

BNZ Katherine Mansfield Novice Award winner – Joseph Ryan



Joseph Ryan lives in Wellington where he is a full time student at both Victoria University and Whitireia Polytechnic. He has attended various writing courses and workshops over the past few years, including the Novel Writing Course at Whitireia Polytechnic, as well as the, Iowa Workshop, Children’s Writing and Short fiction workshops at Victoria’s IIML.

At the moment he spends most of his spare-time working on his short story collection, which he has almost finished, and his novel (both of which play on the kinds of stock-motifs/ characters, seen in *Stranger than Beautiful*). Apart from general fiction, Joseph also has a strong interest in illustration: <http://josephedwardryan.blogspot.com>, and hopes to one day write and illustrate his own graphic novel.

Stranger Than Beautiful

When she was born the doctor drove a hundred miles in his Model-A Ford in heavy rain to their house that overlooked the Catholic school. The doctor said she would not live out the winter because of her many deformities and that her mother should spend what little time she had with her while she was alive. Yet she lived, growing into a small girl of five, only three feet eight inches tall and hunched over, with a face and mouth that were warped, and one eye that drooped far below the other. But she could still see, and she would sit in the garden outside the house and watch the insects in the morning dew. The long wild flowers were around her and the sun was warm.

They grew their own vegetables and were mostly alone. Her mother walked with her in the evenings to exercise her little legs and told her about the war and how brave her father had been. They sat at the top of the hill on Wednesdays and ate tomato soup and looked down on the town in the distance and at the rolling hills and the green countryside while her mother told her about her father.

“if you look far enough, you can see the river where your father used to work. He lived and worked on the river.”

She looked at the river and thought about her father.

“When your father was young he made a houseboat with your grandfather. They worked on it together and when your grandfather became ill, your father brought him all the way home on the houseboat to the place where he had grown up, so he could see it one last time. Your father had a kind heart. I miss him very much.

“We have to be careful not to think about sad things too much. To think on them too much would be to give a garden to them.”

Sisters from the parish below arrived each Thursday with schoolwork. She sat in her room and learned about numbers and how when numbers were put together, they made larger numbers, and she learnt how to spell simple words.

In the evening after dinner, the priest who lived below them, crossed the paddock to sit with her and read her a book.

The sisters had told the priest she should be read true literature, as it was a greater kind of writing, but the priest said that writing was only great if it felt great within the person, and so he read her books that she cherished about giants and fairy queens and many other wild things.

The priest read, and the words were inside her, and she was rich and full of imaginings. She learned of the heroes of story, and how they were mostly stranger than they were physically beautiful, and always alone, and the priest told her that loneliness was the story inside us all, and it was only cured through the medicine of another.

“You are a remedy for me,” he told her. “In your company, I feel parts of myself become well and new again.”

When she turned six her bones started to weaken and she needed a crutch to walk. The doctor fitted her with a brace to straighten her crooked legs and the priest came to visit her and brought with him a box of books.

He told her to pick a story and she looked through them until she found the book about the hedgehog prince and his rooster. The priest sat beside her, on the stool he brought for reading, and he read in his best voice how the hedgehog prince rode home on his rooster across the shadowed hills and through the dark forest to reclaim his kingdom.

The kingdom was adorned with garden waterfalls and towered beside a rushing river painted with autumn leaves.

They rode beneath the ivy arch and the kingdom welcomed them with waves and glowing smiles and the hedgehog prince changed before them. His thorny coat shrunk and broke apart like a pile of twigs, the wind taking the last of his coat from him, and he was a prince once more.

While the priest spoke, he dimmed the lamp beside her, so there were shadows on the walls, and talked in a deep voice, the light catching the lines of his old grey face and long beard. As he spoke he would give the story roots of its own, and free it from the page. It would grow and turn around the room, crawling, its branches journeying behind the curtains and under her bed and around the walls.

“What happened to the rooster?”

“He was given a home in the royal gardens. They looked after him and combed his colourful feathers. The hedgehog prince would visit him each morning and sit with him and sometimes he would climb onto his back and they would ride with the wind.”

“Would they ever ride back to their old home to visit the wild things?”

The priest stroked his beard. “They returned after many years when the hedgehog prince was old and grey. Their old home in the woods had now fallen and was covered in autumn leaves. But the blue birds were still in the trees, and upon seeing them, flew down to greet them.”

“It’s good they went back to the forest. The birds had taken care of them for so long. I was sad when they left the birds.”

“When we become old, those that we dreamed with often become stars once more.”

In the summer when it was hot and there was pollen around the garden, she called for her mother but her mother did not answer. She made her way gently down the steps and found her mother lying still under the washing line with her blue dress milling around her.

She hurried awkwardly down the hill, falling several times, and then was at the gravel drive and calling, though her voice was not a voice most could understand, for it was bent and warped like her.

The children looked at her and followed her and she did not know where to get help. She could only turn amongst them.

A sister found her and asked what was wrong and stood with her in the courtyard until the priest arrived. The priest walked into the crowd and bent down and picked her up. She was high above the crowd and he walked through the children who were looking up at her.

She cried into the priest’s shoulder, her bent mouth running with tears, and the priest told the sister to check on her mother.

