

# **The Seventh Royale Ormsby Martin Lecture 2000**

## **Surprised by Joy: Children, Text and Identity**

Maurice Saxby

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## Maurice Saxby

Maurice Saxby, who was trained at Balmain Teacher's College but went on to complete an Honours Degree in English from Sydney University as an evening student, believes passionately in the power of literature to enhance life, both for children and adults. He has taught infants, primary and secondary school students, but his career has been mainly as a lecturer in tertiary institutions. He retired as Head of the English Department at Kuring-gai College of Advanced Education. He has lectured extensively in children's literature both in Australia and overseas including England, America, Germany, Japan and China. Maurice was the first National President of the Children's Book Council of Australia and has served on judging panels for children's literature many times in Australia; and he is the only Australian to have been selected as a juror for the prestigious international Hans Andersen Awards. He has received the Dromkeen Medal, the Lady Cutler Award and an Order of Australia for his services to children's literature.

Maurice's publications range from academic works such as *Offered to Children: A History of Australian Children's Literature 1841–1941*; *Give them Wings: The Experience of Children's Literature and Teaching Literature to Adolescents*. His forthcoming work is *Images of Australia in Children's Books 1940–1970*. For children he has written picture books, *Russell and the Star Shell* (illustrated by Astra Laxis) and *The Devil's Trousers* (illustrated by Julie Gross). For older readers there are *The Great Deeds of Superheroes* and *The Great Deeds of Heroic Women* (both illustrated by Robert Ingpen) and *The Millennium Book of Myth and Story* (illustrated by John Winch) – a collection of multicultural archetypal stories, ranging from Bible stories such as 'Jonah's Mission' and 'Elijah and the Prophets of Baal' to timeless stories like 'Midas and the Golden Touch', 'Orpheus and Eurydice' and 'The Quest for the Holy Grail'.

*At the risk of sounding self-indulgent I would like to begin by telling you about a few of my childhood reading experiences, since experience can be the wisest of teachers. I should, however, preface what I have to say by affirming that I was brought up in a reading, Christian home – the best possible preparation for a lifetime committed to the joy of literature and for whatever degree of godliness I may possess.*

One of my earliest memories is of myself in a cot, and my mother with a book. My mother has long since gone ‘home’ as she used to express it, but I still have that book – and can quote much of it, even today. It gave me a craving for story, as well as a feeling for words and verbal images. I entered school already able to read. Because my father’s job took us to various new localities I was somewhat of a displaced person, but found stability and security through books.

When I was in early primary school we moved to Broken Hill where I was blessed with the best teacher of my early education, who introduced me to the Municipal Library – the only one of its kind, in those days, outside Sydney. There I read voraciously and I can well remember working my way along the shelves searching for titles that sounded enticing. (The books themselves were covered in funereal black with white lettering on the spine; and the librarian was a gorgon!) One Friday night I came away with a book that sounded ‘just right’. I began reading it the next morning, lying tummy down on an old sofa under the shade of a grape trellis. I hadn’t read many pages when it was as though a cold hand had gripped my spine and shivers began to run up and down my back. The book was *Treasure Island* and I actually experienced the foggy coast at Bristol; and when old blind Pew gripped Jim Hawkin’s hand it was my hand that was gripped by the ‘soft-spoken, eyeless creature’.

I was already ‘hooked on books’, but from that time on I read searching for a repeat of that deeply sensory and emotive experience. As Edmund discovered in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, once you have tasted the White Witch’s Turkish Delight you want it over and over again.

Many years later I discovered C S Lewis’ autobiography *Surprised by Joy* in which he describes that same depth of feeling, the profound emotion – which might be called an epiphany, a revelation – he experienced as a child when falling under the spell of Beatrix Potter’s *Squirrel Nutkin*: He calls it Joy:

*Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic, and only one, in common with Happiness and Pleasure, the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again. Apart from that, and considered only in its quality, it might equally well be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief. But then it is the kind we want. I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world. But then Joy is never in our power and pleasure often is. (p.20)*

This Joy, this peeling away the surface layers of life and experiencing its wonders, whether revealed in the world of nature or by entering into the pain and suffering as well as the ecstasy of others, is a spiritual experience. I believe it to be deeply Christian in that Christ himself was able to share both the happiness and the sorrow of his fellows as is

demonstrated in so many of the gospel stories: the miracle at Cana, the death of Lazarus, for example. In so doing we are enriched and enlarged. We become more Christ-like.

In other words, reading can become part of one's life experience, part of the process of individuation, the forming of one's identity. And I believe that this is true even in today's technological computer, CD-Rom and internet age. Print has great power because it is permanent.

