



2009 Annual Seminar

Another successful seminar was attended by 53 children's literature enthusiasts, eager to hear the three guest speakers, to browse through the selection of books on sale, and to catch up with friends or meet new ones. This year's Bookrapt seminar featured authors Philippa Werry and Jenny Hessel, and writer/illustrator Gavin Bishop. Each are talented in their own way, and it was inspirational listening to each one speak and share their ideas about writing and give us insights into their work.

(Thank you to Lee Rowe and Barbara Dobson for the reviews of the speakers, and to Angie Belcher for the photographs from the Seminar.)

Philippa Werry.

Philippa Werry talked about the extensive background research she did on her excellent children's novel *Enemy at the Gate*, that tells the story of a family dealing first hand with the polio epidemic of 1936-37. The novel weaves in some key historical events and people of the time - Jack Lovelock, Shirley Temple, and the Depression.



Philippa talked about the importance of including only the essence of the historical facts - otherwise the history can swamp the story. She described how her earlier writing for the *School Journal* had introduced her to historical research and how she had gathered and filed copious information as background to this story. While thorough research builds a rich backdrop for a story, knowing when to stop researching and start writing is important. It is, she emphasised, the *story* itself that is of the utmost importance - the research informs the story as the writer considers the impact of historical events on the lives of her characters.

Anyone who has read this fabulous book knows that she achieves this very well indeed.

Philippa emphasised the need to have more than one idea in order to create a novel and cited a useful website by Patrick Ness, writer in residence for the *Booktrust* in England. His tips for writers can be accessed on [the Booktrust website](#).

The Wellington Children's Book Association, of which Philippa is a member, will later this year host a seminar for writers entitled *Spinning Gold*. While registrations are closed, she hopes it may be offered again in future years.

Gavin Bishop

Gavin Bishop spoke first of his involvement in Te Tai Tamariki - a trust set up to preserve and promote New Zealand children's literature. The vision is to provide a repository in which original copies of manuscripts, illustrations and other pertinent materials will be housed and made available for researchers, exhibitions and tours. Margaret Mahy and Joy Cowley have already promised their available works. For more information go visit [the Te Tai Tamariki website](#).

He also promoted the *Storylines Gavin Bishop Award* which will provide an aspiring illustrator the chance to work with Gavin to bring a work to publication.

Gavin didn't do any research on his book *Piano Rock* until he'd finished it (and only to check some of the facts) - but this was appropriate as it was a personal memoir of his life as a young boy in 1950s New Zealand. In verifying the details of remembered times and events he had to deal with a young editor who questioned many of his references.

Gavin shared with us the process he used to create the illustrations for two recent books: *There was an Old Woman* and *There was a Crooked Man*, in which he used a monoprint technique, to achieve bigger, bolder images for younger children. He is, he said, influenced by his own grandchildren (and his failing eyesight!). He has been simplifying the illustrative techniques he uses, and although he made it sound easy, he has an incredible talent with a huge amount of expertise and skill. His just published board books speak of this - they are simply world class. The vertical format is intriguing and works with the board book format, story (nursery rhymes), and illustrative style.

Gavin then treated the audience to a preview of his new book *Cowshed Christmas*, to be released in October. Based on a story by Joy Cowley, Gavin used a variety of techniques to create the delightful images of the farm animals bringing their typically NZ gifts to the cowshed on Christmas morning.

For more information on Gavin, visit his website www.gavinbishop.com.

Jenny Hessel

Jenny Hessel spoke about the process of writing, and the importance of nurturing ideas to ensure the best possible story development. She talked about Roald Dahl's driftwood analogy, that of a piece of wood dipped into the water with a piece of string attached. Every now and again you'll pull the piece of wood out and something interesting will be attached - like a barnacle or some seaweed - and over time a story builds up from all these interesting bits and pieces. Stories are like this, and need to be left to accumulate ideas and gather layers. This was not, Jenny said, what we tended to do in schools, where students are expected to write spontaneously, with no time to grow their ideas. Exposing children to the richness of language - playing with words so they develop an ear for language - is far more important than forcing children write. She believes good writing mainly comes from the subconscious.



Jenny Hessel spoke about the process of writing, and shared the wonderful metaphor from Roald Dahl about writing being like Jenny read a couple of her Grandma McGarvey books to the audience - a real treat to hear these famous and well loved stories told in the author's voice.

Jenny is best known for her *Grandma McGarvey* books, but in fact her first publication was of a far more serious nature. *What's Wrong with Bottoms?* confronted the issue of sexual abuse and received a mixed response from would be publishers - one of which told her that she would never ever be published! Jenny entertained us with readings of two *Grandma* stories, a real treat to hear these famous and well loved stories told in the author's voice. She also shared insights into her collaboration with illustrator Trevor Pye. She was a strong advocate for authors' rights, and the importance of negotiation with publishers to ensure control over the integrity of their work.

The three speakers shared with us their varying perspectives on writing and illustrating, and while their approaches may differ, the underlying principle is the same - that the story is of primary importance.

