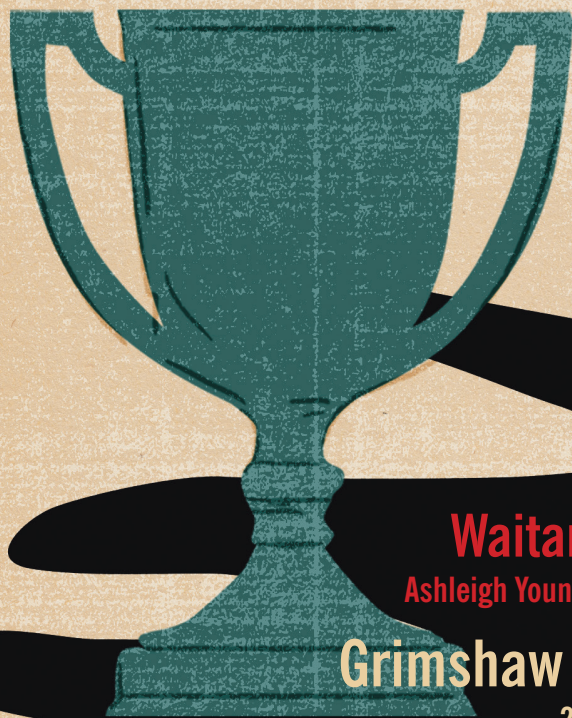


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NEW ZEALAND AUTHOR

NEW ZEALAND SOCIETY OF AUTHORS (PEN NEW ZEALAND INC) TE PUNI KAITUHI O AOTEAROA



Waitangi Day Honours

Ashleigh Young receives national recognition

Grimshaw Sargeson Fellows

2018 recipients

Joy Cowley

Recognised for her achievements

PLUS: Mentoring. Letter Writing. Permissions. How to Write a Column.
Poets in Prison. A Special Festival.

The *Lost Art* of

Before email and Facebook, the writing of letters was common practice. Wendy Megget looks at how the simple act of writing a letter can lead to the unexpected.

There is something exhilarating about receiving a letter. But can writing a letter provide just as much joy?

I get it – who has time to write letters? You're on social media and email all the time. But can you be truly candid on Facebook? Perhaps you journal or do morning pages? While they are useful writing practices, do they push you deep into the 'now', or are you just vomiting onto the page?

Decades ago, we used to write and receive letters all the time. We passed notes in class. We sent news of our travels home by mail. We had pen pals. We even fell in love by mail.

Traditional letters are *personally* created for the recipient, and bring us right smack into the present, as dull as that may be. And as writers, isn't that where we are supposed to begin,

writing about what we know?

With regular letter writing, you *must* write the next chapter of your life, no matter how mundane. In the search for content, we start with what is in front of us. Changes in the weather. How cute the cat looks. What we have planned for our partner's birthday. The book we read late into the night.

Within these humdrum details lies the essence of our lives. If we stop and look at the minutiae of our day, even the smallest human existence contains a wealth of magic.

I recently started writing to my aunt. She is unwell, can no longer talk on the phone and is unable to write back. Sending her letters was the best way I could show her support and love.

When I wrote the first letter, I prettied it up with clip art. I told her how I felt about the start of spring,



Letter Writing

recounted childhood memories of her and reminded her of gifts she had given me that now fill my home. I told her the silly details of my life.

I started that letter believing my life was small. I finished the letter realising that despite my desperate need to feel like my life *meant* something, that it already did. While I was trying to *make* something of my life, my *actual* life was chugging along in the background, and I was blind to its abundance.

Then suddenly I had heaps to write about *outside* my letters too!

I started seeking ways to make my aunt's letters more fun. I collected pretty cards. I added poems from a Roald Dahl book she gave me as a child. It was about squeezing as much into that little envelope as I could.

Then, to my surprise, I started receiving texts and gifts of gratitude from my aunt's family. When my cousins sent loving texts to my mother on her birthday, I realised that I was not just sending letters, I was sending love.

The act of trying to enrich another's life had not only brought me an

awareness of the richness of my *own* life, along with a stream of great writing ideas, but it had enhanced the expression of love within my family.

Think of it this way: if you cannot bring joy to one person in a letter, how can you ever hope to bring joy to millions with your other writing? ■

Have you ever written a letter that's saved a life, freed a prisoner, or just delivered an enormous ray of hope to light up someone's despair? My wonderful PEN letter writers have, reaching out from our privileged place, to places that aren't free, where governments persecute and even kill their own citizens. Every time I send out an appeal I know it will be answered, and occasionally we get a ray of hope back—a poem written for us, or news of a prisoner's release. To join my pen-is-mightier-than-the-sword band of letter-writers, start with an email to me: editline@xtra.co.nz

Lesley Marshall writes letters on behalf of Amnesty, and is the coordinator of the NZSA Writers in Prison committee.