Margaret Meek, from the University of London, author of *The Cool Web: The Pattern of Children's Reading*, once wrote (*Theory Into Practice*):

*If you ask habitual readers what reading is for, they will say it is a special kind of pleasure, or that it has purposes so distinctive that it cannot be replaced by anything else. Reading is so closely linked with their growth as individuals that they often cannot distinguish in memory what actually happened to them from what they read about. Reading may not necessarily have made them into better people but it has certainly given them access to more experience than anyone else can encompass in a single lifetime.*

## Reading and education

This growth and development of the individual, the 'me' is the fundamental aim of education. The word education comes from the Latin root *educare* – to lead out; the provision of an environment and life experiences that allow each child to become everything he or she is capable of becoming; to reach full potential. Even to discover one's higher self as some contemporary philosophies would have it. Reading can help achieve this. As someone put it, 'Books are no substitute for living, but they can add immeasurably to its riches' (Arbuthnot, 1948, p.2).

The aim of Christian education is the same in that Christians believe that one's full potential is found through experiencing God in one's life. It is expressed in the Lord's summary of the commandments in this way: to love the Lord entirely and to love our neighbour as ourself.

I could expand at length on the aims of Christian education, but allow me to select just four points (which I believe have relevance to tonight's topic) taken from a statement from the Catholic diocese of Sydney:

- A commitment to the development of the whole person.
- To fostering the dignity, self-esteem and integrity of each person and collaborating with others for the good of all.
- To inspiring hope and a positive vision for the future.
- To making faith relevant to life and contemporary culture.

Literature, I believe, can help in the development of each of these aims. (And while I am thinking particularly of fiction, of imaginative literature, I would also emphasise the importance of knowledge, of information or non-fiction.)

## Literature and ideology

Allow me to bring you one more reading experience from my childhood. A year after *Treasure Island*, when I had another teacher, I discovered Captain Marryat's *The Children of the New Forest*, first published in 1847. It is about the four Beverley children orphaned by Cromwell's Parliamentarians during the bitter conflict between the Crown and the State in 1647 which lead to the beheading of Charles I. Shortly afterwards in class we had a series of lessons about the English Civil War, designed to enlighten us about the rise of democracy in Britain. The teacher was obviously following the party line and extolling the virtues of the Roundheads. I can vividly recall sitting in my desk, gritting my teeth, and saying silently, 'But I am a Cavalier. I hate Cromwell' – and I think I do to this day!

What had happened was that I had been exposed to an emotionally charged point of view and set of values which we call ideologies. I had absorbed those values wholeheartedly. While in later life, through subsequent reading, travel and contemplation, I had to reconsider my position in regard to Cromwell (although not really to change it), I have never had to re-evaluate the lessons of kindness, helpfulness and loyalty as they were shown to the Beverley children by the old forester, Jacob Armitage, who sheltered them. Another discovery in Marryat's book, was that once committed to a cause one must never look back – and, I suspect, that although I could not have verbalised it at the time, I was aware of the bigotry and intolerance of the Cromwellian cause, in that the young woman, Patience, whom Edward is later to marry was a moderate Cromwellian, able to weigh both sides of an argument.

## Ideology

All literature stems from the writer's own experience, his or her set of beliefs, values, standards, ideology. Consciously or not, the writer's value system is embedded in the text. Ideology is not merely a set of values we believe in, a conviction (for example, racial tolerance, Christian commitment), but the way we take those values for granted and pass them off as objective reality, making sense of the world. A writer's ideology pervades the discourse: not just setting, plot and characterisation, but the tone, the thought content, the theme – what Bal (1985, p.11) calls the 'deep structure' of a novel, even a picture book. Embedded in the text is the writer's worldview; and if the literature is well crafted and convincingly written the reader is potentially influenced – certainly exposed to – that point of view, that value system. Just as I was with *The Children of the New Forest*. By identifying – aligning oneself – with one of the characters, or set of characters, the reader may well adopt the subject position (the ideological stance) of that character for the duration of the reading. That subject position may well be questioned or modified in the light of subsequent reading or experience.

The danger is that a restrictive reading diet of propagandist literature that espouses only one inflexible ideology can lead to a blinkered and restrictive outlook on life. Hence so many

rigid personalities in certain sections of society. With the benefit of hindsight we can recognise it at work in the restrictive literature of Victorian times. It is less obvious to us in contemporary children's literature, although the history of children's books and reading demonstrates this quite clearly.

