

## **Useless Grasses**

### **Elizabeth Knox on imagination**

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It's Saturday not Sunday morning, but let us imagine we're a congregation. Each of us owes the other, we keep ourselves in check, we look to one another when we're low, and want not to be shamed in one another's eyes. We sit together listening, often looking up and out, past the ancestral memorials, to the view beyond the window of slow, heavy clouds on a day when rain is gathering and the wind is low. Some of us are simply watching the weather, some looking for a hidden heaven, some for—or at—God, some at planetary time. Several of those things might be imaginary, but we have to imagine all of them—even the weather now.

Last November in Golden Bay my husband Fergus, sister Sara, and I, went for walk a way we hadn't taken before, which is unusual since we're always going to Golden Bay. We saw a South Island black piwakawaka. The little bird wasn't making its usual sound of someone vigorously washing a little window. The day was hot, and the birds were all subdued, perhaps from a first fine distillation of Australian bushfire smoke staining the sky. The piwakawaka was silent, smaller than the North Island bird, a flitting scrap of shadow. Its tail was crenelated because it had been moulting and its feathers hadn't filled out again. It was recognisable; and quite different. We hadn't seen one before.

Novelty in the natural world is something people tend to notice more as they get older, because often they're seeing things again and the delight is in thinking, "There it is. Still there." A reaffirmation almost more marvellous than anything seen for the first time.

A month after that walk, and that bird, when the sky in Wellington was orange with smoke—another new thing—I remembered having thought about that: the world’s constant, quiet reaffirmation of itself. And it suddenly seemed far less solidly *promised* than it had before.

So, it’s a Saturday, but imagine we’re part of a congregation praying for clemency, and our prayer goes, “We know now. We know now.” With a light refrain of, “If only we’d known.”

What was I thinking when, fifteen years ago, I was having a self-congratulatory conversation with someone overseas about the newest find of natural gas in the sea off Taranaki? This, I said happily, will really help with New Zealand’s ongoing energy needs.

I’d failed to make connections, and it was a failure of imagination. The first thing we have to imagine is that there are things we’re missing, that we don’t know, that elude us. We have to imagine the scale of our failures. What we can’t see at all, or can’t see straight. We’re so busy beholding the mote in our brother’s eye that we can’t consider the beam in our own.

Once, in an antique shop, I found a late nineteenth-century display box of botanical samples made for identifying plants. The case contained a labelled collection of “useless grasses”. The grasses that, if you found them in your paddock, you’d pull them out before they seeded and gained a foothold on good pasture. I often think of that sampler of useless grasses. Of the whole idea of uselessness in plants, and all the things that, over time, human beings decide they no longer need, or can’t imagine needing later. I think about it when I worry about the future of libraries. And I think about it when, once again, I come up against the idea that non-realist fiction is childish because it somehow doesn’t represent the world *as it is*. That idea, that

there's a world as it is—a given, agreed upon, non-negotiable world. As it is.

But what if that world were to disappear? What if it is disappearing? Hastening to change—to turn it spiny, scaled and un-scalable back on us, until it isn't a world we can climb on and fly away to another world, it won't let us, it won't forgive how we failed to imagine it.

I'm going to tell you a story about an ordinary use of childhood imagination, by children—which is also an account of the first time I was aware that I, and another child, were using our troubles to make a fire, a forge, and a story. A story that was believable because its foundational energy was unreasonable trouble and unreasoning rage.

It was in the summer, for me, between primary and high school. A summer we kids spent swimming out to launches moored in Brown's Bay Paremata, and stretching their protective canvas covers by lying in them, sunbathing, as if they were hammocks. Sometimes Barnes the harbourmaster would row out to chase us off, or sometimes he'd just stand on the beach and scold us through a bullhorn until we slipped into the water like unwelcome seals and swam out to some more distant boat.

Other times we'd walk up to the pine forest on the crest of the hill between the Brown's Bay houses and the then new subdivision of Whitby. The pines were old and tall, the space between them a vast russet-floored chamber—scented and silent. An enchanting place. But out of magpie nesting season the pushy world wasn't there at all. There was nothing for us kids to pit ourselves against, no territorial birds or incensed harbourmasters.

