

'New Old Truck' steers important message

by Cristy Bertini

Years ago, if you had told New Zealand sisters Jennifer Somervell and Margery Fern their 12-year-old brother's visit to a national vintage machinery rally would provide the impetus for them to write *The New Old Truck*, they probably would have had a good laugh. Yet, that's exactly where their story began.

When the siblings' brother, John, was 12, he went to an antique machinery show. Inspired by what he saw, he told his father never to sell an old truck that sat in a shed on the family's dairy farm. He wanted to someday restore it so he could enter it in the rally.

The truck, a Model 10 Republic, was made in 1921 in Alma, Michigan by the Republic Motor Truck Company and had journeyed to New Zealand in 1923. The siblings' grandfather purchased the truck second-hand in 1938 for a sum of 25 pounds, and there the truck became a faithful workhorse carting hay, gravel, soil and children until its retirement in 1970.

The goal of restoring it became a marathon of perseverance for John. First, parts were lost in a garage fire. The first restoration deteriorated outside without cover. Then, disaster struck the second restoration in 2004, when the river where he lived burst its banks and flooded the engine.

Most people would have given up, but John took out the engine and rebuilt it. Altogether, he restored

the truck three times over a period of 35 years before proudly showing it in the 2012 National Vintage Rally.

Somervell was amazed at her brother's total labor of love on the old vehicle.



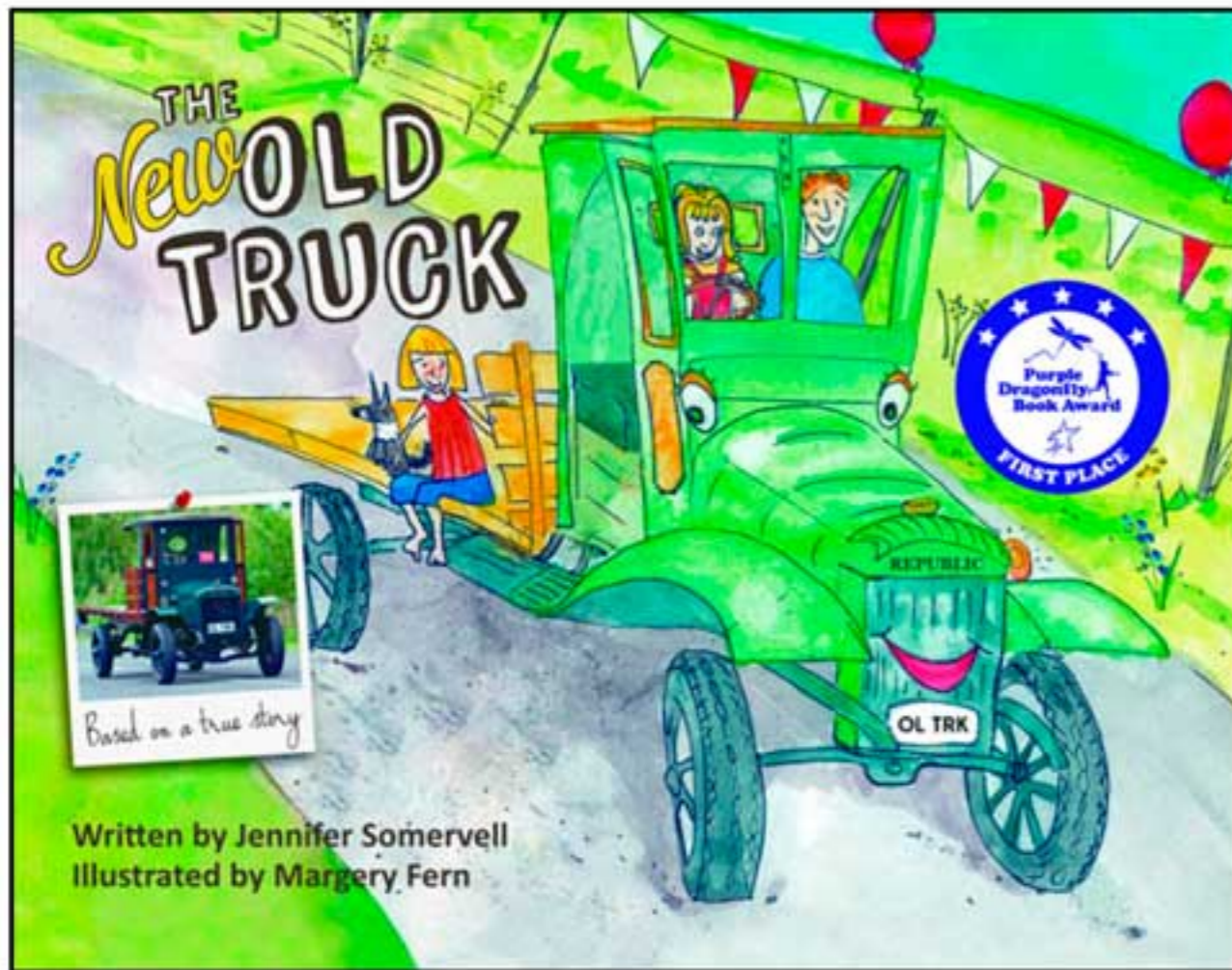
"I thought there was a great theme there. It's about old things not being seen for their true value," says Somervell. "John recognized the value of Old Truck. He brought him into the light and out of the darkness of the shed, restored him and reconnected him with the world so everyone could appreciate him. And he didn't give up."

