

Curiouser and curiouser

What happens when you let a bunch of poets, authors and illustrators loose in the back rooms of Te Papa? An excellent little book, that's what, writes **Kim Knight**.

IT STARTS with Joy Cowley and it ends with Bill Manhire. In between, 20 more acclaimed Kiwi writers and everything from a kuri cloak to a colossal squid.

The Curiozeum: Collected stories of the odd and marvellous, is what happens when you let a bunch of poets, authors and illustrators loose in the back rooms of Te Papa to select an item that sparks their creative spirit. And so a box of beetles, a military rifle, a model waka and John Britten's motorbike are among the diversities given new (and sometimes strange) life in print.

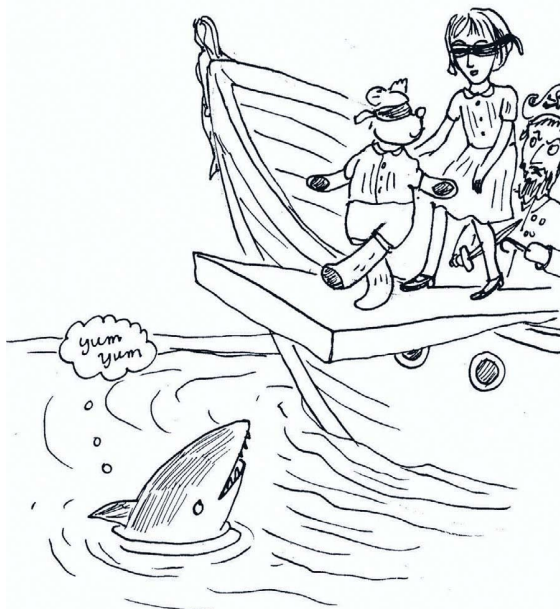
Aimed at 8 to 12-year-olds, *The Curiozeum* is a spiky little book of quick and fast reads and superb black and white drawings by Sarah Laing. The project was a collaboration between Te Papa and the Whitireia Creative Writing Programme. Some of the pieces have the feel of a writing exercise – get the words on paper, move on, no time for over thinking or second guessing – but for a generation that's only ever a click away from instant gratification, I think it's an approach that will appeal. The longest stories are seven or eight pages long; poems just a page or two. Perfect fodder for the "one more chapter before the lights go off" reader.

It's also the kind of project that encourages personal curiosity. If Barbara Else can make a suit intended for shipwrecked sailors speak, what stories might the objects around a young person's own home inspire?

Every reader will find their favourites. Mine included

Wellingtonian Marisa Maepu's *The Saurus* – the tale of a word-eating monster that gets its comeuppance. The story is entertaining, but the double beauty of this book is the end-notes: authors are introduced along with the objects that inspired them. In Maepu's case, a dinosaur toe bone discovered by amateur palaeontologist Joan Wiffen. "Joan taught herself everything about fossils and made the most important dinosaur discoveries in New Zealand. I tried to reflect some of Joan's spirit – particularly her courage, cleverness and tenacity."

I was lucky enough to meet Joan Wiffen before she died and heard the story of how, lateish in her life, she took her husband's place at a geology night class and became obsessed with fossil hunting. She was smart, humble and still extremely inquisitive. I think she would have liked this publication which can be enjoyed as a book, and a great jumping off point for curious young readers looking for their own creative inspiration.



Superb: Black and white illustrations by Sarah Laing illustrate *The Curiozeum* perfectly.

THE CURIOZEUM
– collected
stories of the
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By 22 New Zealand
writers



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\$30

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25 May 2014, by Kim Knight