

Interview with Fleur Beale



Could you tell me what got you started in writing?

My mother was a writer. I grew up knowing that people write stories. Mum read a lot and had stuff published and went to workshops. She would write up the notes and send them to me to read.

Who influenced you?

Mum – she was a writer herself and a storyteller.

Dorothy Butler – she was instrumental in getting me broadcast on radio and suggested I get in touch with an agent. She said that a good agent is worth their weight in gold.

Ray Richard, my agent – he's a mentor, encourager and good friend.

How do agents help you?

Agents get sent things by publishers and they fire that information in the direction of the writers. You know what publishers are wanting through that. If he thinks you are going in the right direction he will tell you - he is encouraging.

I also have an overseas agent. If I feel my story has an international flavour I'll send my books to my international agent but it is real 'book to book' stuff - nothing is guaranteed. It is real hard for writers starting out now – it is tough to get agents now too as they all seem to be full.

How do you keep a balance in your life with writing, work, family and leisure?

Writing doesn't support me. I earn money with manuscript assessing, writers in schools, and relief teaching. It helps me get out amongst people and interacting with people.

Why have some of your books lasted the distance – reprinted?

All scholastic books are still in print plus 'I am not Esther'. With the latter book the story is about an unusual situation and more than the religion thing. Partly the character is losing her own personality – this is something that children can relate to. My longest book in print is 'Slide the Corner'.

How helpful was the Writers in Residence at Dunedin College of Education to your writing and career?

It gave me permission to call myself a writer. People were paying me to write – this is wonderful. You get to meet people and other writers and make useful contacts.

You have had books in the NZ Post Children's Book Awards – how does this affect your career and book sales?

Being shortlisted boosts sales. It gives you exposure and builds your profile as an author.

How important is it to try your stories out with the audience i.e. children?

It can be a trap because certain ages say it is fabulous and they're not looking for the same things as a publisher. You really need a person like a friend or relatives who can tell you whether it is a good idea, whether the character is rounded or if the plot has holes.

What advice would you give to beginner writers?

Go to writing courses, not necessarily year long ones – try night classes, weekend workshops, read about writing, read lots of books and give your work to someone you trust to read it and comment.

Advice to burgeoning writers?

I would recommend you approach publishers with an idea in your mind. Go to a bookshop and look for the same genre as you are writing in (similar books) look at who the publisher is and then approach them with your idea. Give them an outline and sample chapters (those need to be very professional).