Thus, a children's book was born. Somervell, a columnist for *New Zealand Lifestyle Block* magazine since 2003, wrote the story of *The New Old Truck*, and Fern, deputy principal at Waitetuna Primary School, provided the illustrations.

The story takes readers into the colorful interaction between Old Truck and the children who love it. Educational graphics and old photos show its heritage in a great line of Republics made in Michigan, its long journey to New Zealand and its remarkable rescue and restoration on Silodale Farm. Personifying the truck with feelings of sorrow

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when abandoned and joy when restored, the sisters dedicated the book to their brother for not giving up on Old Truck.

The New Old Truck drove away with numerous honors from the 2014 Purple Dragonfly Awards including first place in the "Picture Book 6 and

Older" category, first place in the "Best Cover Design," second place in "Historical Fiction" and honorable mentions in "Best Interior Design" and "Picture Book 5 and Younger" categories.

Somervell says the story works on different levels.

"Children can learn about the first Republic trucks, the differences between vehicles in the 1970s and today, and learn interesting truck vocabulary like chassis, gears, exhaust pipe and crank handle," she explains. "Boys love this stuff!"

Fern points out that children in the classroom quickly relate to Old Truck like a grandparent. They make the connection to how elderly people might feel in our communities and families – a bit old and useless.

"Old Truck is gutted when he is retired because he can't carry heavy loads anymore," adds Somervell. "But John still sees him as special. He restores him to life and back into the family. So children can

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learn that grandparents can be valued and loved, give happiness to others and unite them as a family.”

When the sisters took *The New Old Truck* out for a spin, they loved seeing how it engaged children.

“I think our best moment was when we were told that a 3-year-old child with autism had drawn his first-ever picture of a bright green Old Truck after the story was read to him at preschool,” says Somervell. “I have also enjoyed seeing how the book connects children and adults with their history. Children in the schools around Alma, Mich., were amazed to learn their town once produced thousands of world-class trucks.”

