

Expanding World Views: Young Adult Literature of New Zealand

In my third year as an undergraduate studying English, I took a young adult literature (YAL) class. I quickly fell in love with the novels on the class reading list and kept my roommate up late one night as I related plotlines and characters. After hearing about three or four of the books, she pointed out that most of the novels starred American teens in American high schools dealing with American issues. I should have known she would have picked up on this point. She was born and raised in New Zealand, moved to the United States at age ten, and has yet to fully assimilate into American culture. She wondered aloud what sort of YA fiction she would have read, had she stayed in New Zealand. In a moment of utter American ethnocentrism, I told her that I guessed New Zealanders probably read YAL produced by American, or perhaps British, writers. After all, I had never read or heard of a YA novel by a New Zealander.

The truth is, my quick response was unsatisfying to both of us. She didn't think that New Zealanders needed to rely on Americans for their literature, and her conviction left me wondering: what literature has been written *by* New Zealanders *for* New Zealanders in the genre of young adult literature?

When a search for critical sources on New Zealand YAL in general yielded little information, I turned to websites from libraries and bookstores in New Zealand. I was surprised to find a rich collection of children's literature and adolescent novels unique to New Zealand, and I started to realize how exciting my discovery was. As an American student focused only on novels from my own country, it seemed I had been missing out on a wider worldview of YAL. Now I had access to a treasure trove of exciting new information.

Notable Authors

Browsing through websites made it immediately apparent that there were many native New Zealand authors, though I had never heard of any of them in the United States. While many of them are talented and popular in their home country, it was easy to spot those who reappeared as bestsellers and winners of literary prizes.

Undoubtedly, the most significant of these authors is Margaret Mahy. Mahy is a prolific author, and has published picture books, middle-grade novels, and young adult novels. She has won the Esther Glen Award six times and the New Zealand Post Book Award five times, as well as various other prizes and awards. Mahy writes almost exclusively in a New Zealand setting, because it "is the only country I know well enough to write about," said Mahy (teenreads.com). She captures the experience of a young adult by writing about issues important to this age group and by reproducing the particularities of youth on the page. Though she has no teenage relations, she says that she stays in touch with young people and their trends by "reading and listening in," in order to make the dialogue as realistic as possible.

Many of her novels contain an element of the supernatural, including her award-winning novels *The Haunting*, *The Changeover*, and *24 Hours*. Other significant books by Mahy include *The Catalogue of the Universe*, a romance about a nerd falling in love with

¹ Information about authors and their works is from their websites, which are listed in the works cited section, unless otherwise indicated.

Additional Background on the YA Lit of New Zealand

Further Reading (all available in the US):

- Beale, Fleur. *I Am Not Esther*. New York: Hyperion, 2004.
Beckett, Bernard. *Genesis*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009.
Boock, Paula. *Dare, Truth, or Promise*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.
De Hamel, Joan. *Hemi's Pet*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
Hill, David. *See Ya, Simon*. New York: Penguin, 1994.
Ihimaera, Witi. *Whale Rider*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2003.
Jones, Lloyd. *Mister Pip*. New York: Dial, 2008.
Jordan, Sherryl. *The Raging Quiet*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999.
Knox, Elizabeth. *Dreamhunter*. New York: Macmillan, 2005.
Taylor, William. *Agnes the Sheep*. New York: Scholastic, 1991.

Literary Prizes

LIANZA Children's Book Awards

- Judged by a panel of librarians whose members change each year
- Sponsored by the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA)
- Elsie Locke Award
 - “Given to the book that is considered to be the most distinguished contribution to nonfiction for young adults”
 - Established in 1987
 - Source: “Elsie Locke Award. Christchurch City Libraries. 2 July 2009 < <http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Kids/LiteraryPrizes/ElsieLocke/> >
- Esther Glen Award
 - “Given for the most distinguished contribution to New Zealand literature for children and young adults”
 - Established in 1945
 - Source: “Esther Glen Award.” Christchurch City Libraries. 2 July 2009 < <http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/kids/literaryprizes/estherglen/> >
- Te Kura Pounamu Award
 - Given for the “most distinguished contribution to literature for children and young adults written in Te Reo Māori”
 - Established in 1995
 - Source: “Te Kura Pounamu Award.” Christchurch City Libraries. 2 July 2009. < <http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Kids/LiteraryPrizes/KuraPounamu/> >

New Zealand Post Book Awards

- “Reward excellence in children's literature, recognising the best books for children and teenagers published annually in New Zealand”
- Awarded in four categories: Young Adult Fiction, Junior Fiction, Non Fiction, Picture Book; an additional award is given for the Book of the Year, which goes to one of the category winners
- Judging panel changes each year, and usually includes a mix of editors, authors, illustrators, and librarians
- Sponsored by the *New Zealand Post*, supported by Creative New Zealand and Book Tokens (NZ), and administered by Booksellers New Zealand
- Source: Booksellers New Zealand–*The New Zealand Post* Book Awards. 2009. Booksellers New Zealand. 2 July 2009. < http://www.booksellers.co.nz/nzpb_main.htm >

the pretty, popular girl; *Alchemy*, about a boy who is asked to spy on a classmate who is practicing alchemy secretly; and *Maddigan's Fantasia*, a post-apocalyptic science-fiction novel that was converted into a BBC television series, re-titled *Maddigan's Quest*.

