

Sleeping prince

HELEN LOWE TALKS TO LAURA BORROWDALE
ABOUT A LAND FAR, FAR AWAY

HIDDEN IN an old journal, tucked away in a drawer, the manuscript of Thornspell waited patiently, like the enchanted princess in *Sleeping Beauty*. Thornspell is the retelling of the old story by Christchurch writer Helen Lowe. Told through the perspective of the rescuing prince, the story becomes dramatically more dangerous and more adventurous than the original. Lowe has a diverse range of talents. An environmental manager by trade, Aikido black belt by choice, she writes poetry and short fiction. Thornspell is her young adult novel and she has had the remarkable good luck to have it published in the hard-to-break American market.

A trip to see the New Zealand Ballet perform *Sleeping Beauty* prompted the tale. Lowe thought, 'What about the prince, what is his story?' The story soon unfolded in her mind – only to be jotted down and misplaced. It wasn't rediscovered until a decade later. Striking difficulty in selling her first novel, *The Wall of Night*, as part of a series, Lowe decided to change tactics. "It was a very conscious thought for me; 'I'm going to write another book, it's going to be stand-alone and with a definite ending – not a series!'"

The book became Thornspell. Lowe's publishing contacts suggested she try the United States with it, and within months she had an agent. Three weeks after that, she had a contract with Knopf in New York.

Thornspell has already been nominated in several categories in both the New Zealand Post Children's Book Awards and the Sir Julius Vogel Awards, and for a CYBIL (Children's and Young Adult Bloggers Award) in the United States. But success has been a long time coming: "It was published this year, which is 10 years after I started seriously trying with the writing," says Lowe. "That is a big investment with your time and life, so to actually have something real in your hands, and to think I can do it, I can do it in America, is great."

The tale that's proving so big is the unknown side of the *Sleeping Beauty* story. The reader is introduced to Prince Sigismund as a child and allowed to watch as he, and the spell that forms his fate, grow into maturity. It was important to Lowe that Sigismund be believable – as a boy and as a hero. "He's an action hero, he's a thoughtful person who reads books – if he has to. But he'd much rather be banging at something with a sword, or hunting something." Lowe seems to have a genuine awareness of her male

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characters, something she attributes to her childhood with three brothers, her career in a masculine industry, and her involvement in male-dominated martial arts. Sigismund's world is loosely based in the Renaissance era, although Lowe has altered aspects of the time period on purpose. "I've deliberately blurred it a bit to keep it fantasy. The more you make it a precise country with precise people, the more real it becomes and the better your historical research has to be. It becomes an historical novel, and I wanted it to be a fantasy. So I changed a few things, and set it in a country 'far far away' – not a particular country." To heighten the sense of strangeness, Lowe has looked to the New Zealand and Australian landscape as inspiration to create the physical place, with the European feel of the names and buildings providing an unusual combination, something that works surprisingly well.

The terrible situations in this book are engineered by the evil fairy, the Margravine. She peers out slyly from her corner of the cover and is someone Lowe describes as "quite elemental, quite powerful, and beautiful and wicked at the same time". Characters like this, along with the twists and turns in the back story, make for a story that is at times terrifying, despite the reader's knowledge of what will happen. The book has been beautifully created. Lowe had input into the art design of the book – which is just as well as Sigismund initially looked "goofy"; something which the author insisted be changed.

It was the physical book that brought the reality of her publishing contract home to her. Lowe remembers sitting in her car, holding the galley of the book, when it hit her that she'd done it. "I picked it up and turned the pages. I think it was seeing that my name, the name of the book, the publisher's logo and New York were all together on the page. Suddenly it was real. It was a great moment."



ABOVE Once upon a time Helen Lowe wondered 'What about *Sleeping Beauty's* prince – what's his story?'



THORNSPELL
by Helen Lowe
(Alfred A. Knopf,
\$32.99)