



Story lines

Motivating Kiwis to enjoy the benefits of reading for pleasure and wellbeing is a passion for celebrated New Zealand author Kate De Goldi, whose love for the written word began at an early age.

STORY SARAH LANG

DURING LOCKDOWN, WELLINGTON author Kate De Goldi wasn't cooped up in the city. Thanks to her year-long Henderson House Residency, she's been living with photographer/videographer husband Bruce Foster in Alexandra: a small, former gold-mining town in Central Otago, where two rivers meet. Until they leave in November, they'll soak up the view of craggy, sometimes snow-capped ranges through big windows in the architecturally designed, 1950s modernist house. "Not a bad place to be!" says De Goldi.

You don't apply for this residency – you get asked. "It's such a gift – a stipend and a house in a beautiful place outside my 'normal world', and a chance to write a novel. Residencies help as writing isn't easy [financially]. But I've been lucky to pull together a stimulating working life that

revolves around books." Luck, sure. Passion and determination, definitely.

The 61-year-old grandmother – who has a son, daughter and stepdaughter – writes short stories, novels and picture books read by children, teenagers and adults. They're often labelled children's or young-adult books by publishers, largely for marketing purposes. However, De Goldi doesn't write with target readers in mind. "Good children's literature is literature for everyone."

Listing all her awards, residencies, honours and involvements would take up a whole page, so here are a few. She's twice won the national Children's Book of the Year Award. She's taught courses in creative writing and children's writing, through universities and other organisations. She reviewed children's books on Radio New Zealand for 18 years. She runs sessions for

Wellington librarians about the history and highlights of children's literature. So, you know, just a bit bookish.

Growing up in Christchurch, De Goldi was the eldest of three girls. "In our house, reading was second to godliness. Dad, a lawyer, was the son of Italian immigrants, and I think fully grasping the English language and literature helped Dad feel like a true New Zealander. He built a library, largely of second-hand books. It was important to him – and my mother, a musician – that we were immersed in reading."

Her career plan was "basically to read somehow. Here's my little confession. I never finished my degrees at Canterbury University. I'm a couple of papers off my BA and did three years of law. I had wonderful teachers at school and university, but I was eminently distractible, undisciplined and

patchy, partly because I read all the time. I didn't become disciplined until I started writing in earnest, aged 28." Before that, she was, variously, a librarian, researcher, piano teacher and freelance journalist.

De Goldi has spent 27 years-and-counting as an intermittent "writer-in-schools" for Read NZ Te Pou Muramura (formerly the NZ Book Council) – learning as well as teaching. "Often, children think they're no good at writing, then find they are if they are introduced to new ways of doing it. Teaching taught me to 'unpack' how I work, rather than just write from instinct."

As writing is somewhat isolating, De Goldi prioritises contact and collaboration. "I don't want to write all day, or every day. I like space between books. You need to take in the world to write. I'm a reader first and a writer second."

In 2016 and 2017, respectively, she and fellow editor Susan Paris compiled *Annual* then *Annual 2*: irresistibly fun compendia of stories, poems, illustrations, cartoons and craft activities – and a chance for Kiwi creatives to get work published. Now a Massey University Press imprint, *Annual Ink* has published two books for the often neglected "middle-reader" market of eight- to 14-year-olds (the imprint's primary focus) and a young adult novel. The duo is also mentoring four others towards debut publications.

This busy woman is also a trustee of Te Puna Foundation – the National Library's fundraising body – and is the foundation's representative on its steering group for

"Communities of Readers" (COR): an initiative to engage children, young people and their families with reading for pleasure and wellbeing.

Begun in 2019, COR's separate year-long pilots are operating in South Dunedin, West Auckland, Huntly and Christchurch, co-designed with community members to assist with their needs. In South Dunedin, the focus is the transition from early-childhood education to school. "In all four

communities, we're working with families and educators to see where the gaps are and how the National Library might help address them. It might be providing resources in te reo Māori and other languages – or perhaps providing reading and other resources for communities with people who have difficulty accessing reading material." The inaugural Reading Ambassador will be announced next year.

De Goldi couldn't be more enthused about this "nation-of-readers" mission. "Reading for pleasure – not just for literacy – is a crucial foundation for a fully-literate life, which helps build cultural and economic success. Reading, particularly fiction, builds empathy, by providing a window into others' lives. Parents reading to children, children reading independently, teachers modelling reading, and children getting the right reading materials will make a difference."

natlib.govt.nz tepunafoundation.org.nz

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