## Ideology at work historically

The first books for children tacitly acknowledged the power of literature to instruct, to teach and influence. *Aesop's Fables*, dates from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC and there is a moral to be discovered in each story. Although the work was meant primarily for adults, there is evidence that the book was taken over by children and thought to be suitable for them by their elders. Taken over because of the story (strong narrative) content; and encouraged because of the didactic purpose of the collection.

Scholars (Pellowski, 1979) believe that children listened around the campfire or in the baronial halls as storytellers and bards shared the oral literature of the preliterate world, just as children in various cultures today sit entranced by tribal dance, corroboree or storytelling. (I have had first-hand evidence of this in Papua New Guinea and in the Northern Territory.) The Greeks – Aristophanes, Plato, Socrates – in their writings all testify to the power of story and story as instruction in the lives of children. Sir Philip Sidney (1554 –1586) in the sixteenth century wrote of the storyteller:

*With a tale, forsooth, he cometh unto you;  
with a tale which holdeth children from play,  
and old men from the chimney corner.*

The history of children's literature is very much about the battle between the pull of story on children and the conviction of many of their elders that story should have an educational or moral purpose. Volumes have been written on the subject, demonstrating that the thrust of the literature has depended on the view of childhood held by the culture, the period and the writers that produced it.

For instance, the use of books to preach *at* children became established in the Puritan period of the 17<sup>th</sup> century in England, when it was believed stoutly that children were conceived in sin and were brands to be plucked from the fires of hell. Bunyan described children as 'cursed creatures' and his *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) soon appeared in a children's edition that was pressed upon children for their spiritual betterment. But Gottlieb (1975, p.107) believes that children read it (as I did as a child) because it is a rattling good adventure story and has strongly delineated characters and graphic scenes. Calvin declared that the whole nature of children was a 'seed bed of sin' and that only by whipping could their inherent wickedness be eliminated and their salvation ensured. Puritan manuals demanded, 'What was thou being an infant but a brute, having the shape of a man? What is youth but an untamed man?' (Garland, 1963, pp.24-25). Morbidity was rampant as in a 1671 publication by the devout preacher, James Janeway, *A Token for Children: being an Exact Account of the conversion, Holy and Exemplary Lives, and Joyful Deaths of several young Children*.

Writing for children in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was profoundly influenced by educationists: John Locke (*Thoughts Concerning Education* 1693); Jean Jacques Rousseau (*Emile* 1762) who saw childhood as a *tabula rasa* (a clean slate) rather than being a 'seed bed of sin'. Even so, Rousseau's theories indirectly gave rise to a vast output of evangelical publishing that lasted well into the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The established church was vehemently opposed to light reading and viewed literature as a means of enforcing a strict code of behaviour where fear, rather than grace, ruled. Books were full of dire warnings against even desiring what were considered the fripperies of life. In England in 1802 the redoubtable Mrs Sarah Trimmer founded a periodical called *The Guardian of Education*, that railed against children's books with 'plausible titles' but 'replete with hidden mischief'.

*Revealed religion will be abandoned, and false philosophy will be substituted in its stead. Our youth, from obtaining a premature and superficial knowledge of arts and sciences will be presumptuous and conceited; and in respect to moral conduct, that will at the best act right from habit, rather than from a sense of duty, but it is most probable that they will be every way corrupted. It is time then for all parents who are desirous to bring up their children in the belief of CHRISTIANITY, to be very cautious what books they put into their hands, and above all others, to be particularly jealous of those who are composed in imitation of the HOLY SCRIPTURES, for they are beyond doubt intended for the most abominable purposes, as we shall take occasion to show, when any of them comes into our hands. (In Salway, 1976, pp.21-22.)*

As a teacher and having conducted courses in children's literature, I have in recent times encountered the same attitude. I have even been accused of promoting 'child pornography' by daring to include on a book list Tim Winton's satirical little farce, *The Bugalug's Bum Thief* (1991) which begins with the absurd situation: 'Skeeta Anderson woke up one summer morning to find that his bum had gone'. Not only was Skeeta somewhat lop-sided, but everyone in Bugalugs had had their bums stolen, and I will leave you to complete the hilarious scenario for yourselves.

Returning to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mrs Trimmer roundly condemned introducing children to fairy tales, despite Hans Andersen's assertion that 'Fairy tale never dies' (as indeed has been proven). Mrs Trimmer and her cohort, Mrs Barbault, drew the ire of Charles Lamb who wrote to the poet, Coleridge, in 1802, 'Hang them! I mean the cursed Barbault crew, who blights and blasts of all that is human in man and child!' Charles Dickens also came to the defence of fairy tales in *Household Words*. October 1853, declaring that:

*It would be hard to estimate the amount of gentleness and mercy that has made its way among us through such slight channels. Forbearance, courtesy, consideration for the poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, the love of nature, abhorrence of tyranny and brute force – any such good things have been nourished in the child's heart by this powerful aid. (In Salway, p.111.)*

More recently we have Bruno Bettelheim (1976, p.24), the child psychiatrist, claiming that fairy tales, 'unlike any other form of literature, direct the child to discover his identity and calling', suggesting 'what experiences are needed to develop his character further'.

