude of repeated readings – as long as the paperback holds out.

***Roadworks*** written by **Sally Sutton**, illustrated by **Brian Lovelock** (Walker Books)

One of the relatively few hardback productions, this is a first book by a new illustrator. Once again careful attention to design offers readers a complete package, from the textured endpapers to the roll-call of big machines at the end of the story. In between, a lively, noisy text takes us on a road-building journey. Strong lines, colours and textures, onomatopoeia and a variety of artistic angles and perspectives, all bring the roadworks to active life. A complex task is reduced to the most basic elements without losing accuracy. Once more, this story will beg to be read again and again.

***The Were-Nana*** written by **Melinda Szymanik**, illustrated by **Sarah Nelisiwe Anderson** (Scholastic New Zealand)

More new talent in this title from first time illustrator and author (the latter also had a novel submitted in the Junior Fiction category). Stella Rosa's nana is due to arrive from a far-distant and somewhat mysterious country and Stella Rosa's brother Simon is making the whole prospect of meeting and greeting quite frightening. Cool colours and some dynamic digital illustrations lend a satisfactory scary allure to this tale, whose roots are embedded in the age-old fear of the unknown.

## Picture Book Honour Award

It's rare to get a picture book that both rhymes well and reads aloud well; this is a literary skill that few writers get right, and fewer get right the first time. To achieve not only this, but to create a work that also hits the right notes for both a child and adult audience is exceptional indeed. For these reasons the judges are delighted to make an Honour Award to a book that has achieved such valuable distinctions: ***Piggity-Wiggity Jiggity Jig*** written by **Diana Neild**, and illustrated by **Philip Webb** (Scholastic New Zealand).

## Picture Book Category Winner

To attempt a fresh assault upon a perennially popular topic and to carry it off with artistic and literary aplomb is no mean feat. To do so in a book which has been carefully crafted and designed, so it cries out to be held, to be read, to be bought is equally significant. The judges are confident that the winner of this year's Picture Book category will withstand the gulping, slurping and crunching of readers devouring its words and pictures, and are delighted to present the award to ***Roadworks*** written by **Sally Sutton**, and illustrated by **Brian Lovelock** (Walker Books).

# Junior Fiction Category

As in past years the list of submissions in this category was long, in fact it was the largest category for 2008. The judges saw a pleasing range of titles aimed at the younger end of the junior fiction spectrum and were very pleased to be able to include one in the list of finalists, with several others being close contenders.

As a whole, this category was in solid if not sensational shape. We must say that several books *looked* good from the outside but lacked flavour when tasted and we wondered if, sometimes past popularity of author or genre was automatically equated with quality. Some texts might have been improved if more time had gone into editing and improving the work. We wondered if, in the current economic crisis, this category might not be as extensive in the coming years.

At the same time a number of very good titles, including some of the finalists, had rather lacklustre covers that might well detract readers from discovering the riches within.

We noted the ongoing appearance of titles in Penguin Books' *Kiwi Bites* series (albeit the most recent two could have been re-branded as the *Outline of a Kiwi Bite* series). These books remain a fresh and vibrant offering for this age group and we hope the production of the series will revert to its pseudo-chewed *raison d'être*.

Other publishers, for example Mallinson Rendel, produced some lively and attractive titles for the same age of reader, while Random House introduced us to the first two titles featuring the engaging Ozzie Kingsford and his family. It's great to see that our younger readers are finally getting more books aimed squarely at them.

There were other single-author books in series, notably in the spy and pony genres, published in Britain and selling very successfully here and overseas. As well as two locally-produced horse stories, there was humour, history (two books set in the Great Depression and both finalists) and histrionics, not to mention sports, sci-fi and school stories.

Authors were comfortable about taking their tales offshore and to imaginary lands. As previously mentioned, the judges encountered exciting new voices, which augurs well for the future.

## Junior Fiction Finalists

***Chicken Feathers*** by **Joy Cowley**, illustrated by **David Elliot**  
(Puffin)

Set firmly in the United States, this moving tale has universal resonances. Josh, who lives on a chicken farm, is about to have a brother or sister; his grandmother has arrived to run the household; his friend Annalee has suddenly grown up faster than Josh ever expected; no one believes him when he says that his pet chicken Semolina can talk, *and* has the answer to who is stealing the eggs. When Semolina goes missing, Josh's familiar but changing world takes an even deeper dive. Humorous, wise (although a little preachy at times) and with a delightfully memorable ending, *Chicken Feathers* is a timeless tale that will appeal to children everywhere.

