The Importance of Pleasurable Reading

Joy Cowley, Children’s Author, Wellington, New Zealand

Editor’s note: The following article is based on the keynote address delivered by Joy Cowley at the 2011 National Reading Recovery & K-6 Classroom Literacy Conference. It is printed here, with permission by the author, so that all RRCNA members have the opportunity to be moved by her powerful images and eloquent descriptions.

Greetings, dear friends. It is good to be here again. I have fond memories of my last visit here almost 20 years ago. A group of us were involved in a workshop in a room that had outside windows. Great white snowflakes, like drowsy bumble bees were drifting against the glass and I needed to apologise for being distracted from my talk. This was the first time I’d seen falling snow. One of the teachers said, “You mean you’ve never made a snow angel?” “What’s that?” I asked. Immediately, all the teachers in that room stood up and led me to the car park outside. We all lay down in the snow, waved our arms, and made snow angels. Then we dusted ourselves off and came in to resume the workshop. I loved that incident. My reaction was—lucky children to have teachers who have not lost touch with their inner child. This talk is a tribute to all such teachers. Our love and concern for children is the reason why we are all here.

Before I give you an outline of this morning’s presentation, I have two little anecdotes that will illustrate the importance of pleasurable learning. I didn’t become a fluent reader until I was 9, nearly 10, and the early years were fraught with difficulty, fear of failure, and a poor self-image, the usual shadows that haunt the struggling reader. Fifty years later, an educational company wanted to do a film about the childhood of a successful writer. The director of this film knew that I’d found the old English phonics-based programme meaningless and he wanted to film a child at an old-fashioned desk, frowning over the pages. He had found the book in the National Archives, Progressive Primer Book 1, but to make sure it was the correct book, could he fax me a couple of pages? So there I was, a confident middle-aged woman standing by the fax machine. A piece of paper curled out and when I looked at it, my stomach knotted with dread. That was so interesting. My childhood emotions were still alive within me, although intellectually I believed I had dealt with them.

The second anecdote concerns something that happened 4 months ago. Running to catch a bus, I dropped my wallet in a busy Wellington street. I didn’t know it was missing until I arrived home and discovered my husband, Terry, talking on the phone. My wallet had been handed in at the central police station. Greatly relieved, I hurried back to the police station; but I received a rather odd reception from the desk sergeant. He wanted to know if all the cards in the wallet were mine. I said they...

Joy Cowley shared her passion for children and the importance of reading with attendees at the 2011 National Conference. Prior to delivering her keynote, Joy (left) talked with 2010–11 RRCNA President Judy Embry (center) and President-Elect Eloise Hambright-Brown.
I will start this presentation with a personal history that steered my writing in the direction of early reading. I was born in 1936 and was the eldest of five children. I’ve already mentioned that where reading was concerned, I was a late starter — very late. This was due to a number of reasons. My parents moved around a lot and I attended five schools by the time I was 7. There was a phonics programme that had little meaning for a visual learner. And at this age, I was a shy and somewhat timid child.

The breakthrough came when I was 9 and in the equivalent of a Grade 2 class. We didn’t have school libraries in those days, but a National Library Service van brought books to schools. The other children in my class received “real” books — Winnie the Pooh, Treasure Island, Alice in Wonderland. A picture book was put on my desk: The Adventures of Ping — the little duckling story by Marjorie Flack and Kurt Weiss. I must have absorbed some reading skills because I entered that story and lived it. I was that little duckling that got lost on the Yangtze River and was found again. I had that wonderfully exciting adventure in the security of my own chair and desk. Because I didn’t want the story to end, I went back to the beginning and read it again, and I made this amazing discovery. The story was exactly the same with the second reading. You see, the history of my experience of story had been oral — bedtime tales told by relatives — and these were never the same twice running. I had discovered the constancy of print.

It seemed to be, then, that I became instantly an accomplished and avid reader. I know it didn’t really happen like that. The big change was in attitude. Reading accessed story, and story was empowering. To a relatively powerless child, that was addictive.

My father enrolled me at the public library in our town. These were war years and children’s books were in short supply. I read collections of fairy tales, myths and legends, and then a kindly librarian guided me through the adult section where I encountered the classics: Tom Sawyer, Wuthering Heights, The Swiss Family Robinson, Ivanhoe, The Hunchback of Notre Dame, and 20,000 Leagues under the Sea. Like most children, I skipped whatever I didn’t understand to chase the story, and soon I was reading in every spare moment. I remember being puzzled by a novel by Victor Hugo. I couldn’t find the main character about whom the book was written. I read it twice, but although his name was in the title, he wasn’t in the story. He was Les Miserables.