Fairy tales were ousted by 'the cursed Barbault crew' in favour of a plethora of Calvinistic, evangelical tract-like publications. Not only the RTS (Religious Tract Society) and the SPCK (Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge) but publishers in both Britain and America such as John Ritchie produced hundreds of titles for the home and Sunday School trade – many of which made their way to Australia and continued to be given out as prizes during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the most excessive and notorious was *The Fairchild Family* by the missionary-minded Mrs Sherwood published in parts between 1818 and 1847 who believed that:

*All children are by nature evil, and while they have none but the natural evil principle to guide them, pious and prudent parents must check their naughty passions in any way that they have in their power, and force them into decent and proper behaviour and into what are called good habits. (In Darton, 1932/58. p.175.)*

One way of doing this in *The Fairchild Family* was to have Mr Fairchild, after the children had been quarrelling, take the family on an expedition to the gloomy Blackwood where:

*The body of a man hung in chains: it had not yet fallen to pieces, although it had hung there for some years. The body had on a blue coat, a silk handkerchief around the neck, with shoes and stockings, and every other part of the dress still entire: but the face of the corpse was so shocking, that the children could not look at it.*

Mr Fairchild explains that the man was a murderer – 'one who hated and afterwards killed his brother'.

*Whilst Mrs Fairchild was speaking, the wind blew strong and shook the body upon the gibbet, rattling the chains by which it hung.*

My own Sunday School prizes were not as horrific at *The Fairchild Family*, but they did consist of titles such as Florence Davie's *Tan*; or, *Between the Gold and the Brown* about a sweet little English boy stolen by gypsies, whose face was tanned and the child was used as a ploy by the gypsies to gain custom. Throughout his difficulties Tan never fails to witness to his faith and to share among those with whom he comes into contact 'the knowledge of the love of God in the gift of His beloved Son, who came to seek and save that which was lost' (p.102). Theologically this may well please the Calvinists, but the book is, by today's standards racist, classist and sexist.

Another classic of the genre, is Hesba Stretton's *Jessica's First Prayer* (1866), which is certainly a well written and gripping story about a deserted London waif who is befriended by the children of a clergyman, converted, and goes on to reclaim the soul of old Dan on his death bed. Such texts simplistically reduce and distort the gospel of grace. Even in Victorian or Edwardian society there were those writers like Frances Hodgson Burnett, the author of *The Secret Garden* (1911) who understood that children can be crippled emotionally by adult repressions or blinkered in outlook by upbringing and circumstance, but that healing and wholeness can be achieved in the garden of creativity watered and nourished by



acceptance of what one is and by unconditional love and understanding – which is the essence of the gospel.

At Sunday School, as well as the annual prize, we were given a monthly magazine called *The Lighthouse* which was modelled, I fancy, on such publications as *The Child's Companion and Juvenile Instructor*, and which contained religious verse and puzzles along with exemplary anecdotes and little stories which had a gospel message tacked on to the end or interpolated into the narrative. I always skipped the preachy bits, which I suspect my fellow pupils didn't read any of the contents at all. Does such reading matter class as literature? Rather it stems from an inadequate understanding of the inquiring, developmental nature of childhood, of sound educational principles where children learn by experiencing, as well as a negative view of the gospel. Compassionate understanding and the amazing grace that gives because it has received fail to enter the equation. What sort of literature, then, should we be sharing with our children?

### Children's literature defined

Harvey Darton, the first real historian of children's literature, defined children's literature as:

*Printed works produced ostensibly to give children spontaneous pleasure and not primarily to teach them, nor solely to make them good, nor to keep them profitably quiet (p.1).*

If we eliminate the word 'solely', we still have a text that may well have its intent to make children somehow better than they might be – or to make them think along certain lines. It is now being argued that by 'children's literature' critics today mean 'books which are good for children, and most particularly good in terms of emotional and moral values' (Hunt, 1996, p.17).