***Enemy at the Gate*** by **Philippa Werry**  
(Scholastic New Zealand)

Taking place in the Great Depression at the time of the polio epidemic *Enemy at the Gate* eschews history to give readers first and foremost a cast of characters who speak convincingly to us now. Tom's family enjoys the restricted but enjoyable pastimes of visits to the library, outings to the beach and forays to the cinema, ringed by seasonal events and the school year. The 'infantile paralysis' epidemic changes all that and life becomes confined to the house and correspondence lessons, and the all-pervading fear of the deadly disease, which eventually does strike one member of the family. Tom's passion for running and his chance encounter with his hero Jack Lovelock (a great touch this) are bright spots in an otherwise devastating year.

***Five (and a bit) Days in the Life of Ozzie Kingsford***  
by **Val Bird**, illustrated by **Rebecca Cundy**  
(Random House New Zealand)

This is the second in a series of books about Ozzie Kingsford, his sister Holly ("the Brat"), his parents and his best friend Fletch. Author and artist combine zany graphics with a tongue-in-cheek text to produce for-the-most-part genuinely funny and convincing accounts of familiar but over-the-top family scenarios. In this episode Uncle Rusty is soon to visit and the Kingsford household is in an even greater uproar than usual. The book is enticingly produced with varying fonts, numerous illustrations, and distinct chunks of texts all well-integrated and packaged in a pleasing format.

***Old Drumble* by Jack Lasenby**  
(HarperCollins Publishers)

Also set in the lean times of the 1930s, *Old Drumble* sees this favourite author combine his tall-tale humour with a more reflective and at times poignant voice, as he recounts the Waharoa summer in which a totally convincing young Jack fulfils his ambition to walk alongside his hero, drover Andy, and Andy's remarkable dog Old Drumble. There are tall stories a-plenty, much folk-wisdom and many unobtrusive insights into the life of a small, tightly-knit rural community. Andy's stories have the power to sustain Jack when sad days arrive – and they have the power to sustain readers, too.

***Payback* by Michelle Kelly**  
(Scholastic New Zealand)

This first book by a new author is lively, convincing, funny and tightly written. Young teenager Riley has seemingly numerous problems: he is short, accident-prone, estranged from his girlfriend Kelly for reasons he doesn't properly understand, and now he's mixed up in a potentially dangerous (to him) feud with arch nemesis Vince McGerk, a person he has antagonised once too often. It doesn't help that he and Vince are in the softball team together and that Vince is promising retribution – payback – when Riley least expects it. Meanwhile Kelly has been seen hanging out with Vince. Payback, when it comes, is unexpected and, unusually, thought-provokingly ambiguous.

## **Junior Fiction Category Winner**

Writing history to make past times believable and interesting is a difficult task for any writer but the winner of the Junior Fiction category has such an assured lightness of touch and such a sureness of what he writes about, that his characters step out from the past to walk beside us in the present, for a time as real and as relevant as ourselves and the times in which we live. The author of this category winner is an icon of New Zealand writing for young people. The winning book is ***Old Drumble* by Jack Lasenby** (HarperCollins Publishers).

# Young Adult Fiction Category

Overall, the judges were very impressed by the high standard of Young Adult Fiction this year. Authors ranged from first-timers to old hands. It was exciting to see so many of our 'senior' New Zealand writers continuing to produce good quality reads for the older age group. The fact that five of them are finalists is evidence of their continuing ability to draw us in to their literary worlds and capture us completely.

Coincidentally there seemed to be a theme running through the five finalist titles: questioning. In *The 10pm Question* young Frankie is the all-time question guru. Trei and Souk in *Scorched Bone* question the methods of the mammoth hunters from the North and set off on a journey to find their hunting secrets. What is the creature, Gool, who is able to nourish her brood from afar while they slowly kill their prey? Juno of Taris spends her life questioning the rules of her community and the past lives of her parents. In *The Tomorrow Code*, Tane and Rebecca seem to be constantly asking themselves questions about the messages they receive from the future.

The judges would like to make a comment about editing. Often our final debates and selections came down to detail. So often the writer's work was poorly served by having grammatical errors; unnecessary typos; incorrect spelling and general inconsistencies. Mistakes such as these dragged the story down, and affected the overall quality of the book.