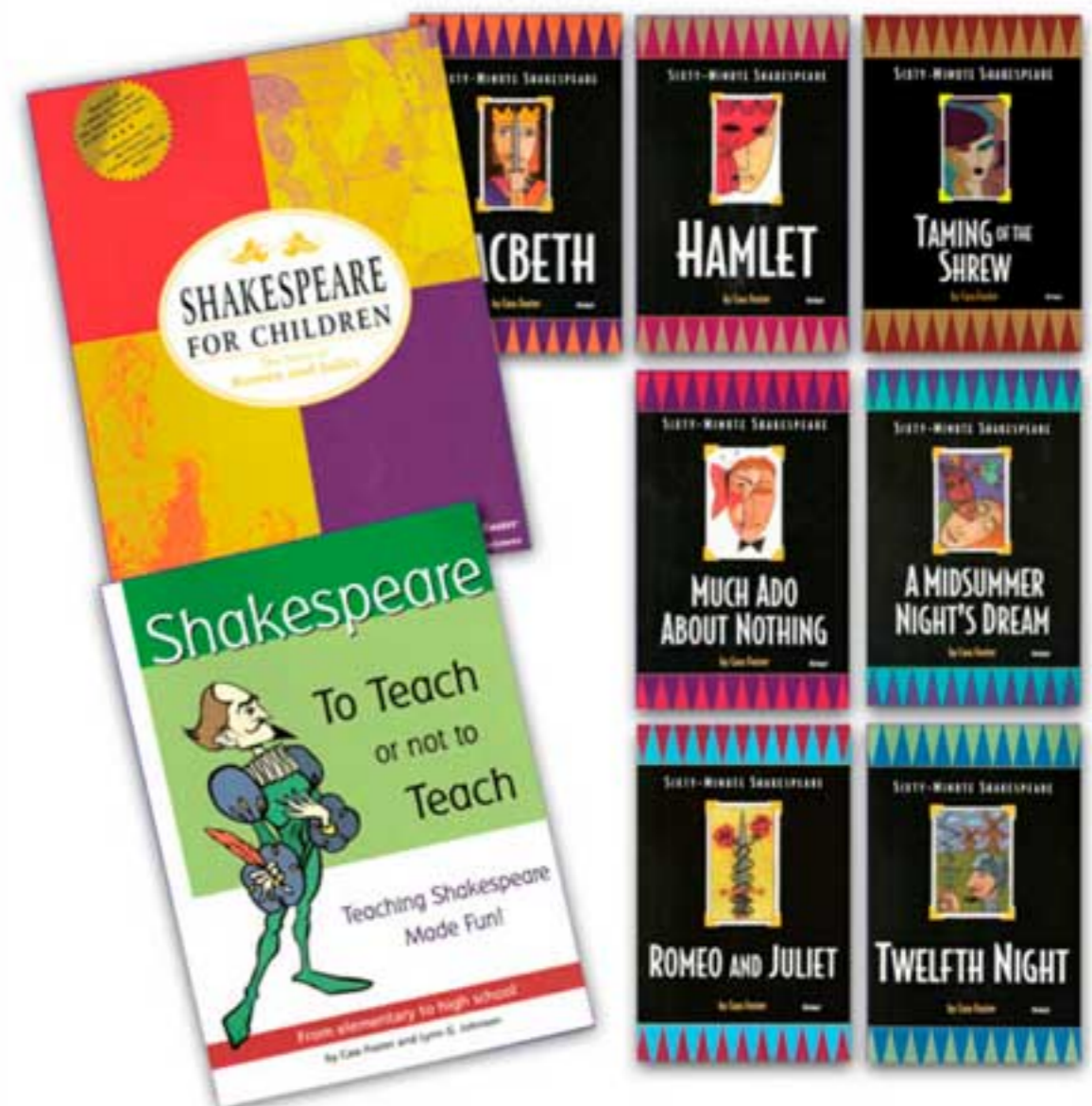
The sisters also believe the story gives children a voice.

“Though the children seem to be ignored, it turns out they saw something in Old Truck that their father didn’t,” explains Somervell. “They are proved right when, at the end, everyone sees how special he is. I also think it can give hope to children who feel abandoned. They too can be restored and brought back into family – even if it is a different family from the one they started with.”

For more information or to purchase a copy of *The New Old Truck*, visit talesfromthefarm.co.nz or alma.lib.mi.us.

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