Pleasurable learning leads to pleasurable recall. On the other hand, we can teach children to read, and at the same time, to hate reading if the process is dull and difficult. Reading for meaning, reading for pleasure — they go together in the effective early reading book.

I had a variety of cards from stores, memberships, credit cards — you know the collection — and all were in my married name, C. J. Coles. The sergeant asked me to write my name on a piece of paper. When I did so, his attitude seemed to harden. “So they are not all yours,” he said. Then I remembered my Visa card in my own name. I explained that I had a business card as J. Cowley. He said, “Not Joy Cowley the author,” he said. Again I nodded. A strange thing happened. Laughing, he bounced up and down behind the counter chanting, “I’m the King of the Mountain, I’m the King of the Mountain.”

He had learned to read those two stories are connected. The woman at the fax machine and the police sergeant behind his desk were each reliving an experience from childhood. Pleasurable learning leads to pleasurable recall. On the other hand, we can teach children to read, and at the same time, to hate reading if the process is dull and difficult. Reading for meaning, reading for pleasure — they go together in the effective early reading book.

To a relatively powerless child, that was addictive.
The Early Years as a Writer

It was love of story that made me a writer and it was my teachers who encouraged that. By the time I was 11, I was writing stories and poems for the children’s page of a newspaper. When I was 24, I had my first short stories published; my first novel was published in 1967 when I was 30. By this time, I was also writing stories for children who were reluctant readers.

Writing for beginner readers began in 1964 with a visit to our local country school to talk about my son Edward’s lack of progress. At this stage I had four children, ages 7, 6, 5, and 3. The two girls, 7 and 5, could read these books. It didn’t happen, so he gave up trying. He could do other things. He was a practical little boy who had already earned the nickname of “Mr. Fixit.” He didn’t think it necessary to compete with sisters who could read.

His teacher was a wise woman. She showed me a basal reader based on the old Dick and Jane and said, “There is no reason why any child would want to read this. Why don’t you write stories for Edward about the things that interest him?” She gave me the Dolch list of 100 basic words, and that was the beginning.

I worked one-to-one with Edward, then with other children from that school, and some from other nearby schools. There was no Reading Recovery in those days—or any other intervention program—and no guidelines apart from that word list. What I learned came from the children themselves.

Some of these children had been arbitrarily labelled dyslexic. I know that condition exists but I am equally sure that none of these children had dyslexia. They had met failure too many times and were not going to put themselves at risk. There was no point in offering them a book. For some, books were the enemy. We started a session with comfortable story talk: “What did you do on Saturday?” “What do you have in your school lunch?” “What did you dream last night?” Then we would venture further into creative story talk with questions: “If you could invent a new machine, what would it do?” “If you could have any kind of birthday party you liked, how would you plan it?”

Once I had the story content, the child would watch while I typed it on my Remington portable. It would be written in the third person with the child’s name in the title and all the way through it. I would read it to the child and give it to him to take home so that his parents could read it to him. Without exception, these children were very possessive of their own stories. They were authors. They had authority. I kept a carbon copy of the story and before the next session I made a small, stapled book with a simplified version of the text and some pictures. My art wasn’t great but they didn’t seem to mind. The child now had his own book, and he was keen to read it.

I know this sounds very simple, but it did work. It worked 100%. And oddly, my practical Edward who didn’t relate to fiction was very happy to have an element of fantasy in his stories. We had titles: Edward Saves the Hay Barn from Burning Down, Edward Teaches His Father to Scuba Dive, Edward Saves His Father from a Shark, and Edward Builds a Plane.

As time went on, I also wrote my own stories for these children based on what they had taught me. I discovered the value of humour. Laughter releases tension. No child could
have a tense attitude to reading when he was laughing. I learned to put a little joke at the end of a story. This was a treat, like dessert after vegetables, and it encouraged them to read through to the last page.

Local teachers were using some of the stories, making them into big books, usually with brown paper and illustrations done by their students. Some of the stories were published in the School Journals by the New Zealand Education Department. Here is a little story at a slightly higher level that began life with a child’s account of an unhappy visit to the school dental nurse. I turned it into fiction for the benefit of that child and later it went to the Part One School Journal.

