

This is a copy of my speech, plus Q & As, which I recently gave at the English Teacher's Association NSW conference in Sydney. I spoke, with Deborah Abela and Maria Boyd, on the topic: Encouraging Reluctant Readers.

I've always been a bookaholic – my love of reading began as a child living in a little bush town in Africa. Books were my windows to the world, they told me about other countries, other cultures, 'otherworlds'. They engendered a love of story, they taught me how it feels to be strong, to act with courage, to be a hero(ine), to try and fail and try again. With the characters I learned to fight giants and demons, and to succeed beyond my wildest dreams.

We all need stories: to tell us who we are, where we've come from, where we're going; to tell us about our world – its people, its geography and history. Most important, we need stories to tell us about ourselves, and what it means to be human.

Stories stimulate imagination like no other medium, and without imagination, we are doomed. How can we invent the wheel, if we cannot first imagine such a thing? How can we know ourselves, our future and our destiny – unless we can first imagine it?

Most important – a love of reading brings with it a facility with language, which will stand us in good stead for the rest of our lives.

I was recently at the CBC Lady Cutler dinner, an award given every year to someone who has made a huge contribution to children's literature – won this year by Ernie Tucker, a most deserving winner of such an award. Ernie talked about his early years as a teacher, and the challenge of matching the right book to the right child at the right time – which is still an ongoing challenge for teacher/librarians.

The challenge for me, as an author, as I see it, is to write good, page-turning reads like the ones that used to keep me reading late at night when I was growing up: stories with great characters, exciting plots and interesting settings, but that can also be read on other levels too, giving insights into the past, into human nature and behaviour, questioning faith, ethics and morality, love, the nature of courage, and friendship, and so on.

The first point of contact between reader and book is the cover. The reissue by Random House of my novel Ghost Boy matches the novel to the landscape of the Quarantine Station in Sydney, where part of the novel is based. (See website for info on Ghost Boy. NB There are special Ghost Boy tours at the Quarantine Station for schools studying the novel: ring 1300 886 875 for details.) Taking students to sites where novels are set could be a very effective strategy to make stories come alive for kids. The Rocks is another popular setting for stories, eg Vashti Farrar's Plague and Federation from the My Diary series, or Ruth Park's Playing Beatie Bow.

Genre novels are always popular, eg fantasy, as witness the enormous success of the Harry Potter novels. In the Shalott trilogy, I combine magic and fantasy with a legend that has endured for almost 1000 years: the legend of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. That the legend has endured for so long bears testimony to its wonderful, archetypal characters and the tragedy that lies at its heart. It's an exploration of all that is good and noble in human nature: chivalry, honour, a sense of decency, responsibility, an acknowledgment of equality as epitomised in the notion of a 'round table', set against the worst of human nature: deceit, lust, treachery and betrayal. The tragedy is that, because of

these very human failings, the utopia that was Camelot, and its king, are brought down and destroyed. See website for information on the Shalott trilogy.

Introducing students to this and all the other enduring legends and fairytales (from so many diverse cultures) gives students an insight into the best and worst aspects of human nature while also exposing them to the delights of a good story. Versions of King Arthur have been written and rewritten through the centuries, while there are numerous versions of classic fairytales (Cinderella, Red Riding Hood et al) including some hilarious subversions by eg Roald Dahl, Babette Cole, and the hilarious ‘politically correct’ bedtime stories by James Finn Garner. Encouraging students to write their own versions of well-loved favourites is also a fun way of introducing them to stories.

Another popular genre is crime & mystery – we all like to try and outsmart the author by guessing ‘whodunnit’ ahead of the denouement, while the author’s challenge is to lead the reader by the unsuspecting nose in totally the wrong direction!

My new medieval crime series for teenagers, The Janna Mysteries, indulges my passion for both reading and writing crime (see my website for information on Rosemary for Remembrance, Rue for Repentance, Lilies for Love and a sneak preview of Book 4: Willows for Weeping.) NB Because the novels are set in medieval time, there is a comprehensive author note at the end of each novel, including the history of the time, a glossary, and so on. Teaching notes may also be found on the Random House website.

I’ve spoken about genre novels, but the key elements needed in all novels to keep the pages turning are: great characters, exciting plots with lots of twists and turns, and an interesting setting.

