

North & South

June 2011

Future proofing

by Sarah Lang

It's not just adults learning about current affairs, climate change and culture clashes – so too are our kids, if the finalists in the New Zealand Post Children's Book Awards are anything to go by. Much of the young-adult fiction and non-fiction tackle tricky themes of dystopia, death and disaster – pitched and packaged to get kids thinking, not to scare them. Meanwhile it's good to see that a quarter of the 20 finalists are newcomers. *North & South* talked to three of them ahead of the announcement of the winners.

ANNA Mackenzie

Young-adult writer Anna Mackenzie isn't scared of the dark, conjuring up everything from apocalypse and war to toxic smog and decontamination in her sci-fi novels.

Ebony Hill, the second in a trilogy, is set 100-150 years into a dystopian future following "The Collapse". First instalment *The Sea-wreck Stranger* saw Ness leave her community's fortress island to save a friend's life. The teenage loner is now adjusting to city life in Vidya, where the air clogs and the eyes burn.

A warrior in a battle to build a world worth living in, she's sent to Home Farm, whose crops feed Vidya, to "uncoil" but instead faces paramilitary factions fighting for resources and control.

The images of environmental destruction resonate in the light of Japan's nuclear disaster and Christchurch's earthquake. In fact, Mackenzie's son Callum, 18, who moved to Christchurch eight days before the quake struck, had to return to the family farm in Hawke's Bay for a month.

He and his sister Madeleine, 14, are *Ebony Hill's* cover stars and their mum's first readers. "Madeleine gives very direct feedback, and Callum raised the darkness of the themes.

“I think it’s important to give children those harder issues because they’ll deal with them in their own lives. There’s a danger that ideas presented to teenagers are simplified to black and white.”

Mackenzie, 47, mixes it up, leavening the heavy emotions – fear, horror, guilt, grief, incomprehension and regret – with courage, determination, stamina, compassion and empathy.

Mackenzie, who’s penned non-fiction and adult fiction, began writing for young adults after running a children’s reading group. “I knew this was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.”

Where young-adult and adult fiction differ, she says, is not in the quality of the writing but in the content – in particular how character is forged in the teenage years.

“I’m interested in what makes us who we are and I think the teenage years are life’s most intense period. Every generation goes through similar stuff, but everything’s so new to them.”

So what is she hoping teens will take from this book?

“I want them to think, ‘That was a great read.’ I want them to want to read the third instalment, *Finder’s Shore* [out in June]. And perhaps to think about the complexities of the world, the moral choices we have to make and how the future is influenced by our decisions now.”