My tiger had a bad tooth, so I took him to the dental nurse.

“Please, Nurse,” I said. “Will you fix my tiger’s tooth?”

“Is he dangerous?” said the nurse.

“No,” I said. “He only eats cake.”

“All right,” said the nurse. “Tell him to get up in the chair.”

My tiger didn’t like the drill. When it hurt him, he howled.

“All finished,” said the nurse. “Tell him he’s not to eat cake again.”

“But he always eats cake,” I said.

“It’s bad for his teeth!” snapped the nurse. “No more cake from now on.”

“Then what can he eat?” I asked.

“The same as other tigers,” she said.

So my tiger ate the dental nurse.

During these years in the mid-60s, I was also involved in Play Centre, the preschool our youngest son James attended. I taped children’s conversations on an old reel-to-reel tape recorder to identify the most-frequently used words and phrases and the subjects of high interest. I had already redefined that old Dolch list listing the words frequently used, those sometimes used, and those rarely used. The Dolch list had some notable omissions. Children frequently use the word love, applying it to everything from food to parents. That wasn’t on the list. But how many beginning readers use the subjunctive — those difficult words: would, should, and could? I later learned that the Dolch list had come from business letters.

Once, at an IRA conference, I suggested there was a need for some formal research and a new 100-word list based on early childhood usage. A couple of teachers assured me there was such a list. “Great!” I replied. “What was the research?” “It came from children’s books,” they said.

The 60s: The Beginning of Story Box

So what was happening in education in New Zealand in the 1960s? The education department was moving away from imported reading programmes and was publishing Ready to Read, its own basal programme. Price Milburn also published readers based on this programme. These little books were welcome. New Zealand children could recognize themselves in them. But they still had a textbook look, stilted language, and were far removed in quality from some of the popular trade picture books that were arriving in New Zealand — books like Wildsmith’s The Very Hungry Caterpillar, Sen-
ries to this workshop and wrote more over the weekend. *Greedy Cat* came out of the weekend.

Over the next 6 months, the Ready to Read editor went through hundreds of manuscripts, made selections, and then sent the chosen scripts to every school in the country to get teacher evaluations. This was an admirable gesture of democracy but not very practical. The process proved to be long and unwieldy, and it was eventually announced that the first new books would be available in 1983 — 5 years away.

I had a bunch of manuscripts that had not been accepted by Ready to Read but had been well-used in classrooms by teachers. I thought maybe about 20 of these stories could be illustrated and published to fill a gap for teachers until the new Ready to Read titles came out. I didn’t know an interested publisher, but my husband said he would take care of the publication. I then decided that I needed to do this with an experienced reading teacher. A friend, June Melser, seemed ideal. She had been a reading teacher for many years, had worked for the Education Department, and had also been a tutor at Teachers College. She was interested in the project but politely declined. I was disappointed. I had begun a search for someone else when June phoned me. She said the reason she’d refused was that she was already committed to a publisher in Auckland, Wendy Pye, who wanted to publish educational books and who had accepted a bunch of June’s retold folk tales. June asked me if I would be interested in meeting this new publisher. I was skeptical. I’d never heard of Wendy Pye but I agreed to go to Auckland to meet her and, in the interval, June sent Wendy my manuscripts.

Wendy Pye was a dynamic young Australian woman, intelligent, honest, and direct. She sat on the edge of her desk and said she didn’t know much about educational publishing but was keen to learn. I was impressed that she had sent my manuscripts out to top educational consultants for evaluation. She wanted to publish them.

And that was the beginning of Story Box.

Wendy, June, and I, plus Wendy’s art editor Bruce Wallace, worked as a team. At first, we had difficulty attracting established illustrators and it became my job to go around the art schools looking for talented students or new graduates who might be interested in illustrating children’s books. Through this we found some gifted new artists including Elizabeth Fuller.

*Mrs. Wishy-Washy* was created in the Marlborough Sounds where our family had a cottage by the sea. June and I had gone there to do layouts and illustration briefs for the first set of books. Early one morning I went out fishing, brought some snapper in for breakfast, and then, because I was cold, I had a hot bath. I was lying in the tub, dreamingly swishing water about, and thinking…wishy, washy, wishy, wash. At once some characters jumped into my head, an obsessively clean farming woman and some muddy animals. The story seemed to arrive intact. I jumped out of the bath, hastily dried and dressed and ran into the living room where June was sitting by the fire. “June, June, I’ve got another story.”

