

***The Power of Place:
Landscape in New Zealand Children's Fiction,
1970-1989.***

Reviewed by Brent Southgate

The Power of Place: Landscape in New Zealand Children's Fiction, 1970-1989.

Diane Hebley.

Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1998.

There have been few critical studies of New Zealand children's literature, certainly few that treat it as literature rather than an occasion for social or educational discussion. So this book—by an author with extensive knowledge of the field—deserves a welcome. Having said that, my main feeling about it is one of disappointment.

In *The Power of Place* Diane Hebley charts the responses of New Zealand children's writers, over a period of twenty years, to the local landscape. The main argument of the book is an interesting one—that writers have gained power in their fiction when they have drawn directly on the landscape's often violent and spectacular nature.

However, to make the case at least two things seem to be required, and neither is seriously attempted. First, comparison with other literatures forced to use less dramatic settings (are they really missing out on a vital ingredient?) Second, comparison, within a particular writer's oeuvre, of those books that do draw on the landscape in the requisite way and those that don't.

Diane Hebley's approach is rather that of the comprehensive survey. Virtually every children's novel of the chosen period is examined for its use of the settings defined by her chapter headings—“Ocean and Island”, “Harbour and Beach”, “Mountain and Bush”, “Hill and Plain”, “Lake and River”, “Cave and Tunnel”. This has its points—but it does mean that the outline of the argument is lost in a welter of unnecessary detail.

How plausible is the argument anyway? No doubt it's good for writers to ground their fiction in a recognisable reality, and good too for children—growing up in a world of images beamed to them from Britain and America—to read stories that reflect their own surroundings. One thing that *The Power of Place* successfully demonstrates is the degree to which New Zealand children's writers have internalised their country's natural imagery.

But hovering at the edge of Diane Hebley's argument is an implication that writers who use imaginary or non-New Zealand settings—writers, in fact, like Margaret Mahy, in much of her work—lack a degree of authenticity and power. If that is the claim I should like to have seen it frankly stated and argued. Writers create what they can, after all, and the physical landscape is only one ingredient in the fictional stew.

The Power of Place has its successes. There is a particularly fine reading of Mahy's *The Tricksters*, which—as it's implicitly set near Lyttelton Harbour—is one of the few books from that author which does suit the thesis. Analysis in terms of the physical setting here turns out to be interesting and revealing. It seems a pity, though, that the somewhat inflexible layout of the book requires the analysis to be distributed across several chapters, and to share space with books of much less importance.

There is a useful bibliography and two appendices, one an essay on critical approaches to New Zealand children's literature.

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