



2008 Annual Seminar

"Storytellers' Secrets" was the title of the 25 th annual Bookrapt Seminar, and an eager audience of members and guests furiously scribbled down the Secrets revealed by three accomplished New Zealand storytellers – Sharon Holt, author of the popular *Skipper* books in the *Ready to Read* Series, Fifi Colston, from TVNZ's "Good Morning", and Moira Wairama, from Wellington's Baggage Arts Charitable Trust.

Attending a Bookrapt Seminar is always exciting not only because of the high caliber of the speakers, but the fact that local authors such as [Lynley Dodd](#), [Sherryl Jordan](#), [Angie Belcher](#), [Jean Bennett](#), [Alison Robertson](#), [Etheljoy Smith](#), and [Jenny Jenkins](#) can be seen dotted throughout the audience.

Sharon Holt

Sharon Holt pointed out that in 2003 she had been a member of the audience, listening to inspirational talks by Joy Cowley, Pamela Allen, and Lorraine Orman. She had no idea at the time that five years later she would be a Seminar speaker.

With dreams of being an author as a child, Sharon 's eventual career path followed teaching and journalism, until rediscovering picture books with her own children rekindled the passion to write and be published.

Sharon writes from her own memories and experiences. A story published in the school journal featured the removal of a large phoenix palm from her property. Her book *Off you go, Auntie Ma!* was inspired by daughter Sophie's kindergarten antics, and her play *Superglue* resulted when Sharon needed to buy some superglue, and son Gregory asked if Superglue wears a cape.



The key to a writer's success, Sharon believes, is to follow instructions well. Locate a copy of the publisher's guidelines, write what they want, and change whatever they want changed. *Skipper the Dog* was originally *Moose the Cat*, but was changed at the publisher's request. As Sharon says, the publishers could have changed *Moose the Cat* to a hedgehog if they wanted to, as long as they paid her. The first play Sharon 's submitted to Learning Media was accepted, Sharon believes, because she first read their other plays, asked Learning Media what they wanted, and wrote a play that met that need.

Another of Sharon 's Secrets, which can be a little depressing for a struggling author, is that initial excitement by the publisher doesn't necessarily lead to a project achieving fruition immediately. Her [Its True! You Can Make Your Own Jokes](#) book had a list of publishers wanting it, but which was then vetoed by the sales departments at the publishers, who said it would not sell. Of course, sales teams often get it wrong, as those who rejected *Harry Potter* learnt to their despair. Once Sharon 's book was finally published it went on to be nominated as a finalist in the non-fiction category of the 2007 New Zealand Post Book Awards for Children and Young People, and was on the [Storylines 2007 Notable Books](#) list.



Sharon believes the most important step an author can take is to get an agent. When she mentioned having manuscripts returned with the comment "It doesn't fit our publishing programme", there were many nods of agreement throughout the audience. An agent knows the publishing programmes, and will e-mail you details of exactly what publishers are currently looking for.

[Sharon's NZ Book Council page](#)

[Sharon's Learning Media Contributor Newsletter](#)

Fifi Colston

Fifi Colston was a familiar face to many in the audience from the arts and crafts segment she presents on [TVNZ's Good Morning](#). Fifi delighted the audience with tales, and photographs, from her childhood, which included time spent in Africa and immigrating to New Zealand on the *Achille Lauro* . Always a good illustrator she sold a pen and ink drawing of a pet parrot at the age of 13 for \$5 – quite an impressive sum for a young teenager in 1973.



Fifi put in three years of solid graft at design school before heading to the advertising agencies for the money, which is far in excess of what one can earn as the Illustrator of children's books in New Zealand . Although Fifi joked that she became the "Blueberry Queen" when designing for a yoghurt company, was obvious that this wasn't where her passion lay. Following a move to Christchurch she became a freelance illustrator, and teamed up with Anthony Holcroft to produce *The Old Man and the Cat* and *The Oldest Garden in China* .

Fifi's first Storytellers' Secret was that publishers generally do not want writers who are also illustrators (unless their name happens to be Lynley Dodd), and neither do they want submissions from writers who have had their work illustrated by a friend or acquaintance.

Fifi managed to partially circumvent this frustrating situation during her seven years working for TV3's *What Now* magazine – as the Art Director she could commission her own work, and that of her friends. Fifi did also mention that if you are an author and your work has been illustrated by someone else and you feel the illustrations are not up to standard, then do say something to your publisher. If you say nothing, nothing will be done.

A Secret Fifi revealed for writers is that you do not want children to read your work, you want them to feel it. She also said that budding writers and illustrators should go where writers and illustrators are – by joining organisations such as Bookrapt and Tauranga Writers.

