

## Why I Write what I write

Brian Falkner

*Tena kotu, tena kotu, tena kotu katoa.*

Why I Write, What I Write. Why do I write? What do I write? Why do I write what I do write? I think before I even attempt to answer these questions I should give you a warning. Do not expect to be enlightened, illuminated or genetically enhanced in any way by the content of my presentation. From the other authors, certainly, but not mine. Do not expect to leave here knowing any more than you knew when you arrived. Expect to sit quietly for ten minutes or so and politely applaud at the end.

But let's pause there for a moment. Why would anyone start their presentation with such a warning? Well you see, if my presentation turns out to be halfway entertaining, interesting or witty, you'll think to yourself at the end, ah-hah, he was only joking. But if it turns out to be dull, ill-informed, and about as much fun as watching CNN's 24 hour coverage of the Presidential Debates, then you'll think to yourself, well, at least he warned us.

Actually, there is a point to this rambling preamble. And it starts with an inflexion. New Zealanders are famous for ending their sentences on an upward inflexion. We can turn any statement into a question. Like this:

I'm from *New Zealand*. It's a small country near *Australia*. It's the country where they filmed *Lord of the Rings*. (By the way, if you're reading this from the presentation notes, instead of listening to me talk, you'll have no idea of what I'm on about here.)

Why do we talk this way? New Zealand is a small country in the middle of the pacific nowhere. We're most famous for having lots of sheep, and we're good at a sport that nobody's ever heard of. It's as if in every sentence we are seeking your approval.

I'm from *New Zealand*. (Hey that's okay, I hear it's really nice there.)

It's a small country near *Australia*. (No really, that's great, that's really er...)

It's the country where they filmed *Lord of the Rings*. (Enough already!)

So forget all the stuff you've heard about hardy pioneering stock who hacked a life out of the wilderness with their bare hands and were fearless warriors in two world wars. We really just want to be liked. If that's okay with *you*?

There's another group of people who are also notoriously insecure, and that is writers. Writers bare their souls and hang them out in the open for you to mock or abuse or just to kick around, all the time secretly hoping that you will respect, admire, and caress them. So if New Zealanders are notoriously insecure and writers are worse...what chance have you got when you're a writer from *New Zealand*? And yet, there's

something about being able to call yourself a writer. There's something about that line of children queuing for your autograph at a book festival or the delight on a child's face as you sign their very own copy of one of your books that sweeps all those insecurities away as if they were never really important. Which they weren't.

That's why I write. I write because it validates my existence. It gives me a reason to be on this planet. A bit sad and pathetic when you say it out loud.

So why do I write what I do write? I write children's books. Chapter books. I write books with a touch of the fantastical about them. Something that couldn't possibly be true, and yet, in my world it seems entirely natural. I hide the pearl of fantasy within a thick oyster shell of realism to make the impossible seem possible. A kind of plausibility by association.

But the question comes around again. Why? The answer in the simple logic of a child: Because! Buddha said: *Things are not what they seem. Nor are they otherwise.* The great French philosopher, Pierre Abelard said: *The beginning of wisdom is found in doubting; by doubting we come to the question, and by seeking we may come upon the truth.* Groucho Marx said: *A child of five would understand this. Send someone to fetch a child of five.* When we learn to crawl, our world expands. When we first walk, it grows a little more. When we get our first bicycle, we realize that there are lands waiting to be explored in the uncharted territories of the neighborhood around our home. What we know suddenly seems small. The number of questions we don't know the answers to seems vast but is still just a raindrop compared to the ocean of questions we have not yet thought to ask. But then far too quickly, the world starts to close in around us.

In a wonderfully tragic story by Helen Buckley a young boy who loves to paint flowers of all sizes and shapes and colours, starts at a big school, where he quickly learns that flowers are small and red, with green stems. There is a narrowing of our horizons that we cannot avoid, year after year, as first parents, then teachers, then professors explain to us the way things really are.

I am going to tell you something now, and I am sorry to have to be the one to break this to you, but you were bound to find out sooner or later. Human telepathy, the ability for human beings to read each other's minds and communicate simply by thought, is more than just possible, it is commonplace. In fact there are very few people in the world who cannot communicate by thought transfer. It just so happens that you are one of the few. The rest of us in this room are all able to read each other's minds. And able to read yours. Yes we know what you are thinking right now. But as soon as I tell you this, you are comparing this information with your own experience and worldview, and you know that I am lying to you. You know the way things really are.

See, I told you I knew what you were thinking!

But my readers are still young. The world is not yet quite so set in stone and the possibility still exists that there are more things beyond the limits of their knowledge that they have not yet discovered. By starting with what they know to be true and pushing it just slightly beyond those limits, I try to appeal to that sense of

wonderment, that exploration of a possible new world. In this world where anything can happen if you can only believe it to be true, the most wonderful adventures can take place with the most extraordinary people and the most powerful emotions, limited only by my own inadequacies in taking the stories from this world and translating them to the page. By my own stuttering empathy with the heart and mind of a ten-year-old child, a badly tuned in radio station to the way kids think and feel.

It may be distant and filled with static, but the signal is there. And I will continue to write, what I do write, as long as I can hear the music.

If that's all right with *you*.