We were usually the same group—two Murphys and two Knoxes. Wendy Murphy was near to me in age, but

would still be at Paremata School in the new year. I was twelve at the start of my third form. Robbie, Wendy's brother, was a year older than my sister Sara. And then there was Sara. We Murphy and Knox kids were the children of intellectuals—or, arguably, demoralised and neglectful parents. We were left to drift, often in and out of danger.

If we hadn't been in the forest for a while we would always walk straight through it to check its shrinking boundary on the Whitby side. Which is how we found ourselves on a day that seemed particularly empty of any entertaining chafing against the world. A soupy grey day with gusty wind of the sort we have more often now. We were sitting in the treeline on the slope above the sweep of a street of empty sections, half built houses, and a few new houses. In the backyard of the house below us were four children. All freckled and fair haired, the youngest a pre-schooler with a wide gait who was stumping from sibling to sibling to stand at the elbow of each watching what they were up to, and waiting to be included. The other girls, maybe seven and ten, were shredding leftover pink batts and attempting—it appeared—to dissolve them in a plastic paddling pool, as if the fibreglass was candy floss. The oldest child was riding his bike in tight circles on the bare clay patch. It was he who looked up at the treeline.

“He seen us,” I said, and grabbed Wendy's arm and pulled her back into the darkness under the pines.

“We're not trespassing, and they're just kids.” Wendy was practical—she didn't like to play pretend, but she had a dark and deep sense of humour that meant, when encouraged, she might just walk off with any moment that presented itself as portable. And I could always bring it out in her. I said to her, all drama and urgency, “But we have to trust someone!”

The words came from television—you'd walk into the living room and there be some program only parents and

older sister watched, and someone on the screen would be saying something television-ordinary, but it would still make you wonder *what the problem was*. What was to be done about it.

I looked behind me. Robbie was sulking about something and kicking a furrow through the smooth pine needles, while Sara made a pile of small dead branches, as it she meant to build a fire. This provided me with a cue. I told Wendy she must remember we were only allowed out for as long as it took us to gather firewood.

Wendy gave me an assessing look.

“They’ll be back before we know it,” I said, “We’ll be locked up again. We have to trust someone.”

Wendy turned and told Robbie to go further into the trees, but to stop where we could still see him. “You’re keeping a lookout.”

Robbie wanted to know why, and I told him that someone had taken us prisoner and we were only out in order to collect firewood. Wendy and I were going to try to alert the kids in that house down there to the situation; meanwhile he should keep a lookout.

Robbie came over to eye up the kids. The boy and one sister were obligingly climbing the hill. We hadn’t even had to make urgent signals. For good measure, we made some urgent signals.

Robbie dashed off to his post. I told Sara she was gathering firewood for our kidnappers and, after I cleared up her confusion about how I knew someone was coming to kidnap us and, if so, *why was I just standing there*, she went on with what she been doing, while somehow making her solid little self in her striped T-shirt and stretchy fawn shorts look peaky and fearful.

Wendy and I kept signalling to the children while backing away into the forest.

Wendy looked the part of a prisoner. She was tipping over from a sleek childhood into a phenomenally oily adolescence. She couldn’t keep her hair clean. And I

looked, as my mother liked to say, as though I'd been dragged through a bramble backwards. We *acted* the part. The kids came up to us and we put our fingers to our lips and drew back, and further back, and they were obliged to follow us as far as Sara's woodpile.

The story started as a two-hander, Wendy and I glancing at each other now and then. We told them how we had stumbled upon something—consulting between us with looks—some days ago, it was hard to say how many days because we were being kept underground. The men—there were a lot of them—worked in shifts so everyone ate when they got up and when they went to bed, meaning two meals every twenty-four hours at changes of shift. We were fed only every second meal. It was difficult to keep track of time without meal times and daylight, we said.

Sara chimed in to say that she was hungry and it would be great if they could fetch us some food.

I watched the boy's eyes narrow and quickly said to Sara, "No, you're just going to have to go hungry. We only want to get a message to our parents."

"Not to the police?" said the boy. It was the obvious question.

"Only our parents." Wendy was firm, and grave. "We'll ask them to reply. We need to know what we should do."