# Young Adult Fiction Finalists

## ***The 10pm Question* by Kate De Goldi**

(Longacre Press)

There was never any question, pardon the pun, that Frankie would weave his way into our hearts. From the outset, his friends, Gigs and Sydney, and Frankie's worries made us smile, laugh and melt as his relationships developed and unfolded. We could picture Ma with her ever-patient ears, gently shaking her head and smiling to herself after Frankie leaves her room at night mostly reassured by her answers. The characters are well-drawn and multi-layered and they develop credibly. Likewise the writing is very strong. The unspoken words of Frankie's anticipated loss of Sydney, along with Frankie's reluctant but eventual acceptance of his need to step back from his mother, build the tension of the story. A wonderful, sophisticated book.

## ***Chronicles of Stone #1: Scorched Bone* by Vincent Ford**

(Scholastic New Zealand)

Set in an ancient time this book, the first of a trilogy, is an exciting and insightful look at life for the prehistoric hunters. There is plenty of action driving the story forward as twins, Souk and Trej, travel north to learn all they can about the hunting of mammoths from the men of the North. Souk is also drawn for reasons she doesn't quite understand, but feels it is her destiny as a shaman to make the journey. Survival and adventure themes are well explored and attention to detail is commendable. There is obvious excellent and thorough research, neither preachy nor didactic but embedded as part of the story. The elements of history will make this a firm favourite with many readers.

## ***Gool* by Maurice Gee**

(Puffin)

Xantee and Lo, son and daughter of Hari and Pearl (from the first title in this trilogy, *Salt*), set out on a perilous mission through jungles and mountains to find and kill the 'Gool' that is threatening Hari's life. It takes them to the scenes of their parents' past lives where they must confront the Company and finish what Hari and his father started years ago. This well-written, engrossing story uncontrivedly incorporates elements of *Salt*, last year's category winner. Allusive and metaphorical, *Gool* also offers readers characters who are humanly frail yet resilient in the face of an almost impenetrable darkness. Realistically, not everyone survives intact.

***Juno of Taris* by Fleur Beale**  
(Random House New Zealand)

Fleur Beale continues her impressive run of novels with this futuristic story of environmental devastation and its impact on a select, isolated community, trapped (or saved) beneath its island dome. Imagine living in a carefully controlled society of 500 people. When strong-minded Juno questions the reasoning behind the relatively straightforward act of weekly hair-shaving, the rules that bind the inhabitants of Taris start to unravel. The development of the origin of the community and how it works are woven smoothly into the story. The novel's many characters are well rounded; the utopia/dystopia details fresh, while the ending is unexpected and revelatory.

***The Tomorrow Code* by Brian Falkner**  
(Walker Books)

How complex and challenging it must be to write about the future while keeping the story true to itself at all stages. Likewise to remain aware of any events that may impact on the past and present or future. Tane and Rebecca receive coded messages from the future – their own future – which they download and decode from a NASA satellite. The messages turn out to be warnings about an apocalyptic event only they can prevent from happening. *The Tomorrow Code* is an exciting, complex, high-energy read, with a fast-paced plot that makes it hard to put down. One has to suspend disbelief of course, but it does make one think. And isn't that what makes a great read – one where you go on thinking about it?

## **Young Adult Fiction Category Winner**

It's not often that we are invited to become part of another family, to spend some quality time with its members, becoming engrossed in the family dynamics to the point that, when it's time to leave, we very reluctantly shut the door on these new friends. We don't wish to part from them, because their family has now become our family too. This is exactly what the judges felt on reading the winner of this year's Young Adult Fiction category, *The 10pm Question* by **Kate De Goldi** (Longacre Press).

# Non-fiction Category

New Zealand has a healthy tradition of publishing some very fine non-fiction for both children and adults. However, it was a little disappointing this year to see relatively few non-fiction titles submitted for the Awards compared with the volume of books in other categories. As in previous years, there were few titles that examined aspects of Māoritanga. This is an area that is well-served by adult publishing and it is a shame that such a rich topic is not more widely available to a young audience.

Previous finalists have seen a focus on New Zealand's history and natural history, both areas which provide many opportunities for exploration. It was exciting this year to see a range of titles submitted, which covered a wide variety of topics in a multitude of styles. Some offered a highly visual approach; others had a more narrative style but were no less successful in their delivery. The challenge for author, illustrator and publisher is to ensure that all elements complement each other to produce books that are coherent, accessible, informative, and visually attractive to the target audience.

No matter what the subject or style, the very best non-fiction will always take readers on a voyage of discovery. The five titles chosen as the finalists provide inspiration, revelation, information and entertainment on widely disparate topics. They all have the capacity to change the inner landscape of their readers, to start them thinking in new directions, even to inspire journeys of their own.