I would argue that a good children's book is one that has the power to stir the imagination, to arouse a sensory, emotional, intellectual and even spiritual response as contained in Lewis' term 'Joy'. Books that will help make children see themselves and the world more clearly; help consolidate their sense of identity. They will undoubtedly have values (that is inescapable) but they will communicate those values through *art* rather than *instruction* or *preaching*. 'The most successful children's literature, by this argument, is therefore rich in imaginative language, psychologically convincing characters, compelling plots, and, most of all, complex themes' (Dolin, 1999, p.52). As Dolin argues:

*The aim of children's writing [should be] delight not edification; that it's attributes be the eternal childlike qualities of wonder; simplicity; laughter and warmth; and that in the worldwide realm of children's books, the literature be kept inside, the sociology and pedagogy out.*

Where, then does literature fit into the Christian experience? What is its place in the moulding of Christian identity? For all experience, including what we read, has the potential to change us, to shape our values. I have been writing a book over the past 12 months in

which I argue that Australian children's literature can help provide a sense of national identity (what it means to be Australian) and therefore is part of the development of a personal identity. In the same way I would argue that literature can contribute to the shaping of a Christian outlook. It may not necessarily 'convert' – that is the work of the Holy Spirit, often through human agency like parental example and guidance. But worthwhile literature, while not being overtly evangelical, can enshrine Christian values. And wide reading that takes in a wealth of experience, from abuse, oppression, bullying to endurance, joy in achievement and sheer buffoonery helps the reader to move toward autonomy and a well-rounded identity.

Allow me to return to my own reading and to draw on a few examples of books and writers whom I believe can bestow this great gift, and help bring 'Joy' (in Lewis' sense) into a child's life.

### **The reading experience**

Returning to *Treasure Island*, I can look back and realise that it extended my very being in a number of ways. Apart from developing my mastery over print, my literacy skills, and strengthening my feeling for words and the rhythms of language, it developed the person I was to become. It gave me what might be called 'hard' knowledge – for instance, what 'Pieces of Eight' are; the purposes of an apple barrel on a sea voyage; what a coracle is. It also gave me 'soft' knowledge about the human condition.

### **Sensory experience**

Remember, I was living in outback Broken Hill, a day's drive across Australian desert to the sea. Yet I was able to be part of a foggy, wind-swept English coastline, catch the whiff of salt spray across the deck of the *Hispaniola*, enter into the exhilaration of exploring an apparently deserted island. Later *The Wind in the Willows* took me into the delights of boating on an English river and into the snowy wild wood with Ratty, the underground cosy warmth of Mole's home.

### **The gaunt of emotional experience**

With Jim Hawkins I shivered in fearful apprehension ('the extreme of fear and curiosity' as Stevenson puts it) as I hid in the apple barrel and overheard the pirates plotting to take over the ship.

### **Attuned to character**

As I read, I began to see that Long John Silver was not all bad; that villains, like Templeton the rat in *Charlotte's Web*, are not irredeemable. Toad from *The Wind in the Willows* convinced me that pride comes before a fall; that hubris always has its nemesis.

### **Transcendental experience**

It think it was *Treasure Island* in its entirety – the whole reading experience – that lifted me to a heightened state of understanding. This is what James Joyce in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* calls an epiphany: a revelation. I could list many, many books which, I believe, have the power to attune children to the ineffable and to provide them with those enduring values enshrined in the gospel and in the example of Christ – the healing power of love.

In the printed version of this talk I list just a few titles which, I believe, have the power potentially to enrich a child's outlook and help to develop an identity that absorbs Christian values. Here I would point you to the vast range of children's literature, and the values it contains. There are many books with embedded themes such as the effect of unconditional acceptance on both the giver as well as the receiver; that hope endures if we only have faith; the need to understand that negative even rebellious behaviour is usually the result of some form of abuse and can only be remedied by understanding – but that ultimately we all have to face up to life's demands and accept responsibility for our own actions.

## The range of children's literature

### *Nursery rhyme and poetry*

I believe that one of the greatest gifts parents can give their children is introducing them from infancy to the old rhymes that attune the child's ear to the cadence and richness of language: the verbal rhythm and imagery contained in such simple verse as 'Humpty Dumpty' or 'Jack and Jill'. Forget the political derivations, the accusations of political incorrectness, and allow children to revel in the bizarre notion of 'Little Jack Horner', 'The Cat and the Fiddle' or 'Three Blind Mice', for example. I would avoid fatuous and tasteless attempts to sanitise the contents as in *Father Gander's Nursery Rhymes Updated for the 1980s* or *The Christian Mother Goose*.

Children today are being force-fed absurd jingle and rhyming commercials by the media. It will be a sad society that deprives children of the heritage of great poetry, including ballads like Alfred Noyes' 'The Highwayman' or the Australian bush ballads – 'The Man from Iron Bark'. Thanks to a wonderful teacher in my second year at High School when I first arrived in London I asked the taxi driver to stop at Westminster Bridge on my way to Hampstead. I stepped out, stood on the bridge and said 'Earth hath not anything to show more fair' – and I silently blessed Miss Fix who introduced me to Wordsworth.

