

## Owen Marshall

Owen Marshall began his address by reading us one of his short stories. It was a “hard luck” story about a middle-aged man called Hodge who lived in a Christchurch boarding house. Hodge and his family have more bad luck than anyone should have to contend with. Indeed, having Hodge around could deflect misfortune. Owen had us spellbound, rolling in the aisles, as he read his story. He is a true artist of the short story. His tight stories are bound together by his use of and choice of words, the sense of place, the development of the character and his wonderful use of humour.

Marshall described himself as more of a reader than a writer. From his early days in the Waikato, Blenheim and latterly Timaru, he was lured into books – indeed, absorbed by books. Books were not a luxury to him, but a necessity of life where he could enjoy adventures in a bigger and brighter world, a world where he could be the hero. His childhood “literary heroes” were the likes of Sherlock Holmes and William (as in *Just William*), although he admitted to being temporarily disappointed when he discovered that William was created by a woman!

To Marshall, reading is part of life; a reader draws sustenance for life from reading. Books are pertinent to life. They show us a world which can mimic our lives; or show its diversity. Readers should absorb themselves in a book – they are worth our full attention. A successful reader is not one who browses, just reads potboilers, or reads to pass the time of day; literacy, perception and sympathetic attention are essential for reading. From books we get the gift of description and an original perspective on life. He pointed to works of fiction that been instrumental in shaping attitudes, for example, Dickens’ novels which changed attitudes to child labour. He described fiction as an x-ray: a picture of what we are, and described books as the archeology of our lives.

Owen Marshall concluded by encouraging us to pass on our love of books to the thousands of young people in our schools.

Rosalba Finnerty