

## **COWLEY: JOY (nee) SUMMERS**

**Dame Commander of the NZ Order of Merit (DCMNZ), 2005**

**Order of the British Empire (OBE) for services to children's literature, 1992**

**Born: 7 August 1936, Levin, New Zealand**

**Married: October 1956, Foxton, New Zealand**

**To: Ted Cowley (divorced 1970)**

**Married: 1971, Wellington, New Zealand**

**To: Malcolm Mason (died July 1985)**

**Married: 1989, Havelock**

**To: Terry Coles (died August 2022)**

### **Honours**

**1990:** Commemoration Medal for services to New Zealand

**1993:** Margaret Mahy Lecture Award

**1993:** NZ Women's Suffrage Centennial Medal

**1993:** Hon. D.Litt, Massey University

**1994:** Award Best TV Drama Script for '*Mother Tongue*'

**1994:** Patron, NZ Children's Literature Foundation, 'Storylines'

**2002:** Roberta Long medal for multicultural writing (USA)

**2004:** A W Reed Award for Contribution to NZ Literature

**2010:** Prime Minister's Award for Fiction

**2011:** University of Alabama, Maryann Manning Award for Outstanding Literacy Scholar

**2015:** Title of "Kaumatua", NZ Society of Authors

**2020:** ICON of the NZ Arts Foundation

### ***Joy's parents were:***

Peter Duffy Summers (b. 13 Oct 1913 Ayr, Ayrshire, Scotland  
d. 27 Dec 1970 Foxton, Horowhenua  
buried Tiro Tiro Rd cemetery, Levin)  
and

Cassia Katrina Gedge (b. 27 Mar 1916, Kiritaki, Tararua, New Zealand  
d. 4 Sept 2000, Auckland, New Zealand  
buried Carterton, Wairarapa).

Peter and Cassia married on 6 February 1935 in Levin, where Cassia lived.

***Joy had one brother & three sisters:***

Joan (18 May 1938 – d. 2019)

Heather (3 Feb 1941 – d. 2016)

Barbara (10 Jul 1945 - present) married Martin Hartley of Levin, 10 children, then married Robert Allan

Peter (21 Apr 1950 - present) married to Barbara, lives in Norsewood

***Joy and Ted had four children:***

Sharon (1957 - )                      trained in nursing, now an artist living in Auckland, married to John Vickers, 4 children

Edward (1958 - )                      runs a home handyman business in Nelson, married to Janice (n. Clothier), Janice has 2 sons

Judith (1959 - )                      writes film scripts, lives in Kapiti, married to Greg Glossop, 3 sons

James (1961 - )                      works in film production, both features and advertising, lives near Hastings on a 15-acre block, married to Maria, 1 son

Joy's father Peter came, with his family, to New Zealand from Scotland in 1926. He was in his teens and already suffering from rheumatic fever which would leave him delicate throughout his life. The Summers settled in Levin, where Peter, at the age of 20, met 17-year-old Cassia Gedge, a young woman of beauty but with a precarious mental disposition. Their marriage in 1935 would be loving but turbulent as each battled with periods of ill-health. They were often forced to survive on a sickness benefit and under a cloud of financial hardship.

Peter was a carpenter, but at the time of Joy's birth in 1936, he was recovering from a latest bout of rheumatic fever, unable to do heavy labour, so was working on a poultry farm in Roslyn Road, Levin. Joy's was a home birth and she cheerfully describes herself as having been 'hatched' on a poultry farm!

Joy wasn't the name intended for her, but with her father being unwell and her birth being a difficult one (she was a breach baby), the relieved and delighted parents were inspired by a William Blake poem 'Infant Joy', and so she became.

She would be the first of 5 children, born at intervals of the next 14 years. Being in and out of work, Peter was constantly moving the family on to wherever he could find affordable accommodation, mostly in various suburbs of Wellington. Then for three years they lived in Bell Street, Otaki, where Otaki Primary School would become the 7th different school Joy attended by the age of 9.

Such a disruptive upbringing without material frills was nevertheless rich in its range of experiences, unconsciously stored away in a mental reservoir for later use in her prodigious writing career.

It was only in Otaki that Joy discovered a zest for reading. She came to it a little later than most children, having struggled with the common phonetic form of teaching children to read. She was a visual person who loved to draw, and could easily have added to the country's illiteracy statistics. Now, courtesy of regular visits from the National Library Service van to Otaki Primary, came an opportunity to enter the world of books with pictures and script that instantly transfixed her.