### *Traditional literature*

Many times I have also had occasion to bless an uncle who introduced me, through a set of blue-and-gold-bound books, to the world's great store of fable, folk and fairy tale, myth and legend. Do you remember the Roman story of Baucis and Philemon, the hospitable old couple who entertained Jupiter and Mercury and shared their all with the gods? In return they were rewarded, like the widow of Zaraheth who gave succour to Elijah, with a never-failing pitcher and self-replenishing loaf. How often have we 'entertained angels unawares' and been repaid with a miraculous draught of Joy!

### *Picture books*

Never has the world known such a rich bounty of wonderful picture books that not only introduce small children to both narrative structure and the grammar of story but also to great artwork. Here in Australia we have artists of the stature of Julie Viras, Bob Graham, Jane Tanner or Gregory Rogers who provide examples of appealing and wonderfully creative artwork.

### **Junior novels**

Children in early primary school delight in fun and make-believe flexing their imaginative muscles by pretending that they can fly, or become invisible, practise ventriloquism, and weave spells. It is part of gaining mastery over a somewhat demanding world and asserting their own individuality. There are hosts of titles that slot into this phase of child development – such as Jenny Pausacker’s *Fast-Forward* in which a boy is able to fast-forward his life, but runs into trouble with the replay. This is the stage where writers like Paul Jennings have a real role to play; and the present much publicised *Harry Potter* books fit into this category.

### **More demanding novels**

As children move up the reading scale they deserve novels which tackle seriously and with integrity themes that will be important to them: bullying (Margaret Wild’s *Beast*); cowardice (Allan Baillie’s *Hero*); tolerance and understanding of racial and individual differences (Katherine Paterson’s *The Flip-Flop Girl*) and the developing self within the context of the family, school or society (Colin Thiele’s *The Sun on the Stubble* or his *Storm Boy* or *Blue Fin*). The list could go on indefinitely.

### **Fantasy**

But I would make a special plea for fantasy which through metaphor allows readers to transcend the everyday and imaginatively, creatively consider the human condition. Two Australian examples spring immediately to mind. Ruth Park’s *Playing Beatie Bow* not only allows children to look sympathetically back into the past but demonstrates that we can learn from the mistakes of the past; Patricia Wrightson’s *The Nargun and the Stars* is about the healing of an emotionally wounded boy (he has lost his parents in an accident) through the love and understanding of an elderly couple, being placed in a pastoral environment and by experiencing a world inhabited by beings that are products of the Aboriginal mind.

### **Censorship**

There is no end to the riches of children’s literature. In two-year courses we can only scratch the surface. But I am often asked by parents and by schools, particularly Christian schools, about literature that has the potential to harm, and about censorship. Ideologies become emotionally charged, and we tend to want to censor anything that does not agree with our own cherished subject position. There is fear of exposing readers to anything outside a restricted and limited range of experience.

We hear about schools banning certain books for silly reasons: Enid Blyton because she is classist; even *Huckleberry Fin* because it is allegedly racist; or books that deal with violence and horror. This is a big subject. One could defend horror generally on the grounds that it taps into the dark side of our natures and gives it a healthy airing. (I was fascinated as a child by reading surreptitiously RL Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and later Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Grey*.) Personally I believe that forbidden fruit leads to deceitful sampling; but I also don’t think for a moment that my own furtive reading did me any harm. Why? Because I was also exposed to a tremendously wide range of great literature. A balanced diet is of great importance.

Violence which is nihilistic worries me, and I have publicly condemned some books published here in Australia because they are without hope. Katherine Paterson, a committed Christian, who is from missionary parents and is married to a Presbyterian minister sums up my attitude to these questions. She says she does not avoid strong themes (such as death, exploitation, tragedy) because she believes that a writer must face life honestly, which means admitting that there are unpleasant things in human nature and in the world, so that the reader may know the nature of the game that is being played and make purposeful moves. But, she says:

I will not write a book that closes in despair. I cannot, will not, withhold from my young readers the harsh realities of human hunger and suffering and loss, but neither will I neglect to plant that stubborn seed of hope that has enabled our race to outlast wars and famines and the destruction of death (Paterson, 1980, p.48).

