

# Given a golden ticket

Taranaki author Emma Pearl has writing in her blood via a relative famous for his classic kids' books. **by LINDSAY WRIGHT**

**T**oko, astride the Forgotten World Highway, is about 10 minutes' drive east of Stratford. It's dairying country. There's a pub, school, hall, rugby club, domain and tennis courts, a big-iron trucking company.

Also nestled into this rumpled volcanic landscape of central Taranaki is the home of author Emma Pearl, who writes books for children and adults. Toko is her adoptive land, a long way from Buckinghamshire, where she grew up in a whānau that included her very literary great-uncle, Roald Dahl.

What sweet-toothed youngster hasn't salivated over Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* or chortled with *The Twits*? His irreverent and funny works have reached across the world for generations.

"My grandmother, Uncle Roald and my family all lived within a few miles of each other in Buckinghamshire," says Pearl. "It was like one big, extended family. Uncle Roald was my maternal grandmother's brother and the closest thing I had to a grandfather after my other grandfather died.

"I sort of filled the gap between Roald's own children and his grandchildren – at a time when he was doing most of his writing for children, so we spent quite a bit of time together."

This included Dahl teaching his young relative to swim. "I was five years old and not too keen on getting wet. He said if I could swim a width of his indoor pool, he would buy me the biggest box of chocolates you could get.

"I practised and practised ... and finally did it. Uncle Roald clapped, cheered and gave me a big hug. 'Come on,' he said. We got into his car and drove to the village shop where he bought the biggest box of chocolates they had and gave it to me."

An even bigger treat came a few years later when *The Twits* was published. "He had dedicated it to me. It was such a huge thrill for a seven-year-old bookworm like

me to see my name – 'For Emma' – inside the flyleaf."

*The Twits* may have been dedicated to her but Pearl's favourite Dahl work is *Matilda*. The bookworm schoolgirl appealed. "I was just like her."

Like Dahl's, the Pearl family home was full of books, a nurturing environment for a budding writer. "I've been writing ever since I could hold a pencil – all I ever wanted to be was an author. Uncle Roald showed me how to use and value my imagination.

"I've written hundreds of picture books and five adult novels. I've always loved sto-

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ries. Once you start looking for stories – get in that mindset – you see them everywhere."

Pearl's first novel was written in her 20s but "has never – and will never – see the light of day".

She studied French and Spanish at Cambridge University and then art history at the university's Peterhouse college. From there she worked at a contemporary art gallery, as a travel agent and in children's publishing before setting off on what would become an extended OE.

She backpacked around the world, visiting some 50 countries. Along the way she did voluntary work, learnt to snowboard and qualified as a PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) dive master.

## GETTING SERIOUS

Pearl's travels led her to Aotearoa, where she met her Kiwi husband, Nick Orwin. After moving between the UK and New Zealand, they ultimately settled in Toko with

their two children, Sam, now 13, and Jess, 11, and a one-eyed cat called Penelope.

When Pearl decided to get serious about writing for young people, she connected with "a wonderful, supportive writing community online" through the WriteMentor site. In 2020, she secured a US publisher, Page Street Kids, for her picture book *Mending the Moon*, illustrated by Sara Ugolotti.

The book deal was secured through a Twitter service called #BBPitch, where picture book writers pitch their manuscript online and have it read by literary agents and editors.

A sequel, *Saving the Sun*, has also been accepted by Page Street and will be published internationally in September. Page Street distributes via Macmillan and has proved a healthy market for Pearl, who has also acquired a US agent.

For her, there is joy in writing for children. "What is so magical about children's books is that they can make you think just as much as an adult fiction book can.

"Writing for kids, you have to be very concise – you have to grab their attention immediately or it's gone. You have to get up a big emotional message into a small number of words."

Having been part of a mentoring community, Pearl is encouraging of anyone who wants to write.

"My advice to budding writers is simple: read, read, read as much as you can and join lots of groups that support authors. There are lots of resources out there for writers and the literary community is welcoming.

"The more writers the better. Writers aren't competitive as such – we all love books and reading, so we encourage each other."

## MODERN CENSORSHIP

Pearl now works full time from tiny Toko as a writer, picture book mentor and freelance editorial consultant. "I love it here. It has everything we need, and good stories."

*Mending the Moon* and *Saving the Sun* would both appear to include elements of





Emma Pearl, clockwise from above, with her children's book *Mending the Moon*; with her great-uncle Roald Dahl; reading to New Plymouth youngsters.



Māori mythology. “I suppose there could be some fusion which I’ve taken on board from living in Aotearoa. You can’t live here without absorbing some te ao Māori.

“Both of my children were born in Aotearoa New Zealand and they grew up reading about Māoridom and learning te reo. They’re my sounding boards – they soon let me know when I’ve got something wrong.”

Great-uncle Roald has been accused

in recent times of getting some things wrong. His British publisher, Puffin, and copyright managers the Roald Dahl Story Company made changes to Dahl’s texts in new editions, tweaking words and phrases deemed potentially offensive to sit better with modern audiences: *Charlie’s Augustus Gloop* becomes “enormous” rather than “fat”, the physical attributes of the awful aunts of *James and the Giant Peach* were rewritten and genders were neutralised

across the canon. The uproar was swift, both about the bowdlerisation and the clunkiness of many of the edits. Puffin has since agreed to keep publishing the original works as the Roald Dahl Classic Collection.

Pearl’s own reaction is to agree with the take from Queen Camilla: “I’m against censorship in any form ... writers must be free to think and express themselves.” Uncle Roald, she says, “would have hated it, but he’d see the funny side, too.” ■

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