It was *Mrs. Wishy-Washy*. In 1968, New Zealand teachers urgently requested new and upgraded materials to replace their dull and largely uninteresting books for children. Ten years later, the education department arranged a weekend workshop for authors and illustrators. Among the stories Joy wrote over the weekend was *Greedy Cat*. 
The 70s: Teachers Wanting More!
Our first bunch of Story Box books came out in 1979 — 16 shared reading books. We had planned a further 16 books and had not imagined any more than that. After all, this was supposed to be a small series to fill a gap for New Zealand teachers. But thanks to the work of Wendy Pye, the first lot sold immediately in New Zealand, Australia, the UK, and then America. And teachers were calling for more, more, more.

In later years, teachers asked me why the Story Box Reading programme came out in small units. The answer was simple: We never did consider anything as grandiose as a reading programme. Story Box grew bit-by-bit, by demand.

The 80s: School Visits and Research
We were now in the 1980s and, for me, this was a decade of school visits and research. I was aware that the world of children’s books was controlled by adults with little input from children. I needed to further the basic research I had done in the late 60s and early 70s, and generous teachers allowed me into their classrooms. Generally, 5- and 6-year-olds are not reflective. But a class of 7- and 8-year-olds would readily tell me how they felt when they were 5 or 6.

I asked questions about almost everything that concerned them: their position in the family, foods they liked and disliked, games, sports, what made them laugh, what made them scared. I explored their values, their sense of justice, and their ambitions for themselves and their family.

I took copious notes and wish now that I had kept them. However, it didn’t seem necessary to keep the research once it had gone into stories and been published. For example, the The Hungry Giant book came from comments about bullying, something that all children have experienced one way or another.

Some answers to questions have stayed with me: I asked a second-grade class what they would do if they were president for a year. One boy said: “I’d make all the world leaders who started wars go in and fight them” — great wisdom from an 8-year-old.

In the 1980s and 90s, I also set up a system to evaluate manuscripts before they went to the publisher. There were teachers who trialed stories for me and I also took manuscripts into schools so that I could judge reaction. Where did I have the class’s attention? Where did energy fall away? I always found children very honest in their reactions and I learned something new almost every time I did this. Once I took four manuscripts into a school in Blenheim, New Zealand. Two stories were okay, one needed more work, and the fourth—a story that I liked—did not connect with the children at all. Some children listened politely. Others fidgeted and played with the velcro on their shoes. I asked them, “What was wrong with that story?” The boy in front of me didn’t bother to put his hand up. “It was boring,” he said. I thought that maybe I could rewrite it or at least, salvage the idea for another story. “Which part of it was boring?” I asked. “All of it,” he replied. He was right. That manuscript went in the trash.

In 1986, Wendy Pye left Shortland to begin her own publishing company and her new programme, Sunshine books. I wrote for the Sunshine books for a few years with characters like Huggles, The Little Yellow Chicken, Sloppy Tiger, and Millions of beginning readers have been delighted by Joy Cowley’s unforgettable characters based on personal experiences and talks with children. Joy says Mrs. Wishy Washy came to her as she was lying in the tub, dreamingly swishing water about, and thinking … wishy, washy, wishy, wash. The Hungry Giant came from a child’s comments about bullying.
Mr. Grump. Now my earnings from early reading books were very good, and a way of recycling excess income was to do voluntary work in countries whose culture was not adequately represented in their children’s reading.

Many of these countries had Story Box or Sunshine books and I received numerous requests from teachers — would I write for their children who were learning English? This was not the answer. They needed their own authors. So I offered to fly in to countries like South Africa, Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia, China, Iceland, the villages of North Alaska, and do writing workshops for teachers. I’d have them write stories from their own childhood and their folk tales; then I would edit them to simple language, do layouts, and supervise illustration. In South Africa, schools received simple photocopied and stapled black-and-white books, produced and distributed by READ. In Hong Kong and Singapore, whole reading programmes were published. The result was the same. Children were reading about their own country and culture, in stories written by their own authors.

From the mid-1980s, I was also writing trade children’s books, picture books and novels, books that went into libraries and shops, and books that children could own. Until this time, all my books had gone directly into schools. Parents could not buy educational readers for their children. Libraries did not stock them.