### Lucy Maud Montgomery (1874-1942)

Writers, as I have already pointed out, inevitably implant their own ideology, their world view, within their books. But they do not have to be Christian to enshrine Christian values, and if they are Christians they do well to admit that Christians are not perfect. It is that realisation which, to my mind, provides the enduring quality in the works of L M Montgomery, creator of *Anne of Green Gables*. Montgomery was a Christian married to a clergyman, but she also questioned the narrowness of much religious experience. Not that she proclaimed this overtly in her children's novels. But it is her true understanding of the love of God that can mellow flinty hearts, combined with her wit and utter lack of pretension and sanctimonious rectitude, that makes her books a joy to read, even almost one hundred years after they were written. In one of the books the children categorise people who belong to the race 'that knows Joseph' as being, in E M Forster's term, 'on the side of the angels'; people with whom we can connect; who bring us Joy.

If you can obtain a copy, read *The Story Girl*. It is about a group of children spending the summer holidays on Prince Edward Island creatively. The children go willingly to Sunday School; prayer and Bible reading are taken for granted. When secular games are forbidden on Sundays the children get round it by playing sermons and trying out the role of the preacher. When the local newspaper announces the approaching date and hour of Judgement Day, the children assemble in the orchard suitably dressed and more or less soberly await the Second Coming. When the appointed hour passes, Cecily who has held onto the text that no one knows the day or the hour, announces triumphantly, 'I told you the Bible was more to be depended on than the newspapers'.

But it is not the overt Christian emphasis (Peter has a hard time deciding whether being a Methodist or a Presbyterian is the best way of becoming a Christian, so reads the Bible for himself and finds it intriguing) that makes the book memorable. It is rather that it catches the carefree, innocence of youth that we need to defend with all our might in this age of instant gratification and canned entertainment. Youth should be like the Golden Arcadian Age of the pastoral in which young people grow up creatively, learning by experiencing the joys as well as the vicissitudes of life. At the end of *The Story Girl* the narrator concludes:

*Our summer was over. It had been a beautiful one. We had known the sweetness of common joys, the delight of dawns, the dream and glamour of noontides, the long purple peace of carefree nights. We had had the pleasure of bird song, of silver rain on greening fields, or storm among the trees, of blossoming meadows, and of the converse of whispering leaves. We had had brotherhood with wind and star, with books and tales, and hearth fires of Autumn. Ours had been the little, loving tasks of every day, blithe companionship, shared thoughts, and adventuring. Rich were we in the memory of those opulent months that had gone from us – richer than we then knew or suspected. And before us was the dream of spring. It is always safe to dream of spring. For it is sure to come; and if it be not just as we have pictured it, it will be infinitely sweeter.*

What better recipe for a happy childhood and a firm understanding and sense of self! Please allow children to experience all seasons. Even the bleakness of winter (emotional as well as seasonal) can be assuaged with the warmth of friendship and a cosy fireside. Spring is bound to follow, for as Pandora discovered and Pope confirmed, 'Hope springs eternal in the human breast' and rigidity of outlook stifles hope.

## A very beginning list (some personal favourites)

### *Picture books: Read to or read and share*

- ***John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat***, Jenny Wagner & Ron Brooks. The widow Rose lives with her dog, John Brown who becomes jealous of the Midnight Cat. A seemingly simple story that says a great deal about human relationships.
- ***The Very Hungry Caterpillar***, Eric Carle. Introduces numbers, the days of the week and the concept of metamorphosis. But it is really about identity – being true to one's nature.
- ***Wilfred Gordon Macdonald Partridge***, Mem Fox & Julie Vivas. A tender look at old age from a child's point of view. A wise book.
- *Don't Forget the Bacon*, Pat Hutchins
- *Drac and the Gremlin*, Allan Baillie & Jane Tanner
- *Hairy Maclary from Donaldson's Dairy*, Lynley Dodd
- *Millions of Cats*, Wanda Gag
- *Mr Gumpy's Outing*, John Burningham
- *My Cat Likes to Hide in Boxes*, Eve Sutton
- *One Woolly Wombat*, Rod Trinca & Kerry Argent
- *Peepo*, Janet & Allan Ahlberg
- *Rosie's Walk*, Pat Hutchins
- *Sunshine*, Jan Ormerod
- *Tale of Peter Rabbit*, The, Beatrix Potter
- *Where the Wild Things Are*, Maurice Sendak
- *Where's Spot*, Eric Hill

### *Junior Books: Read alone or read with*

- ***Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day***, Judith Viorst. Every child has just such a day, and it is comforting to learn that this is a common experience.
- ***Onion Tears***, Diana Kidd. A boat child living in Australia mourns her past, especially when teased at school. But sympathetic understanding works wonders.
- ***Pigs and Honey***, Jeanie Adams. An Aboriginal family go on a pig-hunting expedition, sharing the warmth and love of family life.
- ***Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes***, Eleanor Coerr. Sadako died of leukemia after the bombing of Hiroshima where her monument now stands.