Although it is a well known fact that writing and illustrating children's books in New Zealand is more frequently done for love and kudos than money, Fifi did reveal that Learning Media do pay reasonably well for the work they accept.



Fifi reiterated Sharon 's Secret of writing what publishers want. When opening, the then fairly new, *Next* magazine Fifi noted there was no poetry in the magazine. She scribbled down a “Pam Ayres style” poem, sent it off, and as a result wrote a monthly column for the magazine for eight years.

The Secret of where Fifi's ideas come from is something she calls that “What if question”. At the supermarket one day she noticed the teller's name badge said “Verity”, and thought, “What if a girl called Verity always told lies?” From this “what if question” the book, *Verity's Truth* was born. When watching Jamie Oliver one day, Fifi thought, “What if you were a girl, and you couldn't cook, and your name was Jan ie Olive?”, from which emerged the book *Jan ie Olive – a Recipe for Disaster* .

Fifi also adheres to the Storytellers' Secret of, do what your publisher asks. If they ask you to rewrite something, rewrite it, as Fifi had to do to the entire middle section of *Verity's Truth* . “Trust your editor”, she says, “they know what they're doing. In fact, ask them what to do.”

A final Storytellers' Secret that Fifi imparted is that while it is very important for an author to know the entire back story in their work, this doesn't necessarily have to be told in the story itself – a mistake Fifi believes many authors make.

[Fifi's Blog](#)

[Fifi's NZ Book Council Page](#)

[Fifi's TVNZ page](#)

[Fifi's Christchurch City Libraries Page](#)

[Fifi's Storylines page](#)

Moira Wairama

Moira is a member of Wellington 's Baggage Arts Charitable Trust, especially well known for their combined telling of Maori, African and Native American myths and legends. They also tell their own original stories and a range of tales from other traditions.



As a young child Moira filled her school exercise books with stories, a creative outlet that came to a grinding halt at a secondary school that frowned on fictional writing. However, the school for some reason, accepted poetry, so Moira turned to that genre, which today she knows is an excellent way to start young teenagers off as writers. Through her work as a teacher Moira has noted that poetry is very good at providing an outlet for the pent up angst of young male teenagers, and that often those who move through their angst would go on to create insightful and beautiful work.

Although not Maori herself, Moira has been speaking Maori for 12 years, and worked part time for many years at Te Ara Whanui Kura Kaupapa Maori. She is passionate about the language and culture, and about creating the caliber of books in Maori that kids will want to learn and read. Whenever Moira speaks at schools she takes both English and Maori language versions of her book *The Puppet Box* with her, and it is always the Maori version the kids want to hear. A Catch-22 seems to exist in New Zealand whereby publishers do not send out information about books in Maori unless schools ask for them, so the schools do not know that the books exist in order to ask for them.

Moira backed up Fifi and Sharon 's comments that Learning Media is a great organisation to write for, with good editors who provide a good way for new authors to learn about how to get their work published. A Secret that Moira shared is that, when writing picture books, you should use your illustrator to help tell the story. She points out that the illustrations in *Te Pouaka Karetao* (the Maori language version of *The Puppet Box*) are so good, that even children who do not speak Maori can follow the story.



Another Secret is that we are all storytellers and we all want to be listened to. Find the story you want to tell, and keep working at it. Do not let rejection get you down, and keep plugging away at it. *Harry Potter* taught us that publishers do turn down good stories, so keep pushing. Sometimes an author needs to think outside the square to tell their story in a different place – for example, many of Moira's stories are not written down, but are told orally, or in a different way.

Moira's play *Questions* , about suicide, began as a poem, which she decided was not enough of a vehicle to address the issue. Picked up by a TV producer, Moira had the unique

experience of turning the play into a TV script with the help of acclaimed New Zealand actor and director Ian Mune. They were told the show shouldn't be done, that it was irresponsible and that it would trigger suicides. Moira replied that being quiet about the issue wouldn't stop it, and said that, as an author, you have to know when to stand up for your story.

A Secret imparted that Moira learned during the production of *Questions* is that while as the author of a stage play you maintain some control over your work, as the author of a TV production you lose almost all control – something for authors who are intending to script write should consider.

Moira also stressed the importance for authors and illustrators to be surrounded by like-minded people by joining authors' groups, as fellow writers will keep you on your toes and challenge you to continually write.

And a final Secret from Moira – you can make a living as a writer or illustrator in New Zealand ; you just have to be practical about it. Do not quit full time work and throw yourself into your craft, if it means you cannot pay the mortgage. Retain enough guaranteed income to pay for rent and food, and realise that you don't need a lot of other stuff if you are to follow your passion. And do it now – you do not know what is around the corner, and you will not have more time as you get older, you will have less.

[Moira's Baggage Arts Charitable Trust page](#)

[Moira's Storylines page](#)