I no longer worked directly one-to-one with reluctant readers, but correspondence grew with teachers who had a specially gifted child in a class or perhaps a student who needed extra encouragement. This was a very rewarding way of following the progress of individual students. These days, even greater reward comes from seeing children who have grown into published writers. One young New Zealand woman won a short story award that gave her a place in a prestigious British summer school. She was the youngest to receive this award. When interviewed, she mentioned me as a mentor and said, “Now I shudder to think of those awful stories I sent Joy Cowley when I was young.” Well, her stories were not awful. They were brilliant. And this young writer judging her efforts was only 15. She is now 17 and has a bright future ahead of her.

The Love of Story
I have corresponded with children in love with reading and story who have now become creative teachers, and I gladly keep in touch with them and their classes. I feel like the grandmother of their students. In my experience, children who become addicted to reading also become writers, at least while they are still at school. What they read overflows into their own efforts. This is part of a four-step learning process: observation, imitation, innovation, and creation.

We know how this process works. The young child observes his mother making peanut butter sandwiches. He imitates. At first he gets holes in the bread and peanut butter over the counter and himself, but he soon gets it right and he is ready to innovate. How about peanut butter and jelly beans? Peanut butter and chips? Then he is into leaving out the peanut butter to experiment with his own creations. So it is with all learning. Children are creative. Give them the tools and technique and they will create, each in their own way. Some of the most-profound writing I’ve seen has come from children who are learning disabled.

Here is a story from Lonnie, an 11-year-old boy with Downs Syndrome. He gave me this as a stapled book when I visited his special needs class in California. I have copied it, word for word, here:

The gun eater. The gun eater cam down to the erth. He saw the sad people. He saw all the guns. So the gun eater eat all the guns and there was no more guns in the erth the end.

For a little over 6 years I worked at a distance with a wonderful retired Canadian teacher, Rowena Watson, and her protégé, Kenneth. Once a week this teacher met Kenneth at McDonalds, bought him a meal, and helped him with his reading. I sent books and letters that she read to him. The first card I received from Kenneth, age 7, was written by Rowena and signed with a shaky letter K by Kenneth. That was as much as he could manage. Five years later, Kenneth was sending me handwritten stories, three and four pages long. Many of these stories were violent because that was his background, but in them the boy who was the main character was always powerful. One story was about a boy who killed his bullying father. The title was The Boy Who Ate the Wind and Drank the Rain. That retired teacher had helped this boy to empower himself by giving him the tools of literacy.

I’m still writing a few early reading books, and some trade books. I’ve needed to cut back on speaking engagements but, when I can, I’m a part of the faculty of the Highlights writing workshops in Chautauqua.
each July. I have loved my job and have only one small regret — that I did not keep details of research, studies of children I’ve worked with, and a journal of the back-room work that has gone into the publication of early reading books.

But here, out of 55 years of experience in writing for early reading, I can offer a brief list of the ingredients that make an effective book. I have placed them in order of importance, although they are, in fact, all important.

Ingredients That Make an Effective Book

1. **Story**
The text needs story shape, a well-defined beginning, middle, and ending. It must have a plot. A plot is what happens in a story, and often it consists of some kind of problem or challenge which is resolved. If nothing happens, we don’t have plot and we don’t have a story.

2. **Child-centered**
The text must belong to the child’s world and not to some adult view of that world. All stories contain messages, but the story must come first, not the message. Writing that preaches to a child is a big turn-off.

3. **Respect**
A story respects the child as a person in his or her own right, and not a little person who is adult investment. Many stories do not respect the dignity and authority of the child. They have a dumbing-down effect, using sentimental language or describing something that the child has known for several years. Some traditional stories introduce “a little boy” or “a little girl.” Do you know any children who consider themselves little? No. Little is always the younger brother or sister, never the reader.

4. **Humour**
No one can be tense while they are laughing. Humour is important in that it releases tension, creates enjoyment, and diminishes fear of failure.

5. **Empowerment**
All children know powerlessness to some degree. Even children from nurturing homes experience helplessness through lack of skills—tying shoes, putting on gloves, doing up buttons or zippers, through being too small to reach things, through facing indifferent or grumpy adults out there in the world and scary things like barking dogs and their own nightmaraes. Books can redress the balance between the powerful and the powerless. In story, children may solve adults’ problems but adults do not solve children’s problems. Children solve their own problems. Small is always the winner.