I thought this was hardly the best excuse for not calling the police, but that I didn't have a better one. And Wendy was selling it really well. A wish—that you could take a situation of danger to a parent to get a hearing and advice—was pushing itself to the front of our story and I could feel the energy of it, without yet having been directly disappointed by parents myself. It was another year before I knew what Wendy knew, how an everyday expectation—that a parent would do what they should when applied to for help—could turn from an everyday expectation into a lifelong wish. For now, what I was able

to think was that it was good for our story, that strange *force* in Wendy's feeble excuse for a plot. Force coming from somewhere I didn't understand. But I did understand that it was a great move to give the kids something to do—to bring us writing paper and pencil, rather than the snack Sara was angling for. Because there was no further business in the snack once it was eaten. We could direct the kids to a letterbox—ours would be best—I'd be able to haunt ours, at least till school started. And if I wrote the letter, then Wendy could write the answer ostensibly from our parents, and we could come back here, to the Whitby side of the forest, so the kids could deliver it.

We explained our plan. And, "*Please,*" said Wendy.

"Please," Sara said, then added, "They've threatened to beat us."

"Or at least we think they have," I said. "They have accents that make them hard to understand."

"What kind of accents?" asked the boy, still doing his due diligence.

"They only speak English when they're talking to us," I said. "We can't understand what they're saying when they're talking among themselves. We don't know what they're up to. We don't know why they here."

Wendy said that the one who had the best English and spoke to us most often sounded more Czech than Russian. Some years before she and her family had spent nearly a year in Germany, and had taken trips to several other countries. "He's the one who threatened us," Wendy said. "He seems to be a bit on the outer with the others."

"Russia invaded Czechoslovakia," I said. "He's probably further down the pecking order. We're the only ones he can take out his feelings on."

I don't know how much geopolitical savvy the boy had, but he'd started nodding.

Robbie drifted back.

“You’re supposed to be keeping watch,” I hissed, and made a gesture at Sara to take his place. Sara scuttled off, pressed her back to the pine trunk and peered around it.

Robbie wanted to know what was going on. Wendy explained the situation to him—how these kids were going to help us get in touch with our parents.

Robbie asked their names and offered his, which wasn’t a thing we’d thought to do. I remember they were mcsomethings—McCartneys, McAndrews.

“Why don’t you just run off?” The boy’s sister asked. “Like now?”

“When they send us out they always keep someone back,” Wendy said. “Our little sister.” She pointed to herself and Robbie. She and Robbie did have a little sister—and a big one, who had run away from home the year before, and disappeared.

“Our big sister,” I said and indicated myself and Sara. So, we were in a thriller with a Russian underground base and an abduction, but hadn’t, for economy of invention, decided to be one family.

“Can you just start by getting us a paper and pencil?” I said.

The girl darted off to the edge of the forest and bellowed at the next girl to get writing stuff and bring it up here.

I wrote the letter. We didn’t have to stretch out the task and our invention, because the kids’ mother appeared below and went off her nut about how they’d left the toddler unattended with the paddling pool.

I pressed my unfinished letter into the boy’s hand and gave him my address. I told him we’d be back for the answer and to watch for us.

They loped off downhill. For another few minutes we made a precautionary show of breaking branches off a fallen pine bough—but the kids had all gone indoors. We realised we’d have to get rid of the piled wood and spent

another half an hour wandering in separate directions, and scattering it, before heading home, us Knoxes to start staring at the letterbox.

The McSomething's did deliver. And they collected Wendy's concerned fatherly reply, a letter as advised not too full of questions or threats in case it "fell into the wrong hands". We returned to lurk at the Whitby edge of the forest. We remembered to wear what we'd been wearing that first day, but made our clothes a bit grubby. And Wendy and I got out our coloured pencils and pastels, and I borrowed my older sister Mary's expensive set of acrylic paints, and we made bruises of pastel and pencil, and scabs from Mary's acrylics, reddening the surrounding skin with Wendy's mum's blusher. The blusher was a risk since it was the only component of our fake injuries that smelled fake. We made Sara a little ghostly with talcum powder and, on our way up the hill, she found a right-sized branch and practised using it as a crutch.

We had to wait till we were spotted, then the kids all came up the hill, the toddler piggyback. They handed us the letter. Wendy opened it. I turned away to wipe my eyes. Sara limped closer, but not too close, because her make-up only really worked in the gloom. We spared some attention from our parents' precious communication to explain that the men had made good on their threats.

