

Dear Readers,

My thanks to you for reading *From the Cutting Room of Barney Kettle* alongside your student readers. It's lovely to hear that a book one has sent out into the world is finding readers and very good to know there are teacher-readers who'll help students deepen their understanding of the story, the setting, and the characters.

I began this book nine years ago, hoping it would be a lively, comic novel about a boy filmmaker and his trusty assistant-sister who are making a film about the city street where they live 'above the shop'. I've always found city retail communities interesting (they are a kind of family) and I liked the idea of exploring one through both a camera lens and the perspective of two children who live amongst a group of colourful adults.

The Street in question was – in my mind's eye very definitely the High Street of Christchurch : a significant street in the early colonial history of Christchurch (hence its name), and before that, an important thoroughfare to food sources for Ngai Tahu, the iwi of Ōtautahi. The greater area around the High Street is significant in my personal history, too – my grandparents and several great aunts ran hotels there in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s; also, over several decades, I spent much time there with my sisters, cousins, and friends – exploring, shopping, listening to music, drinking coffee and wine...

I wrote the first couple of chapters over twelve months; it went slowly, as my books always do in the beginning, while I find my way into the narrative voice, the characters and their story. But it all came to an abrupt halt with the Christchurch earthquakes of September 2010 and February 2011. My sense of the city, its past, present, and future, was irrevocably changed. More

practically, only two buildings survived in the stretch of High Street on which my story took place. It was effectively no more. And writing a comic novel set in Christchurch was now out of the question – it felt insensitive and improper. I left Barney and Ren alone for four years and worked on other projects.

By late 2014 I thought I could see another way into the story – one that took account of Christchurch’s tumult and sadness, one that, in a sense, paid tribute to lost Christchurch, but also celebrated the highs and lows of community, the sharp, searching eyes of children, and a fast (and occasionally fractious) friendship between a brother and sister.

I always have trouble with the beginning of stories – settling on exactly the right way into the new story world. It was no less so with *Barney* – there are effectively two beginnings, almost three! A letter introduces an unnamed narrator who writes from a hospital bed where he is recovering from serious injuries. He wants to tell the story of the last lovely summer on the High Street before everything changed forever; he wants especially to tell the story of Barney Kettle, boy filmmaker and part-time megalomaniac.

Following that, the *first* beginning (the first chapter of the ‘narrator’s’ story) introduces Barney – 12 years old, fizzing with impatience and creative energy – and the Street, seen through Barney’s wide pan shot as he surveys it happily. The *second* beginning brings us Barney a couple of months later, uncharacteristically stumped about what his next project will be. We meet Ren, eternally loyal assistant and organiser, and we meet the Street again, this time through its inhabitants and their occupations – a cavalcade of people, shops, cafes, history, colour, noise and many stories. By the end of this second chapter Barney and Ren have ‘discovered’ their next film project *and* stumbled on a mystery, in the form of an envelope addressed to YOU which contains a small zine-story, *Orange Boy Lives*.

Those two beginnings were effectively my way of setting up a story mystery that I, the writer, would have to explore and solve. I had an inkling about the unnamed narrator, but I had no idea who had left the zine in the envelope or what it meant. My task was to both plant the clues and follow them, in order to solve the mystery - alongside Barney, Ren, and the reader. I knew more or less where we would end up but I had no idea how we'd get there. This was both a terrifying and fascinating way to write. Each morning I walked down the steps to my shed wondering what would happen next – and importantly – knowing I would have to work out *why* it happened.

Writing is its own mystery – I never really know quite what a story is ‘about’ until I’ve finished writing it, and then I see it is usually about a number of things, some of which I didn’t consciously construct.

What I do see is that this story contains many other stories. There is the story-within-the-story – the story of Barney & Ren told by the narrator. Then there is the story-within-the-story-within-the-story – the documentary story that Barney and Ren are making, which in turn contains individual stories of the people on the Street – the ones living there during the time of the story, the ones from the past, and the ones we can’t see until they reveal themselves. There are books everywhere in the story, too, containing still more stories. There are zines with stories. There is the (his)story of the Street itself – its buildings and events – and hovering over the book’s story, yet another story – one about a city that has suffered a calamity and sustained many losses. And in some respects the whole book is about the creative impulse and the *process* of making stories – by writing them, filming them, drawing them. (The two beginnings illustrate this – they show the mechanics of the narrator working his way into the story.)

I think the book is also about community – how people live, work, and play together over time; how they live cooperatively – with respect and humour and great affection, also bad temper and small mindedness. And, how a community can be a kind of collective parent to the children who live in its midst. It's also about the people who are forced to live outside of community's grace and what that means for them, and for us.

At the heart of the story is a strong relationship, too, between a brother and sister who are also friends and collaborators. They both have excellent qualities and glaring faults, but they complement each other; they admire and irritate each other, tease, support, plead and prod. They have a rich shared history and great plans for the future. It is their sibling love and creative friendship which refracts another important theme, hinted at beneath the relatively jolly story surface : that is loss.

I see very clearly now that for me *From the Cutting Room of Barney Kettle* is both a celebration – of childhood, family, community, and place – and a lament for the loss of those things, through both catastrophe and the passing of time. It is, in part, both a song and requiem for Christchurch, its people and its past.

But these are just my thoughts, and certainly not the final word. A book isn't properly complete until it's read by others – and readers bring their own unique experiences and emotions to the story, making it interestingly different each time. Each new reader will see Barney and Ren's story through a different lens, focussing in on some things, gliding over others. That's the way it should be. I hope you all enjoy the ride.

Warm wishes, Kate