The doctor said that her mother was with God and the priest told her not to cry and that he would care for her now.

“God has given you to me,” he said. “He has placed you in my hold and I will write to the church and they will have to understand. If they will not, then I will tell them I can no longer be a priest, for I will not leave you alone to the tigers of this world.”

In the evenings when the children went home from school and the field was empty she would go with the priest down to the oak that sat beside the field and watch the sunset.

“Between our birth and our death, we have our own universe. We are awake to the miracle of the light of life for such a short while.”

The priest told her about how he was in the war, like her father. He said war was full of darkness and even with the light of God it was hard to see. He said that he used to be lost in its darkness for many years, but that she had brightened God’s light inside him and he felt lost no more.

They sat in the long grass and the land fell into shadow and soon she was shadow too.

She told him, with her breathing tight, that they were like characters in a fairy tale. He looked at her sadly, his heart aching, but he said nothing and they watched the world move slowly.

He asked her what characters they were. She told him what they could be and what they couldn’t be, since now her fantasy world had laws. And for a while they were black swans in the burrow of their forest hideaway, lost to fantasy, faraway from the known world, and headed south to escape the land that burned behind them.

The winter was cold and the priest had men from the mine cut down the trees at the back of the school and they had firewood. Her breathing worsened and the doctor came and sat beside her and gave her an injection. He told the priest that the growths in her chest were inflamed and made it hard for her to breathe. He said she could not be moved and must keep her head elevated.

The priest prayed.

As the days passed, she started to get better and asked him if she had been playing with the children, or if it was all a dream.

“When you are unwell, God sends you good dreams to cradle your soul. He knows how special you are to this world.”

The doctor took the priest outside and told him that the growths would only inflame again and that she needed to be taken to hospital for an operation. He explained how the operation carried great risks, but without it she would not live out the winter.

She sat in bed and felt better.

“I love you so much you know,” the priest told her. “My heart broke when I saw you struggling to breathe. I will tell you a secret. I told God I could not love him if he did not make you well again. I am not sorry that I said this to him.”

“I can breathe now,” she said.

“I am to take you to hospital today.” And he started to pack her things.

She sat up and coughed and felt her chest.

“Can we take some books?”

“Yes, we can take all your books.”

And she sat in the car and he brought her an ice cream and put it in a bowl so she could eat it. She ate her ice cream while they drove along and he checked her breathing and she said she could breathe all right now.

“You never complain,” said the priest. “You suffer each day, but you never complain.” He told her to eat and watched her eat and he stopped the car to wash the mud from the window.

“It’s warm,” she said.

"It is a warm day," he said. "Good driving weather. God has blessed us."

"It's easier to breathe in warm air."

"It is easier," he said. He threw water on the window and smiled.

"I feel better."

He glanced briefly above. "God listens to me. I have told him to look after you. He will keep you safe."

She looked at the river through the window and watched it roll over the stones and the sun fell and glistened on the water.

"Is it against God to believe in fairies?" she asked. "To believe they are real. Like God is real."

He got into the car. "It's not against God to believe in fairies. If God created them and they are good, then to think about them is to be with God."

Her hand was sore and she rubbed it. "Do you believe in fairies?"

"Long ago I thought I saw one. When I was little like you. But when you grow older you forget what they look like, and you think they were just a daydream. That is how fairies hide. They hide in your past."

"If I caught one, I would not put it in a jar like in the story," she breathed deep. "I would leave it alone."

"God has given you a good heart."

"Would you put it in a jar?" she rubbed her chest.

"I think I would be too amazed to be able to pick up a jar. I might just watch it." He looked at her. "Is your chest sore?"

"It's alright. My breathing is better now."

He started the car. "We should go now. The doctor wants you there early."

"Are angels fairies?"

"Maybe they are. I don't see why they couldn't be."

They turned onto the road.

"Do you like reading about fairies?" he asked.

She took a breath; her small chest rose and she looked at him. "I like to think about them."

"Then it is good to read about them."

"When I grow up I want to write about them. Do you think I could write a story about fairies when I grow up?"

He answered at length. "You can do anything you want to do. You have a good heart. A good heart is a fine compass in whatever you do. With a good heart you shall never get lost in God's world."

She coughed a little and pulled at her jersey.

"Are you cold?"

She shook her head.

“There are many types of storytellers,” he said. “Storytellers are like birds. They take different things from the world to make their nests. You will take good things from the world and make a warm nest.”

They drove and she looked out the window at her reflection and she rubbed at the window. She watched the fence line change and she asked the priest if he would be lonely if she fell asleep now.

He smiled at her. “You rest now. We have a long drive ahead.”

And she looked at him.

“You have a good dream,” he said. “While you are in hospital I will find some books on how to write stories. I will read them and make notes.”

She looked at the window and saw the sun bend in through the glass and it looked like a rainbow to her, and she closed her eyes.

And somewhere along the long road, where the river bent north, the secret part of her that made what it could from the world started to fall away.

She played with the children in the sun shower and the grass was green around her, lush and turning in a silver wave, and when the children asked her to throw the ball, she did not throw it, for she had noticed a strange shape on the hill.

And the children asked again for the ball.

But she could now see the rooster, and towards him she ran.