



2011 Annual Seminar

Susan Brocker

Susan is a firm believer that an author needs to have passion for their subject matter - "writing from the heart" as Joy Cowley so aptly puts it. Susan's passion for writing began as a child. Writing was an escape, and a place where she could have anything she wanted. Although unable to have a pony in the real world, in Susan's early stories written as a child she had a pony, and really felt that she went on adventures with that pony through her writing.



As with many authors, Susan also has a passion for reading. Fostered from a young age starting with Dr Seuss, before progressing on to C.S. Lewis and Disney, Susan believes that the best children's books are those that work on two levels, such as Dr. Seuss's tale of discrimination with the Sneeches. Some of Susan's early readings, such as of *Tonka, A Horse Named Comanche*, was reflected years later in her 2010 book [Brave Bess and the ANZAC Horses](#). Other stories that Susan wrote early on in life, such as her first novel about a horse, *The White Stallion*, written at the age of nine, gestetnered by the staff at Hilltop Primary School and distributed to the students, found an afterlife decades later as Susan's 2007 novel [Restless Spirit](#).

Writing, says Susan, "got me through my teenage years". A particularly observant English teacher, who recognised Susan's need to escape, taught her structure and grammar, and introduced her to poetry. In particular, Susan discovered the war poets such as John McCrae, and fell in love with works such as *In Flanders Fields*, which, again, influenced her writing years later in 2001's [War Heroes](#).

After finding out she was interested in being a journalist, careers advisors suggested history as a high school subject. Susan became so passionate about history that she went on to do a history degree at the University of Waikato, with a special interest in WWI and WWII. Again, this passion translated into her written work, and was reflected in such books as 2001's [Journey to the New World](#) and 2004's [Across the Oregon Trail](#).

All of Susan's books, whether fiction or non-fiction, are historically accurate, and Susan said she loves bringing history alive for kids. A move with husband Lionel to Holland led Susan to many of the places she had studied, and history came alive for her at locations such as

Anzac Cove and on the battlefields of France. She travelled extensively, collected information, wrote travel articles, and applied much of this research to her later novels.

Returning to New Zealand she secured a job as an editor and writer for an educational publisher, and wrote a lot of books targeting at hooking boys into reading, by covering such topics as break dancing and extreme sports. During this time she learnt that while it is fine to have a message in your writing, the story has to come first – the passion has to be there.

Finding writing for the US curriculum market extremely frustrating, which reiterated words from one of our former seminar speakers, children's author Angie Belcher, Susan decided she wanted to write stories for Kiwi kids, about our history and our land. Her first manuscript, [Restless Spirit](#), was accepted by HarperCollins, and Susan continues that relationship with the publisher today.

Aside from history, Susan's other passion, animals, is equally reflected in her writing, with her dog Leila the inspiration for [Saving Sam](#), while the over boisterous Yogi is the inspiration for [Wolf in the Wardrobe](#). Susan's final words of advice to seminar attendees were to never preach or talk down to a young audience, and to keep in mind that the first role of fiction is to entertain – using a well shaped plot to build up the tension. She also pointed out that you need interesting characters, with flaws and weaknesses that kids can relate to, and that editing is the biggest strength of a write. She finished by saying that when you write what you feel passionate about, your story will sing to the child within.

[Susan's Website](#)

Kate Stone.

Two thirds of Kate's job is as Managing Editor for HarperCollins New Zealand, while one third is as Commissioning Editor for Children and Young Adults at HarperCollins, a job she finds hard, but immeasurably rewarding. As a passionate publisher, Kate is a champion of authors and their books, and certainly the level of involvement she has with her authors seems to be quite exceptional.

Kate outlined the different types of publishing houses there are: trade (i.e. producing for bookshops), STM (Scientific, Technical, and Medical), Academic, and Educational. She said that every book has to work within its own business model, and needs to be able to stand on its own merits. She explained the difference between backlist and frontlist publications: *frontlist* means a book that has just been published. It usually refers to a title that is less than one year old. *Backlist* means a book that has been in print for at least a year and that is still selling well enough to be stocked in bookstores. Backlist titles are most important in educational publishing.

Around 22-25% of book sales in New Zealand are for children's literature. HarperCollins NZ publishes around 70 titles a year, of which 10 or 15 are for this market. Of this, around 1-2



are picture books, and the rest are divided between junior fiction and young adult. Works are chosen based on literary merit, the way the story is told, and the slots that are available in the list. A number of attendees at the seminar turned out to be holders of rejection letters from various publishers, stating "We loved your manuscript, but it doesn't suit our list." This is hardly surprising as HarperCollins receives around 10-20 unsolicited manuscripts every week.