She was further encouraged by the librarian at Otaki Public library who sharply perceived Joy was beyond the British schoolgirl stories of her peers and guided her towards the classics of Dickens, Stevenson, Kingsley, Scott, Dumas and Hugo.

These were authors who wrote stories she found both meaningful and pleasurable to read. Early seeds were sown that would make her become a passionate advocate for books that would stimulate the beginner reader, the slow reader and the reader who has English as a second language.

Her nurturing continued at Foxton's small library, when the Summers clan moved to that town around 1946. A run-down house, on which the rates had not been paid for many years, had become available on Purcell Street, and with it came 5 acres of land.

When she was just 11, Joy began helping her father, as carpenter's mate, to build a new house there. Until now she had always been dressed in second-hand clothes, but Peter found the money to buy her a new set of overalls! Being the eldest, she was always relied on for the labouring work her father couldn't do that made a necessarily self-sufficient household tick over. In her adult life she would be as proficient as anyone at running a small farm, scouring, spinning, dyeing and knitting wool, fishing, sailing, cooking, basic furniture-making that begat a skill for wood-turning, soldering, wood-chopping and renovating old houses.

Her final primary year, at Foxton School, saw her emerge as dux (top student), before moving up to her first secondary year in the District High School there. She was quickly frustrated for, while she had stopped moving from town to town, there were frequent movements in the teaching staff at the District High. Her learning was disrupted, so she asked to transfer to Palmerston North Girls' High School. This was granted and for the next three years she would spend an hour and three-quarters each way daily travelling a circuitous route to Palmerston by bus. But it was free because she was taking subjects not offered in Foxton, like Latin and French. And it gave her three uninterrupted hours to read each day because she didn't suffer travel sickness!

At the start of her sixth-form (University Entrance) year, 1953, her parents insisted she leave school as they needed her to earn a wage to support the family.

This was avoided only by the intervention of a kindly family, the Lloyds, who lived opposite the Girls' High and whose children were among her school friends. She could live with them during the school week, returning to Foxton on the weekends, while after school taking a job (arranged by her teachers!) as Children's Page Editor at the Manawatu Daily Times.

This turned out to be a dream solution and set Joy on her lifelong path as a writer. She became the 'news-for-children lady', although she never wrote any news. Her weekly column consisted of self-penned stories, many of them about an imaginary dog called Crackers and his mischievous antics, with Crackers sometimes taking over the typewriter to tell tales about her! Stories sent in by her young readers would also be published.

At the end of year, the newspaper offered her a cadetship. But when she reported the happy news to her parents, she was rewarded with a resolute 'No!' Journalism was populated with atheists and communists and they weren't having Joy embroiled in that kind of workplace!

Instead, her parents apprenticed her to the local Foxton pharmacist, Stuart Donnelly (son of long-standing Levin pharmacist Bill Donnelly). Initially aghast at being pitched into an environment requiring skill in maths and chemistry, when her abilities were in the arts, it's a testament to her resilience that Joy turned a likely sow's ear into a silk purse. She describes her three years at Donnelly's (1954 – 56) as the best thing that could have happened to her. It taught her discipline, something she believed had been lacking in her life to date, and a great deal about the healing qualities of natural plant ingredients. These were the days before many synthetic drugs were on the market.

There now appeared to be no limits to her capabilities. She bought a motorbike and this gave her the means to fulfil another of her passions – flying. At age 18 she was riding to the Middle Districts Aero Club in Palmerston North, thrilled to be training to fly Tiger Moths! And to be the only female trainee in the squad. Her affection for the delicate, manoeuvrable Tiger Moth remains to this day (even though she crash-landed one!)

Just as her life was flourishing, at the age of 20 she became pregnant to a young farmer, Ted Cowley. As was the custom then, their marriage was arranged and she moved onto Ted's dairy farm at Whakarongo, on the north-eastern outskirts of Palmerston North, to become a wife and mother.

She would have her four children in the course of the next five years (1957 – 61).

After her second child, Edward, was born in 1958, Joy took up writing again, penning short stories in her evenings. Initially these were for Edward who was a slow reader, but steadily they extended to other children and other schools, with teachers beginning to ask if they could be made into a book. Some were published in the *Home Journal* School magazines and one was broadcast on radio's *Country Calendar*.

Joy joined a writers' group in Palmerston North to hone her skills and by the early 1960s, after having stories accepted by the *Listener*, she was inducted into PEN, the New Zealand Society of Authors.