I found Mahy to be a wonderfully original storyteller. Her best novels combine aspects of everyday teenage life with intriguing threads of science fiction and paranormal activity. She also understands the beauty of words, giving her novels a lyrical quality that makes them a thoroughly enjoyable read. Mahy's distinguished contributions to YAL have also led the New Zealand Book Council to create an award in her honor. The Margaret Mahy Medal is given annually for contributions to children's literature and literacy.

Another popular author is Tessa Duder. Though Duder's books span a wide variety of themes, her most famous novels feature fifteen-year-old Alex Archer. The Alex Quartet, as Duder refers to it, is comprised of *Alex*, *Alex in Winter*, *Alex in Rome*, and *Songs for Alex*; the books follow Alex's journey as she trains and competes in the Olympics in Rome and, ultimately, deals with the aftermath of her experiences. The series is internationally acclaimed, and has won three Esther Glen medals and three New Zealand Post Book Awards. As a teenager, Duder was a competitive swimmer herself, and hoped to go to the Olympics. Because of this, her novels ring true both with competitive swimmers and with teens in general.

Another of Duder's novels, *Jellybean*, features a protagonist much like Alex: both girls are passionate about pursuing their dreams. Geraldine, nicknamed Jellybean, has great ambitions of becoming a conductor, but often feels lonely as she struggles to fit into her mother's busy schedule. Both the *Alex* books and *Jellybean* are available in the US, although they are much more popular in New Zealand.

Other than the *Alex* books and *Jellybean*, Duder's novels have not been published outside of New Zealand. These include several stand-alone novels as well as the Tiggie Thompson series, a set of three novels about a girl with body image problems. Duder has also written both picture books and nonfiction for young adults and has compiled several anthologies of short stories.

Another Esther Glen Medal winner is Jack Lasenby. Lasenby grew up in a small rural community called Waharoa, and most of his books feature the

sort of setting he grew up in, full of the bush, farms, and small towns. He is known for telling the truth as he sees it and not pulling any punches. He feels that kids are smart and deserve books of substance. His best-known work is a historical fiction series set during the Depression, comprised of *Dead Man's Head*, *The Waterfall*, and *The Battle of Pook Island*. These comical books describe the adventures of the Seddon Street Gang, a group of boys who live in a small town. However, many of Lasenby's other novels carry a darker tone. For example, *The Lake* describes the adventures of a girl "learning to survive in the bush and, in the process, finding the strength to handle her stepfather's sexual advances," according to New Zealand Book Council's website. Two post-apocalyptic novels set in the future focus on themes of social injustice and inequality.

Though Lasenby is well known and well liked in New Zealand, his books are either unavailable or difficult to find in the United States: some (including *The Lake* and *The Mangrove Summer*, another historical fiction novel) can be ordered through bookstores and websites, but I was unable to locate any of his books at local libraries in my area. His other books, though unavailable in the US, have won many awards in his native country, and continue to be popular among both students and teachers.

While Lasenby, Duder, and Mahy all write almost exclusively for young adults, Maurice Gee is popular with both adult and young adult audiences. Like Lasenby, many of Gee's novels are set in small towns. They feature a wide variety of subjects, ranging from mystery to speculative fiction, but he is best known for capturing some "region and aspect of New Zealand life" in each novel, says the New Zealand Book Council's website. His most recent novel, *Salt*, won the New Zealand Post Book Award's Young Adult Category and has received great popular and critical acclaim. *Salt* takes place in a post-apocalyptic landscape, where

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two kids from radically different social spheres have to team up in order to help each other.

Gee's wide range also includes fantasy, science fiction, and thrillers. *Under the Mountain*, about twins who discover they possess hidden powers that will

help them save the world, was later adapted into an 8-part television series in New Zealand. The *O Trilogy*, beginning with *The Halfmen of O*, is an epic fantasy series often compared to *The Lord of the Rings* and is popular among New Zealand teens. *The Fat Man* is a psychological thriller about a man who was bullied as a kid and eventually becomes a bully himself, trying to get payback for the way he was treated as a boy. Though most of Gee's novels feature some kind

of supernatural element and/or a fantastical setting, they are most importantly about people and character. They are also relevant to cultural issues in New Zealand, including the recurring theme of two characters from different cultures that discover how to work together, reflective of the split culture of the Maori and *Pakeha*, or whites.

Problems with International Publishing

Though these and other talented New Zealand writers for young adults have won great critical acclaim both in New Zealand and abroad, including in England and the United States, few books by New Zealand authors are available in the United States, and none have garnered the same popularity away from the islands. The question is, why?