6. **Age-specific**
I see many manuscripts written from some vague idea of a “children’s book.” I ask what age the book is for and the author might say, “Oh, from 5 to 11.” I always think that such an author is thinking about the breadth of a market and sales rather than the consumers of the product. Remember that stories must be written for a certain age and stage of development. Don’t write a story to be read by children. Write it for one child that you know well and you will probably get the level right.

7. **Reading level**
The level of a book is determined by the range of words, rather than the length of the story. I’ve seen manuscripts with texts only 50 words long that have been much more challenging than Dr. Seuss’s *Green Eggs and Ham*, which has over 1,000 words. If you want a rough idea of the level of your story, put a ring around every word that can be illustrated, and see what you have left. It is the range of words that cannot be illustrated, the heavy duty “service” words that suggest the level of challenge.

8. **Avoid list books**
There is a temptation to create pattern books that consist of a repeated sentence with perhaps one word changed on each page. These books read like worksheets and do not engage a reader.

9. **Natural language**
Apparently, 80% of our everyday spoken language is contained in a basic 100-word list. Be aware of the language of the children you are writing for. In early reading books, I see language structures that are rarely used by children. For example, how often do you hear children say, “I see a …” More naturally, they would say, “Look! There’s a whale!” or “Wow! A whale!” To achieve a natural effect, forget about *writing* and try *telling* the story on paper, using conversational language.

10. **Line breaks**
A new reader will track a line of text with her finger until she comes to the end of the line. Then she stops, takes a breath, and traces her finger back to the beginning of the next line. The breath pause can take
from 2 to 4 seconds. It is important that the line break is at the end of a phrase or sentence. If the line break is in the wrong place, meaning will be lost. Here is an example of poor line breaks:

'O lovely mud!' said the cow and she jumped in it.

11. Decodable language
Where possible, I use decodable language for the lower levels — words that sound the way they are spelled. These are not necessarily short words. They can be multisyllabled as long as they have high interest and can be sounded out letter-by-letter. Most boys would find no difficulty with words like carburetor or electronic or helicopter. When my son Edward was struggling with said and their, he had no problem reading the high-interest word supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.

12. Storyboard
If you are writing an early reading book, I suggest that you use the storyboard technique. Draft your story onto sequential pages and think about the action that will be illustrated on each page. Remember that it is difficult to illustrate more than one action on a page.

13. Gender-specific
We know that girls will read books about boys but boys aren’t interested in books about girls. With this knowledge, some women writers will write about boy characters, but often the characters are girls disguised as boys. The stories are gentle, domestic, reflective, or sentimental. They lack action and are not about the subjects that interest boys. Some of these interests are beyond the author’s interest, but we can always do research. Remember that boys want information. It is not enough to write about a car race, describing the colours of the car, and the car that wins. Boys will want some interesting mechanical details. Do the research and give them those details.

14. Nonfiction
Boys often look for nonfiction stories. As in fiction, women writers tend to get ideas close to their own interests. I see many nonfiction books about the seasons, nesting birds, butterflies, and sunflowers. I’m sure that many girls will enjoy these stories, but where does that leave the boys? Again, be adventurous in research — sensational sporting events; interesting characters from history; how to make or do something; or dramatic natural occurrences like hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions. They need not have complex or challenging language. Think of all the decodable words associated with a volcano — crater, rumble, magma, a river of red-hot lava, ash, smoke. There is room, too, for make-and-do books. These can be simple. But even though they are nonfiction, remember the story shape.

In Closing
The most-valuable asset for anyone writing or evaluating books for children is a good memory. When we are authentically in touch with our own inner child, it is easy to connect with the child out there. Fads and fashions may change and there are cultural differences to be observed and respected, but the emotional world of the child is the same from one generation to the next.

About the Author
Joy Cowley is an award-winning author of novels, short stories, and children’s fiction, with Mrs. Wishy-Washy being her most famous character. She has written more than 600 early reading titles and is among the most popular children’s authors in the world. Joy enjoys mentoring writers. She is a patron of Storylines, an initiative to promote awareness of the importance of reading for all children, and supports writers and illustrators of children’s literature in New Zealand. She also runs writing workshops for people whose culture is not adequately represented in their children’s books, and has edited stories to make them accessible to new readers.