

## REFERENCES



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### Opinion

# Little Australians need more than Harry Potter



ROSEMARY  
JOHNSTON

In the first few pages of *Seven Little Australians*, published in 1894, Ethel Turner proclaims Australian children as “different” because of the distinctiveness of the land they live in: “It may be that the miasmas of naughtiness develop best in the sunny brilliancy of our atmosphere. It may be that the land and the people are young-hearted together, and the children’s spirits not crushed and saddened by the shadows of long years’ sorrowful history.” There is, she says, “a lurking sparkle of joyousness and rebellion in nature here, and therefore in children”.

Children’s books are produced by a nation for its most precious commodity, its posterity. Though contemporary Australian children’s literature is highly respected, I am not sure that Australians value its rich provenance, or the diverse ways it has contributed to ideas of nation and national identity.

Australia’s top 10 best-selling children’s books are all unabashedly British *Harry Potter* titles, says figures from Nielsen BookScan. When Angus & Robertson asked children around Australia to vote for their all-time favourite book, only two of the top 10 books were Australian.

Such indifference is in stark contrast to other nations. *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *The Secret Garden* and the Narnia series are English classics continuously in print. Similarly so with *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Wizard of Oz* and

*Little Women* in the US. *Anne of Green Gables* carries Canada across the world and the landscapes in which she and her author lived are now a national park.

Children’s literature plays a significant role in the making of national imaginations. Books read and reinforced by family, school and peers become part of the images we think with, part of a shared folk culture. Ethel Pedley’s *Dot and the Kangaroo*, published in 1899, prefigures a disposition towards environmentalism long before it became today’s hot topic. Its dedication reads: “To the children of Australia in the hope of enlisting their sympathies for the many beautiful, amiable and frolicsome creatures of their fair land whose extinction, through ruthless destruction, is being surely accomplished.”

What we could call a sort of Australian romantic nationalism is overtly reflected in Norman Lindsay’s *The Magic Pudding* and May Gibbs’s *Snugglepoot and Cuddlepie*, both published in 1918, and Ruth Park’s *Muddleheaded Wombat* series, published between 1962 and 1982. In these books, Australia is “read” and “written” through gum trees, wattle, kangaroos, koalas and wombats.

These texts have contributed to some of the stereotypes of Australianness that we may either love or deplore: ideas about the bush and bush mythologies, about constructing home as nation, about national consciousness. These images are alive and well, as we can see at Steve Irwin’s Australia Zoo, which mixes connotations of “wildness”, “warriors” and “the

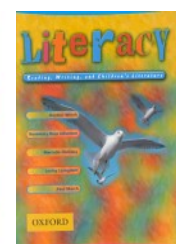
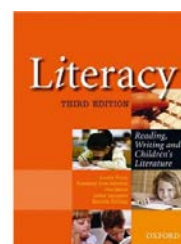
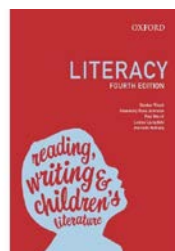
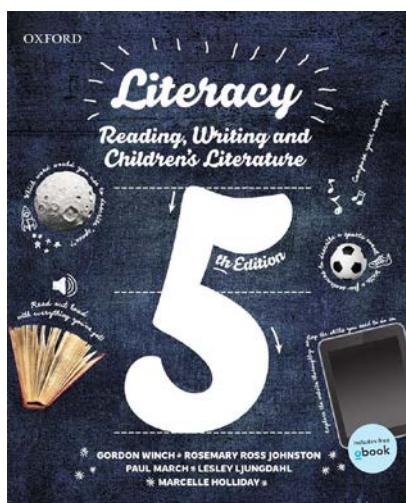
environment” into a powerful cultural brew.

These and other books have introduced children to a complex Australian poetics of time, space and distance which is marked by dualities of nature, such as droughts and floods; distinctive landscapes; different ontological perspectives: here and there, inside and outside, home and away, belonging and not belonging.

Imaginations feed the image-making of future writers. The strangely strong sense of the surreal that we see in the work of Elizabeth Jolly, Tim Winton, David Malouf and Christopher Koch, for example, is also apparent in Colin Thiele’s *Storm Boy* and the work of writers such as Gillian Rubinstein, whose novel *Space Demons* won the Children’s Literature Peace Prize in 1987, and Patricia Wrightson, who was awarded the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen Medal in 1986.

A host of talented writers and artists are now conceiving stories about other concerns and experiences. But without a sense of the past, both good and not so good, we are oddly bereft. Children’s books are a significant part of national journeys, histories, and futures.

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## Outline of presentation

## **Language, Reading and Text: using picture books in the classroom**

**Word and image have historical connections in all cultures**

**Picturebooks bring words and images together – They may tell the same story, or a different one, or reshape, or retell, or problematise, or negate**

**Representations of outer and inner (abstract) worlds**

**Current issues include: the environment, gender roles, changing shape of families, refugees, multiculturalism, Indigenous rights**

**They complement 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills**

**They encourage multiple ways of seeing**

**Verbal and visual imageries**

**Ways of discussing pictures**

- Cultural codes, clues and cues (stereotypes?)
- Compositional patterns: focalisation and focus
- Naturalistic/surreal/fantasy images
- Centres and margins, space and proportion
- Materials (collage, woodcuts, watercolours, oils)
- Texture
- Direction of light
- Relationships of people and events to time and place
- Hue (colour), density (chroma = brightness /dullness), tonal variation (lightness /darkness)
- Shapes, shadows, lines and outlines
- Borders and backgrounds
- Representation of 'the world beyond'
- Aesthetics: 'vectors', 'volumes' and 'mass'
- Interpreting background, landscape
- Use of lines
- Use of space
- Representations of time
- Visual syntax
- Sequencing
- Causality
- Connections
- Direction
- Relationship
- Comparison
- Metaphor
- Satire and irony
- Diagramming
- Labelling
- Timelines/charts
- Navigation
- Use of numbers.
- Maps,
- Cartoon conventions

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