Easy-read stories for School Publications were her special interest – stories children *wanted* to read rather than *being forced to*; stories they could relate to in their own lives. By the early 1970's, teachers were making 'big books' from them to use with their students, and these types of little tales would eventually dominate much of Joy's life's work.

Meanwhile, she also wrote stories for adults, published in the *Listener*. It was one of these, called 'The Silk' that would open another chapter in her life. It was reprinted in an American magazine, *Short Story International*, and read in New York by Doubleday editor Anne Hutchens, who wrote to ask if she had a novel! She didn't, but she set about creating one and this, along with four more adult novels, were published by Doubleday between 1967 & 1978.

The debut novel was called *Nest in a Falling Tree* and met with good reviews in America and Britain. Roald Dahl won the rights to make it into a film, called *The Road Digger*. He invited Joy to his home outside London and shared with her the news that he had just completed his first children's novel, *Charlie and Chocolate Factory!* (1970). What made an even more lasting impression was the money Joy made from the deal. There was enough to buy a bay in the Marlborough Sounds, Fish Bay, which became the base not only for decades of blissful family holidays but much of her future writing. As well as a house for them to live in there, Joy and Malcom built a retreat house. They called it 'Arohanui' and hosted retreats there for the next 20 years, for individuals, groups and families needing time and space to help them recover from a broad spectrum of psycho-social issues.

In 1978 Joy decided to take five years' leave from adult novels to write a children's reading programme with teacher/editor June Melser. The difference here was that these publications would look and feel like 'real' books, not printed and bound on the cheap, as most Ready-to-Read type books were. It would become known as the Story Box Reading Programme and its conception arose from a weekend gathering of *School Journal* authors and illustrators at Tatum Park, Waikawa, just south of Levin. The reception for these books was bewildering. They sold out immediately and teachers clamoured for more. They went to Australia and England. They started being published in the United States in 1981 and are still being used there. Joy's five years of commitment to children's reading became a 'rest-of-life' affair.

In 1980, *The Silent One*, set on a Pacific Island, was awarded Children's Book of the Year in New Zealand, an honour she has repeated three times since. This award now headlines an annual celebration of children's books that comes close to a true national festival of reading.

In 1994, she became a patron, trustee and fund-raiser for 'Storylines' the Children's Literature Foundation of Aotearoa/New Zealand, and more recently released a book on writing for children, *Writing from the Heart*.

Two further adult novels, *Classical Music* (1999) and *Holy Days* (2001), have been added to her catalogue, as well as a collection of adult short stories published by Penguin.

She's travelled the world to inspire children's reading, through the Americas from Alaska to Chile, throughout Asia, Europe, the Middle East and from South Africa to Egypt.

She's been married three times. Ted Cowley ended their first marriage in 1967, after which she came close to taking her own life. She found new love with Malcolm Mason, an admirer and chartered accountant 25 years her senior. This ended when he died of cancer in 1985. A very close friend of theirs, Terry Coles, became her third husband four years later after he left the priesthood to be able to marry Joy. For many years they lived at Fish Bay in the Sounds with a menagerie of animals – sheep, chickens, ducks, 8 cats and a dog. In 2004, they moved to Wellington for Terry to be closer to medical services, but the city eventually became too noisy, with too many steps and stairs, so now they live in a cottage in Featherston in the Wairarapa. Here Joy maintains a garden and a shed with a lathe and woodturning tools.

Every summer she still treats herself to a 'fishing trip' to her Marlborough Sounds bolthole, which is now looked after by her sons. Sadly, Terry is no longer well enough to accompany her.

Her creative hours remain devoted mostly to writing for children including work targeted at reading in schools. And she still writes articles, short stories and spiritual reflection material for the older reader.

Her spiritual literature has arisen from a deep Christian faith gained through reflecting on her lifetime's experiences. She continues to use this rich vein of wisdom to facilitate one retreat a month at the Magnificat Retreat House just outside Featherston which can be attended by large groups numbering dozens down to a few individuals.

And there's always time left to spend with Terry, her four children, 13 grandchildren & six great grandchildren. She cooks, spins wool & knits, paints, plays the piano & still enjoys any activity to do with the sea. So far, Joy estimates she's packed about 150 years of living into her 85 years of life!

For a highly candid and engaging depiction of her life, you would do well to pick up a copy of Joy's memoirs, *Navigation*, published in 2010, from which some of the material above has been sourced. An additional source was Joy's own website: [www.joycowley.com](http://www.joycowley.com).