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Kids' Lit Quiz™

Where reading is a sport!

By **Dr Chris Thornley**



Wayne Mills is the creator of the International Kids' Lit Quiz™ a competition which rewards students aged 10-13 who enjoy reading for pleasure. It began in Hamilton in 1991 and has now spread to Australia, Canada, England, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Nigeria, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Singapore, South Africa, Thailand, Wales, and the United States.

In 2008 Wayne was awarded the Margaret Mahy Medal in recognition of his national and international services to children's literature and 2011 the New Zealand Order of Merit for his contribution to education and children's literature. He was made a life member of Storylines Children's Literature Trust and Foundation

He retired from the University of Auckland in 2015 to work full time on his Kids' Lit Quiz™.

He currently lives in Hawke's Bay.

The atmosphere is electric, the air is filled with literary thoughts, and faces across the room radiate excitement. We're all at the National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, for the New Zealand final of the Kids' Lit Quiz. Sixty-eight students, their families, whānau and friends, and most importantly - the Quizmaster and his volunteers. Why are they here, you might wonder?... Because these students want to win... and they love reading. Here, reading is a sport!

Today, months of training, lifetimes of reading, and years of coaching come together.

Conspicuous by his Quizmaster hat, Wayne Mills is here for his 33rd year! It's his brainchild that brings students aged 10-13 across ten countries together for a reading competition. With school heats, regional heats, national finals and a world final, the number of questions written by Wayne and answered by students, the number of books read, movies watched and authors, titles, characters and plot lines remembered, is mind-boggling.

Wanting to understand more about this phenomenon, I decided to go behind the scenes and easily tracked down people who were happy to give me the 'good oil'.



Students competing in the largest regional heat at St Cuthbert's College

Mary – librarian coach

Mary, the Kids' Lit Quiz coach from Karori Normal School tells me she has entered teams for 12 years, "This is a celebration of reading; it raises the profile and builds onto our school's culture of reading." As librarian, she talks to classes about it at the start of the year. She holds weekly practice sessions and emphasises that participation is what matters. "Kids love it. They train, they share books, and create their own questions. Whether they make the teams to compete in their region or win a place in the national final (as we did in 2023), students who participate are recognised here – they get additional library borrowing privileges, and they feature in the school newsletter."

Lars – teacher coach

Lars teaches at Levin Intermediate and for the last five years has taken teams to the Manawatū heats. Kids' Lit Quiz is an elective at his school and each year students are inspired and motivated by their peers who grapple with Shakespeare's plays, explore non-fiction texts that they might otherwise pass off, and read books like Tolkien, having previously thought these stories were just movies or TV programmes. Lars says, "Kids' Lit Quiz really expands their horizons as they come to research and appreciate the world of literature. It moves us beyond the literacy teaching of comprehension or critical literacy that occurs in the classroom and enters the realm of literature study."



Seatoun School team winners at the Wellington heat

Seatoun School students and coach

This year, Wendy Bamber (coach) and her Seatoun School team are in the national final. Wendy told me, “Our principal made such a fuss of the team in our school hui after we won the Wellington heat, and the whole school saw our top readers being celebrated. It was a joy to see the students being such fantastic role models and looking so proud and excited.”

I also wanted to hear from students and luckily within their practice schedule, the Seatoun team found time to help me out before the big day.

Alba’s in this because, “I’m not particularly sporty and I’ve definitely enjoyed doing Lit Quiz because my favourite thing to do is reading. I’ve never before come across a competition like this that acknowledges people who are good at reading.”

Madi and Hazel both think the quiz has changed their reading habits, “Being in Lit Quiz has encouraged me to read a

lot of books that I usually wouldn’t pick up.” And, Hazel is sure, “Lit Quiz has made me remember more details about the books as I read them.”

I felt like Curtis, who’s been doing Lit Quiz for three years, summed up for all the students I could see at the finals event, when he said, “I absolutely love it and I’m so happy that we made it to the national final.”



Seatoun team members practise, practise, practise

Celeste – finals volunteer

Celeste has been a volunteer for 20 years and volunteers are essential. Today, at the finals they’re checking buzzers, running microphones to team tables so everyone hears the students’ answers, adjudicating tricky answers, recording scores and ensuring everything runs smoothly. But 20 years... I want to know what keeps her coming back.

“The joy I see in children’s faces when they participate in the quiz is something that I keep coming back for. They light up when they get an answer correct

and the buzz of success is instant. I think one of the reasons for the Kids' Lit Quiz's enduring success is that there is NO learning or testing involved. All you need to be is a reader. No lists, no rules about what you should or should not read. Just read."

For Celeste, bringing so many people together "...who love reading is something to behold and this has not changed for all these 20 years. Children talk about the books they like; they bring books with them to the quiz and read in their spare time. They show others what they are reading and get ideas from each other. Much laughing and chatting and genuine enjoyment is evident during the challenge of the quiz. Silence is not required!"

Celeste also loves chatting with different parents and children too and tells about one mum who told her that the Kids' Lit Quiz was a real highlight for her daughter and that 'til now winning anything at all was not part of her experience. Apparently, after a win in the heats, her daughter said to her... 'So is this what winning feels like?'

Thinking back to her own experience as a parent, she tells me, "My own son who's now 28, has two Master's degrees and is applying for his Ph.D. was in the quiz many years ago and to this day remembers the questions he got right and the fun he had in the team. Because it is a team, children feel included - they want to be part of this fun sport."

Wayne Mills

Wayne's always been surrounded by books and nowadays never reads

without a pen. His career has spanned the primary and tertiary education sectors, so there's no questioning his dedication to developing our young people's love of reading and the absorption of broad literary knowledge, but I wondered what's 'on top' for him right now.

Clearly, he values the role of teachers as essential influencers.

"I think once the kids can read, the emphasis needs to be on reading for pleasure. This is the way adult book groups operate and this is the way reading for pleasure should be. The power of the story has got to be more important than the power of the word. I think you'll see that there's a potential chasm that could open up between structured literacy and reading for pleasure. We still need teachers who read aloud to kids to 'sell' the enjoyment of reading. Let me give you an anecdote.

My granddaughter (Aria, age 8) came home two weeks ago to say that her teacher was reading *Stig of the Dump* to her class. Nice book but 60 years old. When she told me I sighed dramatically and thought why not something more contemporary. Well, what's happened is that Aria is loving the book and tells me about the story every day. You see, while I harrumphed at the teacher's choice, the teacher obviously selected it because she enjoys it. And that's the key. She's the perfect one to model reading for pleasure.

I gave Aria my anniversary copy of *Stig* and she is able to follow along. She is mightily chuffed."

Now, back to the final

Two hours have passed, two hours of intense concentration, careful listening and sensational team play. Seventy-five questions from five categories and the score-board tells the whole story. My congratulations must go to every participating student across the teams, You were outstanding! To Bohally Intermediate (4th) Masterton (3rd) and Southwell (2nd), you must be very proud of your achievements today. My very good wishes go to The Cathedral Grammar School (1st) for their participation in the world final, Canberra (10 July 2024). Have a wonderful time! I shall be streaming the event.

More Information

For more information about the Kids' Lit Quiz visit: kidslitquiz.com

NZ Finals Venue

The National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, was the very special finals venue. Here, the students and their supporters were also able to view the He Tohu Exhibition displaying:

- Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Treaty of Waitangi
- He Whakaputanga/Declaration of Independence of the United Tribes of New Zealand
- the Women's Suffrage Petition/ Te Petihana Whakamana Pōti Wahine



The Cathedral Grammar School team with the Quizmaster