- *27<sup>th</sup> Annual African Hippopotamus Race, The*, Morris Lurie.
- *Angel with a Mouth-Organ, The*, Christobel Mattingley and Astra Lacin.
- *Big Bazoohley, The*, Peter Carey
- *Flat Stanley*, Jeff Brown
- *Hide Till Daytime*, Joan Phipson
- *Lucy in the Leap Year*, Nadia Wheatley
- *Mr Majeika*, Humphrey Carpenter
- *Paolo's Secret*, Libby Hathorn
- *Rose Meets Mr Wintergarten*, Bob Graham
- *Shrinking of Treehorn, The*, Florence Parry Heide
- *Story of Shy the Platypus, The*, Leslie Rees & Patrick Watson

#### **Middle Primary: Read alone, but do discuss**

- ***The Bamboo Flute***, Gary Disher. A boy and his father at last communicate with the aid of a wise old tramp.
- ***Charlotte's Web***, EB White. The power of friendship and a lesson in loyalty.
- ***Sarah Plain and Tall***, Patricia MacLachlan. A family's need for hard work, love and laughter is wonderfully met after their mother dies.
- ***Storm Boy***, Colin Thiele. Who does not know Mr Percival, Storm Boy's pelican? But this, too, is about the power of love.
- *Best Kept Secret, The*, Emily Rodda
- *BFG, The*, Roald Dahl
- *Boss of the Pool*, Robin Klein
- *Bottersnikes and Gumbles*, SA Wakefield
- *Callie's Castle*, Ruth Park
- *Freaky Friday*, Mary Rodgers
- *Harry's Mad*, Dick King-Smith
- *Just So Stories*, Rudyard Kipling
- *Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, The*, CS Lewis
- *Pigs Might Fly*, Emily Rodda
- *Pinballs, The*, Betsy Byars

#### **Upper Primary/Junior Secondary: Books to talk about**

- ***The Cay***, Theodre Taylor. Racial Prejudice breaks down in the face of kindness and wisdom.
- ***Climb a Lonely Hill***, Lilith Norman. Sometimes children learn lessons that their parents need to learn.
- ***A Wrinkle in Time***, Madeleine L'Engle. Love is certainly stronger than hate.



- *A Little Fear*, Pat Wrightson
- *Ash Road*, Ivan Southall
- *Blue Fin*, Colin Thiele
- *Change the Locks*, Simon French
- *Divine Wind, The*, Gary Disher
- *Goodnight Mr Tom*, Michelle Magorian
- *Julie of the Wolves*, Jean Craighead George
- *Little Brother*, Allan Baillie
- *Lyddie*, Katherine Paterson
- *Midnite*, Randolph Stow
- *Other Bells for Us to Ring*, Robert Cormier
- *Refuge*, Libby Gleeson
- *Seven Little Australians*, Ethel Turner
- *Space Demons*, Gillian Rubinstein
- *Stripes of the Sidestep Wolf*, Sonya Hartnett
- *Tom's Midnight Garden*, Philippa Pearce
- *Wizard of Earthsea*, Ursula Le Guin

### **Traditional literature: A small sampling from the world's riches**

- *Adventures of Odysseus*, retold by Neil Philip
- *Atlantis: The Legend of the Lost City*, Christina Balit
- *Devil's Trousers, The*, Maurice Saxby, illustrated by Julie Gross
- *Great Deeds of Superheroes/Great Deeds of Heroic Women*, Maurice Saxby, illustrated by Robert Ingpen
- *Kojuro and the Bears*, Junko Morimoto
- *Orchard Book of Magical Tales*, Margaret Mayo
- *Orphan Book, The*, Tololwa M Mollel, illustrated by Paul Morin
- *Robin Hood*, Margaret Early
- *Snow Queen, The*, Hans Christian Andersen, illustrated by Errol Le Cain
- *Snow White*, retold by Josephine Poole, illustrated by Angela Barrett
- *Tales from Grimm*, Antonia Baker & Margaret Chamberlain
- *When a Goose Meets a Goose*, Clare Scott-Mitchell (Poetry)

### **For Further Consideration**

- Can books change lives? Positively? Negatively?
- What is the role of the parent, the school, the church in guiding children's reading?
- How could current issues such as reconciliation, graffiti (pollution generally), drugs etc be incorporated into children's fiction? In non-narrative form?
- All humanity (all living things) irrespective of colour, class or creed are equal in God's sight, but human life is far from equal. Search for books that embody this theme.
- There is talk today of 'emotional intelligence'. What does that entail? How can books help?

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### ***Follow-up reading***

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