"We didn't even do anything to provoke them," Robbie said. Then to Sara, concerned, "Has your ear stopped bleeding?"

I think we met those kids four times altogether. We were flighty and hypervigilant and wouldn't let them get too near—not wanting to risk them seeing how our plastic paint scabs had come loose and were only attached to our skin by the hairs on our arms. When they were

sceptical, which to their credit was often, they'd question us. But the questions were never the ones I expected and dreaded because I couldn't answer them—like what would an underground base do with firewood anyway? They asked the human questions—what was being done by whom, and for what reason, and how we felt about it. And they carried our messages. Our story made use of their bodies and their time. And eventually they did bring the pale and loitering Sara some biscuits.

This game was a major preoccupation the summer after my last year at primary school. Of the games of my childhood it wasn't the most intense, or prolonged, or loved—but it was the most extravagant and stagey and outlandish. I should say here—for those who might have read it—that Wendy is Grace in my autobiographical novella *Tawa*. *Tawa* tells a dark and terrible story—but the real story is darker and more terrible still.

Wendy and I drove that game, with some star turns from Sara, and Robbie's presence—a boy with the girls—making it possible for the oldest McSomething to imagine it was okay to talk to us. The conceit of the game worked because of our collective sense of fun—Wendy, Sara, Robbie and I were enjoying ourselves, and so were the other kids who, after all, had just moved in and knew no one and there we were on their doorstep, and all it cost them was some packets of biscuits and a few forays into the old part of their new neighbourhood.

So—a sense of fun on everyone's part. But it was something else as well for Wendy and me—twelve years old and already burned black at our edges. We were learning how to put the energy of ourselves into invented things, silly things, like letters to parents saying “Help, we've been spirited away and shut in the dark”, and letters from parents asking “Tell us what we can do to help you”.

There is a tedious common understanding that works of pure imagination might be said not to be silly only because they take a thing we all agree is real and serious and make of it a differently costumed likeness. All serious works of fantasy and science fiction are *really* about...and here you can fill in some big-ticket item, some gnawing trouble of society. The imaginative representations are a code, where everything matches up one-to-one.

In this view all fantasies must be allegories—and as allegories at least have dignity of dress and deportment. Because, if they aren't allegories, and it isn't a code, where do they get their meaning from?

I think you can sense my exasperation with this mindset, which doesn't matter, except when it does, like how confident and eager we are to praise Margaret Mahy because she was a beloved writer, rather than because she was a great one. A woman, an author of children's books, a fantasy writer, a great writer in a culture where, when I was a kid, parents would say, "Are you just going to sit there all day reading that book? Why don't you go outside and *do* something?" A culture that has a tendency to think of imagination as something that's nice to have, especially for young and developing minds, but is something that has its practical limits.

Its practical limits might be the death of us all.

This summer, like that one long ago when, in a rage of invention, I started looking around for somewhere safe to put myself, I've been, more consciously, thinking about *saving* myself which—at the age of sixty and deeply embedded in my life—means saving other people.

My sister Sara, of the piled firewood, lives in Medlow Bath, in the Blue Mountains, New South Wales. Sara is in the neighbourhood support arm of the Rural Volunteer Fire Service, which means she has a locked trailer of

firefighting equipment parked at her gate, so that she and her neighbours can fight embers and take responsibility for the late evacuation of animals and people into their “place of last resort”, a brick-walled, asbestos-roofed house a few doors down from Sara.

Twice she’s left Medlow with her cats and chicken to shelter with friends in Sydney, though she hates to leave if anyone else in her community is staying. She’s been awake all night in forty-degree heat unable to open the windows, because the air isn’t breathable. And she’s had tearful conversations with people in her local shops who don’t know how they will manage to keep their livelihoods since the tourists and the holidaymakers are staying away. “I’m not complaining,” Sara says. “It’s the same for everyone.” She speaks quietly, in a voice drained of energy. Her emotions cauterised, which means the burning of the flesh to stop bleeding. Because how are you supposed to feel when the wind changes and the smoke clears and the trees of your garden are full of birds because they’re the birds who managed to fly away from the fire and are now living in a strip of green along the great Western Highway? Sara has gone beyond dread, into exhausted fatalism. “I have cats, not kids,” she says. “I can only imagine how it is for people with kids.” She tells me that all the New Zealanders are talking about coming home. And I say, “Come home.”

