

Kate De Goldi's heart-warming novel *The 10pm Question* was this year nominated for a Montana Book Award – despite being written for children.

THERE WAS ONE surprise entry in the fiction section at this year's Montana Book Awards: *The 10pm Question* by Kate De Goldi.

It was a surprise not because it shouldn't have been there – it should – or because it's not a heart-warming story, beautifully told – it is. It was a surprise because De Goldi's novel is a children's book. And it was a surprise because *The 10pm Question* had already won book of the year at the New Zealand Post Book Awards for Children and Young Adults – the first book to be nominated for both awards.

De Goldi, who lives in Wellington by the sea with her photographer partner, Bruce Foster, professes to have been completely surprised by the novel's reception. "At various stages I had severe doubts as to whether anyone would read it, because it fell between a lot of categories. But I was very deliberately and consciously doing what I wanted to do with a book. In some ways I felt like it was the kind of book I'd been waiting to write for a long time."

10pm concerns Frankie Parsons, who is 12-and-three-quarters and beset by worries. He worries about the kidney-shaped rash on his chest, about the fact there is never any money for the bus and about the fact his mother never leaves the house. His family is large, warm and slightly eccentric, his best friend and he share a secret language and his new best friend Sydney has dreadlocks and a work-averse mother.

It's an utterly charming book, full of bold language play, an operatic cast of vividly drawn characters, and a story which is by turns comic and tragic. It is, says De Goldi, the kind of book that she loved reading as a child – she has a particular love of post-war children's literature from Britain and America, a time when the genre was filled with writers producing sophisticated books for children that required careful reading. "A book where not an enormous amount happened, where children conversed, where there was a lot of thinking, where there was play with language, where there was texture."

De Goldi grew up in Christchurch, in a large, loud family. She has 42 first cousins, and they all lived within walking distance; her Italian grandmother set sail to Te Puke to be with her husband-to-be. "Obviously I was a vile teenager and fell out with my parents," she says. "But in terms of the broader family, I was very lucky. It was very warm and wonderful."

After studying English and history at the University of Canterbury, she stayed in Christchurch, where she worked as a tutor and a librarian until, in 1988, she entered the American Express Short Story Competition with her second ever short story, *Parkhaven Hotel*. She won. "I had no

idea how to go about it really," she says. "I just wrote stuff that had kind of been there for ages." A book of short stories followed – loosely autobiographical – then a novel, and then she began writing for children. After three novels, she and artist Jacqui Colley collaborated on three picture books for children, the Lolly Leopold series.

The classroom has remained a constant source of fascination and in *10pm* she has nailed the nuances, the colour and the feel of a Year 8 classroom, with its seething mass of allegiances and petty jealousies. Although she does spend significant amounts of time in schoolrooms teaching creative writing for the New Zealand Book Council, she still draws on her own memories of the time. "It's a microcosm of the real world," she says. "I was just so aware of tribal and interpersonal relations in the classroom for my whole school life. I suppose in some ways I was watchful in the way a writer often is.

"That period is, for me, the richest period to write about, that period before adolescence. I love it because the kids are so sophisticated, they have language, they have awareness and it's the moment when they develop an awareness of mortality. So it's quite a fraught period."

De Goldi stayed in Christchurch until she was in her late 30s, when the family – including children Luciana, now 21, and Jack, 19 – moved

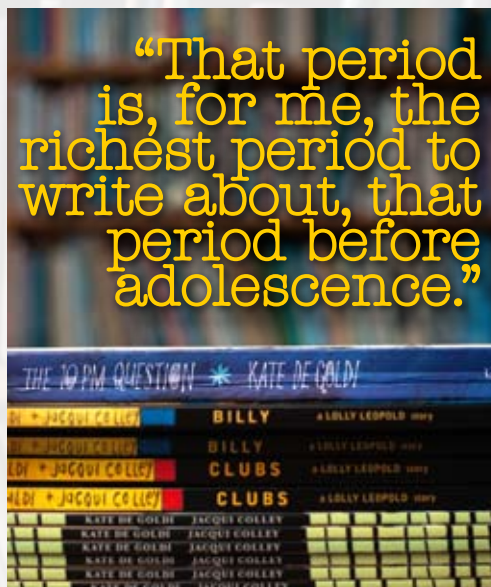
to Wellington. "Christchurch was a good place to grow up and it was a great place to have a family early on," she says. She was, she says, having a perfectly fulfilling private life there. Later, she wanted a change. "I do remember driving down Salisbury Street and having the overwhelming feeling that I might die in Christchurch."

But the city is still hard-wired into her writing. *10pm* is a strange, not-quite-familiar amalgam of Christchurch and Wellington; she admits that despite her intention to set a book in Wellington, characters will turn a corner or come down the bottom of a Wellington hill, only to appear back in Christchurch.

Since moving to the capital, she's become a regular reviewer of children's literature on Radio New Zealand National – where she frequently espouses her belief that adults

should read children's literature often and closely – and tutors creative writing at Victoria University's Institute of Arts and Letters.

And she still reads children's fiction. Often. One of the great pleasures of introducing her children to reading, she says, was rediscovering books she hadn't read for 30 years. "I like rediscovering the books that I loved," she says. Sometimes, she discovers that in her youth she misunderstood bits. "Words have a music and a visual life before they have a meaning, even. I love that about childhood reading."



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