## Non-fiction Finalists

### ***Back & Beyond: New Zealand Painting for the Young & Curious***

by **Gregory O'Brien** (Auckland University Press)

“Poozling” is, apparently, a Kiwi term for collecting things from the past and present and arranging them in new combinations. Gregory O'Brien's second book about New Zealand art for young readers is themed around poozling and journeying, exploring the way art stores knowledge and ideas, and how artists have helped shape our view of our country. The reproductions of the artwork are an irresistible lure into the book and O'Brien's text, which never falls into the trap of being earnest or didactic, provides readers with absorbing insights into New Zealand art and its wider social context.

### ***The Crafting of Narnia: The Art, Creatures, and Weapons from Weta Workshop***

by **Weta Workshop, Paul Tobin and Daniel Falconer** (HarperOne)

This magnificent book takes readers behind the scenes of the making of the two Narnia films. C.S. Lewis' Narnia books have remained an enduring part of childhood for decades and their transformation into film required a massive effort to create a believable world. *The Crafting of Narnia* chronicles every stage of the process, from the initial concept drawings to the sculptures and intricate props that were developed for the film. While obviously produced for a general audience, this is a book that will appeal to readers of all ages and can stand alone as a record of Weta Workshop's award-winning work.

### ***High-Tech Legs on Everest* by Mark Inglis with Sarah Ell**

(Random House New Zealand)

“Life for me is all about participation,” says Mark Inglis in his mini biography in this book. Never content to be a spectator, Mark Inglis is famous for his determination to turn what might seem insurmountable difficulties into springboards to success. *High-Tech Legs on Everest* is an honest and adrenaline-packed story about an incredible adventure. Originally published for an adult audience, Mark Inglis and Sarah Ell have successfully adapted the story for younger readers with a gritty and accessible narrative. Mark Inglis' story is combined with fascinating photographs and useful information boxes in a book that will have a wide appeal to a variety of age groups.

***Juicy Writing: Inspiration and Techniques for Young Writers*** by **Brigid Lowry**  
(Allen and Unwin)

Brigid Lowry is an experienced writer and her enthusiasm for her craft bubbles through this entertaining and inspiring guide. It offers ideas and suggestions on everything from finding the right environment for working in to finding the ideas and turning them into fresh and original writing. Highly practical advice is provided alongside thought-provoking exercises and a wealth of useful information. Although an index would have been a helpful tool to track down key points, this is a wonderful launch-pad for young writers.

***Piano Rock: A 1950s Childhood*** by **Gavin Bishop**  
(Random House New Zealand)

This book is a little jewel, a delight to hold, to look at and, of course, to read. The restrained, silky-smooth jacket, the old-fashioned cloth-feel spine and the appealing endpapers all promise something quite special. *Piano Rock* is a nugget of memoir that wanders through a 1950s childhood, sharing events that were humdrum in their time but which will often be astonishing to modern children. Gavin Bishop is one of New Zealand's most highly respected illustrators and he has studded the text with his brilliant artwork.

## **Non-fiction Category Winner**

This book takes readers on a fascinating journey through New Zealand's history and culture. It challenges preconceptions about the nature of our art and its place in our world, and encourages readers to think about the way they respond to art. The winner of the Non-fiction category is ***Back and Beyond: New Zealand Painting for the Young & Curious*** by **Gregory O'Brien** (Auckland University Press).

## 2009 Best First Book Award

The winner of the 2009 Best First Book Award struck the judges with the intensity of its writing, the force of its narrative, the disturbing yet fascinating depiction of its anti-hero, whose articulate obsessions grip the reader even while antagonising and distancing that very same reader. A powerful and chilling portrayal of a violent yet highly intelligent teenager, at odds with society and with himself, Denis Wright's debut novel ***Violence 101*** receives the 2009 Best First Book Award.

## 2009 New Zealand Post Book of the Year

Stories in which nothing much happens, where everything appears to stay the same, and yet is subtly changing, are perhaps the most difficult stories to write. Essentially these stories are about people, about *characters*. Eccentric families have often been at the heart of some outstanding fiction for young people, and the family at the centre of the 2009 New Zealand Post Book of the Year is no exception. The judges predict, with reasonable confidence, that this year's winner will become an enduring classic. One could say, in fact, that there is little question about it. The 2009 New Zealand Post Book of the Year is ***The 10pm Question*** by **Kate De Goldi** (Longacre Press).