Creating believable characters that readers find interesting and with whom they can identify, is crucial. Whether my stories are set in contemporary, past or future time, or even in ‘otherworlds’, I make sure that all my characters go through the sorts of things that teenagers today can understand, identify with and share. I want readers to fall in love with my characters, and really care what happens to them. I put my characters in situations that test their courage, their loyalty and ingenuity, their love, their friendship. I give my characters moral dilemmas to solve (eg Janna tells lies, steals things, sets fire to a barn, has to learn who to trust and whether or not to withhold information, etc) I raise questions of faith and belief – whether in a higher being or in oneself. I explore hatred, ambition, loving unwisely – and its consequences. I hope that, through reading my stories, teenagers will gain an insight into how people behave under stress, and also imagine how they themselves might react in similar situations. Through hardship and adversity, through testing themselves to the limit, my characters change and grow and empower themselves. They’re an inspiration to every teenager today who embarks on a journey to self-knowledge, to find out about our world, our society, and about the best and worst aspects of human nature; above all, to find who they are, where they fit in and what they want to achieve. Characters strive – and often fail, or are done down, providing role models to modern teenagers: don’t give up, don’t blame everyone but yourself for the situation you’re in, get on and turn it around and do the best you can.

The Janna Mysteries are set at a real time and in a real place, and so I include real historical characters and events in the story, giving readers an insight into life in the 1140s, and the changing fortunes of the bloody and brutal civil war between King Stephen & his cousin (and rightful heir to the throne) the Empress Matilda.

A good plot is also vital. I write fast-paced action adventures full of crimes and mysteries, danger, excitement and romance, with twists and turns guaranteed to tantalise even the most reluctant of readers.

An interesting and credible setting for the stories is also important – particularly for me because my novels are set in medieval England. Because Janna moves from place to place in her quest to find her father, so readers gain a great insight into different aspects of life in medieval time: the forest, a manor farm, various hamlets, Wilton and its abbey, Sarum, Winchester & Oxford. Janna keeps company with peasants, an outlaw, lords, ladies, nuns, spies, pilgrims and jongleurs, and even royalty, for her journey takes her right into the heart of the royal court where she finds out the true meaning of treachery and betrayal.

To write The Janna Mysteries, I needed to walk in footsteps of my characters. Because Janna is a healer, I needed to learn about the English countryside, and its herbs and wildflowers in particular, but it also gave me the chance to look at old buildings, or their ruins, visit libraries, museums, access old documents and also talk to people, the various experts I met along the way, which has been invaluable.

Writing The Janna Mysteries has entailed a huge amount of research; you'll find a booklist on my site with some of the more helpful references I've come across.

The topic today is: 'Encouraging reluctant readers', and I've discussed elements of good story-telling and hopefully given you some pointers for encouraging your own students to read, and even to write their own stories.

I'd like to finish by reading an email from Michelle, who says: '*I used to hate reading and it would take me a month to read a book, but after reading your Shalott trilogy I just kept reading, now I love reading all different types of books especially ones set in medieval times. I started reading the Janna series a couple of months ago and got hooked, it is one of the best series I have ever read. I couldn't put them down. I've just finished reading the third book, which I stayed up all night reading.*'

I can't tell you what a thrill it was to me, as a writer, to receive a message like this. To take someone from hating reading to someone who'll stay up all night to read is both a gift and a blessing – and this, really, is why I write.

Q: Which would be the best series for students to read and combine with a study of medieval time, the Shalott trilogy or The Janna Mysteries?

A: The Shalott trilogy is set in a mythical medieval time, and gives great insight into the legend of King Arthur with all its adventure, mystery and magic and its exploration of human nature – it probably works best as a rewarding and enriching adjunct to English studies. The Janna Mysteries is set in real medieval time and its history and society are as accurate as I can make them. The novels give students a wonderful insight into various aspects of medieval society as Janna travels about unravelling the clues in the search of her unknown father.

Q: Do you plot everything before starting to write a series?

A: The Shalott trilogy was a lesson in how NOT to write a series! The first novel, Shalott, was written as a one-off, but by then, I'd become fascinated by the characters in the legend, and so I wrote Return to Shalott, in which I explore, in particular, the characters and motivation of both Guinevere and Morgan le Fay – and also magic. It wasn't until I'd finished Book 2 that I (as an author) and therefore Callie (as the central

character) realised why she'd gone back to Camelot in the first place: yes, to empower herself – but also to save a child, with ramifications both for Callie's future and for the future of our world. I really should have known that right from the beginning – and I learned my lesson from that when I came to write The Janna Mysteries. I have an outline for every book in the series – although there are changes as characters come to life and the plots take unexpected turns!