A likely part of the problem is the vernacular of New Zealand teens. Speaking of her novel *Hot Mail*, wherein two New Zealand teens become friends through a series of emails, Tessa Duder describes the slang of the protagonist: "Dan's voice, particularly, is probably the first time that the written vernacular of a young New Zealand male has been portrayed with

such accuracy." However, British slang is also considerably different from American lingo, and yet publishers have found ways around this problem, usually by "translating" the slang, as publisher Arthur Levine famously did with J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (Nel 261–284).

A more likely problem is the many logistical and cultural differences between New Zealand and the US. Since New Zealand is in the Southern Hemisphere, their seasons are opposite those in the US. Similarly, schools work differently there, running from late January until early December. Laws significant to teens are different there, too. All of this makes writing for young adults more complicated when an author needs to explain differences within the text. Speaking about the difficulty of writing books for an international audience, Mahy explains, "A young adult can get a driving license at the age of 15 in New Zealand, and if I describe a 15-year-old legitimately driving, people in some other countries think I must have made a mistake. Editors then insist that I explain the driving license situation instead of simply taking it for granted. It sometimes makes me more self-conscious about details than I really want to be" (teenreads.com).

Even more difficult to explain to non-New Zealand teens is the cultural identity of the islands. Though New Zealand has much in common with its European cousin, England, and its neighbor, Australia, it has its own identity, influenced by both European and native Maori culture. "Nowadays, New Zealand sees itself as very much part of the Pacific Rim, and I think of myself as part of that culture, too. I want to write for contemporary children who are now far more aware of the Maori culture, partly because it is celebrated and not hidden as it was when I first started to write," explains Mahy (papertigers.com). While New Zealand children grow up in an atmosphere influenced by the Islander heritage, international audiences may have difficulty understanding the unique mix of Maori and British culture.

Additionally, "New Zealand thinks of itself as a rural country," says Mahy (papertigers.com). She and other New Zealand authors, especially the aforementioned Gee and Lasenby, make reference to the small towns and farms that give New Zealand this rural setting in their novels. While some American teens would be able to understand the culture of living in a small town or farm, American readers from big cities

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and even suburbia may struggle with the pastoral setting typical of New Zealand literature, finding them significantly different from the rural life they might see in US television or fiction.

New Zealand YA literature has been largely unrecognized outside of the country itself. However, as young adult readers become more internationally savvy, it is likely the issues that impede the publication of literature from New Zealand, as well as other countries, could dissolve. With the popularity of media (including film, literature, and Internet connectivity) from England, Australia, and New Zealand, American teens are becoming more capable of deciphering the particular speech patterns and cultural idiosyncrasies of other English-speaking countries.

As an American college student with little previous understanding of New Zealand slang or customs, I was rarely confused by the uniquely New Zealand concepts and characteristics. In fact, I found these unfamiliar features made the books even more authentic. I was usually able to figure out unfamiliar phrasing from context, and if necessary, I simply looked up confusing references online. It may take a little more work, but it is possible for students to understand these references.

Expanding World Views

If these mental blocks to the sometimes-confusing cultural differences could be removed, YAL from New Zealand could become valuable to American teens. Specifically *because* New Zealand literature is attuned to the specific issues, culture, and slang of the region, it could provide a valuable window for American teens interested in learning about a lifestyle and culture that is significantly different from their own.

More and more of these novels are being published in the States, and enhanced global communication and online purchase of international novels continues to make it easier to find books published outside the country. This means that students and teachers with an interest in other cultures and lifestyles can find these gems of literature if they are willing to look for them. With luck, literature from New Zealand will soon join the ranks of ethnic and international books, allowing American teens to expand their worldview even further.

Nicole Westenskow graduated from Brigham Young University (BYU) with a bachelors of Arts degree in English in April 2009. In her next to last semester, she took a YAL class just for fun and ended up falling in love with the field. She took a class on writing YA novels and recently attended a conference at BYU on writing for young adults. She now plans to edit or write YA novels as a career.

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For Further Reading

New Zealand Book Council: a source for a wide variety of literature from New Zealand. Contains author profiles, news,

events, and other information. (<http://www.nzbookcouncil.org.nz/index.html>)

The New Zealand Post Book Awards: archives current and past New Zealand Post Book Award Winners. (http://www.booksellers.co.nz/nzpb_main.htm)

Papertigers.org: contains resources and articles for teachers, parents, librarians and readers of young adult literature, focused on authors and literature from the Pacific Rim and South Asia. (<http://www.papertigers.org/index.html>)

Story-Go-Round: a source for general information about New Zealand literature, run by New Zealand author Lorraine Orman. Contains links to booklists, other websites, and information about award winners. (<http://www.story-go-round.net.nz>)

Storylines: a source for reviews, lists of award winners, recent events, and author profiles exclusively for Children's and Young Adult Literature in New Zealand. (<http://storylines.org.nz>)

Wheeler's Books: an online book resource containing information on books, authors, and libraries in New Zealand. (<http://www.wheelers.co.nz>)

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