One evening during all this Fergus asks me have I seen that terrible video of the cockatoos in the heat wave. The ones who can’t fly anymore and have fallen to the ground. And the ones who can still fly and keep trying to feed them.

“I’m not going to watch that,” I say. And then I can’t stop thinking about it—thinking that, before too long, we’re going to be the cockatoos, those of us who can still fly trying to feed those of us who have fallen.

The summer for me between primary and secondary

ended, and we all went back to school, and at Paremata, on the first playtime, Sara spotted the three school-age McSomething's clustered in the playground. And they saw her. She rushed up to them waving her arms. "We escaped!" she said. "But we're not allowed to say anything about it. The police are watching that base to see what those people do and we have to keep it a secret. We might never know what happens!"

"They believed me," she insists when we're trying to put our memories together. "I'm sure they did. I'm not ashamed of it. We gave them an adventure."

Because I write fantasy, which is sometimes equated with not putting away childish things, I often feel a need to make an argument for fiction that is full of stuff that is true, while yes less solidly dependent on, I won't say material facts, because material facts are a whole other thing, or a vast class of things from viruses to black holes. Let's say the *facts of matters*, rather than matter. Matters like the political realities that we are always to consider, economic realities that teach us that many things of value have fluctuating values and we have to accept that no matter how necessary those things might be to our well-being the fluctuations have made them, as they say, simply out of our reach, like a house, or a life-saving drug. But what's simple about that? What's simple about suffering? The worlds of fiction faithful to this world behave according to the material realities of markets, money, media and the politics of all that, how the people in those worlds see themselves, and behave according to what they see on a sliding scale from knowing complicity to knowing revolt; a sliding scale from "this is how things work" to "this isn't working." And that's all great and fascinating.

But fiction less dependent on the facts of matters might be more able to ask: What if this world *as it is*—as

it has been since the Industrial Revolution—is *just now*?” What if this world was very different? What if the powerful lost their platforms, but not their lives or dignity. What if the last can be first? Or we can make a melange of firsts, like animals at a waterhole, heads down, only our ears and tongues moving in the temporary accord of a common thirst.

Imagine that. Imagine standing still for a generation. Imagine fixing things and feeding ourselves. Imagine taking care of everything and everybody, and our governments behaving like kind parents who really do know better, rather than corporations mindful of their shareholders. We’ve been encouraged to be jealous and punitive, like the children of the too large family whose parents’ regard is the only regard worth having. Or the children of a small family with a parent parsimonious with love whose regard the children feel they have to constantly fight for. But look around you. *Who is looking at you?* Perhaps the thrush on the bank within arm’s reach of where you’re walking who looks at you but doesn’t stop tossing the leaf mulch about delving for insects. Even if like me you stop and speak to the thrush, one of those birds—the birds of Wellington—most of them won’t fly away. You can almost see them thinking that that would be an overreaction. Why do the birds of Wellington these days not startle like the birds of my childhood and youth? I think they don’t count us as dangerous in the same way anymore. They don’t know how they are valued—valued and enjoyed—but our changed attitude to them has changed their attitude to us. I’m pretty old now, so that’s generations of birds. If we can change our mutual relationship to beings to whom we can’t offer any explanations, why can’t we do better with ourselves?

I keep going back to animals. I do because, while we so-called ‘writers of imagination’ were using myths and

monsters to think how we might be different, they—animals—were always there; there so that we might look at them and imagine how we might be different or, whenever they come to us for help, how little difference there is between us and them.

Thomas Carlyle wrote, “Not our logical faculty but our imaginative one is king over us.”\*

So, sisters and brothers, imagine the last being first, and the lion lying down with the lamb. Or us lying down as lions and lambs in some ceremony of the future commemorating lions. A ceremony with stories about lions, to which our great-grandchildren will listen and then imagine lions. There was the life, and after that, the resurrection, which is the life imagined.

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I used another Carlyle quote in my speech, but misremembered it, which is funny, since it’s the epigraph of my next book!