HarperCollins NZ invests in relationships with its authors, and often publishing decisions involve whether the author has the potential to produce more than one novel. Kate said that a very bad idea is publishing on trend, as often the process from acceptance to delivery date of a published novel can be very lengthy, and misses the bandwagon altogether. Kate likes to edit manuscripts herself whenever possible and works closely with the author, talking with them on the phone, often meeting them in person, and even giving them a say in the cover of their book. This was quite surprising to hear, as often authors particularly in the United States, never meet their editor, and certainly do not have a say in artwork for their books. Even Piers Anthony has no say at all over the cover of his books. The passion that Kate has for her authors and their work was obvious, and so nice to hear after a recent talk from a local author who objected bitterly to her American publishers changing the title of her novel, to no avail. One could not imagine Kate Stone selecting and using a title that one of her authors was so upset by.

HarperCollins usually has an editor, a proof reader, and then a final reader who hasn't had anything to do with the work previously, nor worked with that particular author before. An editor checks for grammatical errors, consistency and continuity errors, character development, speech, and "getting the voice right". Test runs of children's literature are often done with staff members' kids. Kate agrees that editors can be wrong, but pointed out that often if an editor lets something slide, the proof reader will pick it up.

Talking about the cover design of a book, Kate described this as a minefield, stating that in publishing, people do judge a book by its cover. While you can't tell the whole story on the cover, it needs to be true to the field of the book, and to convey the essence of the work. Pagination is another issue that editors pay close attention to, and if widows or orphans can not be avoided then the editor, or author, may need to change the text.

The final read is done by a fresh pair of eyes, with no style sheet of character descriptions for them to check against. Once the book is cleared for printing it is up to publicity to design press releases that will generate interest in the book. Kate says that there is a change in the way books are being publicised, with social media networking being used more and more, including Twitter and Facebook. However, she stressed that this type of publicity needs to be sustainable: authors don't want to have no time to write because they are too busy updating their Facebook page and website.

Finally Kate addresses the growing impact of e-books on the traditional market. HarperCollins has, for the last five years, set all new print books up ready to go as e-books when this be required. At the moment only 3-5% of book sales in New Zealand are for e-books, but overseas the numbers are much higher. (See [Amazon: E-books now outsell print books](#).) HarperCollins is aware that young people are used to doing things online, and are

prepared for the next generation of readers. Kate feels that while print books will always be with us, e-books provide much better opportunities for writers, and in particular, provide better opportunities to keep books in circulation over the long term.

HarperCollins New Zealand

For questions regarding submission guidelines, please contact the editorial department at: editors@harpercollins.co.nz.

Barbara Else

Barbara is an author, editor, literary agent, and manuscript assessor, who is also a self-proclaimed passionate reader. In her capacity as a literary agent the first advice Barbara gave budding writers is that legitimate literary agents are paid on commission (anywhere from 10-25%). Prospective writers should never, ever pay an up front fee to someone proclaiming themselves a "literary agent". The role of a literary agent is not to give writing advice, and as such, they will not take on unmarketable material. What a literary agent does is select appropriate manuscripts, find publishers, negotiate contracts, act as the liaison between the writer and publisher, and collects royalties and other payments.



A literary agent provides targeted marketing for a manuscript, can often secure a better contract for a writer than they could get themselves, can offer professional advice on trade matters, protects writers from unscrupulous or incompetent publishers, and handles financial and administration matters. A manuscript will also be taken more seriously if submitted by a literary agent, and many publishers will not accept unsolicited manuscripts. Bearing all this in mind, Barbara said it can often be harder to get an agent than a publisher. She suggested having a professional approach, and making an enquiry before sending any material. She also directed seminar attendees to Noah Lukeman's [The First Five Pages](#) as an essential tool for first time authors.

In her role as a Manuscript Assessor Barbara suggests that authors first seek a cost and time frame for assessment. Barbara has a handy [calculator](#) on her website, as well as links to the websites of members of the [New Zealand Association of Manuscript Assessors](#). An assessment can help writers be objective about what they've achieved so far. Manuscript assessments do not offer kind words - they offer constructive criticism. It is still up to the writer to perform the necessary work on the manuscript to get it to a standard that can be published.

As a reader Barbara looks for a story that leads her on an uninterrupted smooth journey that is interesting, with no pot holes along the way to slow the story. Pot holes such as bad grammar, disjointed sequences, or problems with structure, character, or point of view issues. Is the narrative convincing and appealing? Is the overall structure hard to follow? Too wordy? Fiction, Barbara says, is the same as an essay - there should be an introduction, the bulk of the story, and a conclusion on what to do to solve the problems. She suggested

writers look at books on screenwriting, which has structure detailed down to a fine art, and particularly recommended the works of American screenwriter [Blake Snyder](#).

Individual scenes can be badly shaped or messy, which affects the whole story. Barbara says that new writers often polish like mad, but can not focus their characters. First drafts, she says, are always terrible, but it is important to get the story down, and then shape it. Many first time authors of children's books write the kind of stories that they loved when they were young, which doesn't suit 21st century kids. Final advice from Barbara was: don't talk down to kids; if you can't rhyme, don't try; and don't force humour. Barbara's latest novel, [The Travelling Restaurant](#), took six weeks to write the initial draft which, she said, was "rough as guts". It then took her a year to polish the story, although the essence and tone remained the same.

[Barbara's website](#)