

The Brave New World of Kids Literature

The British schoolboy wizard Harry Potter may have taken the world by storm, but what about the toothy, smiling chubby grey hippopotamus eating cake on an Aussie rooftop? For more than 21 years Hazel Edwards' "There's A Hippopotamus on Our Roof Eating Cake" has been and continues to be part of Australian kids growing up.

For the first hundred years of Australian settlement, children's books which featured the Australian colonies were parodies of British literature. Scenes were English countryside and Aborigines looked like Africans. There was no recognition that Australia had its own distinctiveness.

However by the turn of the century children's books were starting to reflect the uniqueness of the Australian experience, its landscapes, flora and fauna and the emerging sense of being Australian. Children's books would become a participant in this developing sense of national identity, books such as "Dot and the Kangaroo" (1899) by Ethel Pedley, "The Magic Pudding, the Adventures of Bunyip Bluegum" (1918) by Norman Lindsay, "Tales of Snugglepot and Cuddlepie" (1918) by May Gibbs, "Blinky Bill" (1933) by Dorothy Wall, Mary and Elizabeth Durack's tales about Aboriginal children in the Kimberleys (1935).

It was after World War II, that Australian children's literature really came to be recognized for its educational and cultural importance. In 1945 the Children's Book Council was established in NSW to be followed by all the other states. It was a time of great Australian authors such as Patricia Wrightson, Joan Phipson, Colin Thiele. Alan Marshall's "I Can Jump Puddles" (1955) became a classic in its revelation of Australian landscape and courage overcoming polio.

However it was during the 1970's that Australian children's books came of age. There was an emergence of innovative, brazenly Australian children's books. There was a new breed of children's authors and illustrators reflecting a confidence in an Australian identity and its landscape in all its diversity. The quirky Australian humour evident in "The Magic Pudding" exploded into best selling wickedly irreverent kids' books by authors such as Paul Jennings, John Larkin, Moya Simons, Margaret Clark, Morris Gleitzman, Dianne Bates with newcomers like J.A. Mawter. Duncan Ball's Selby the talking dog has reached near iconic status in Australia and fame in Japan. Moya Simons' "Dead Meat" series is not only making kids laugh in English and German, but it will also be doing it in French when released in France next year.

May Gibbs' gumnut blossoms and evil Banksia men have paved the way to Mem Fox's "Possum Magic" illustrated by multi award winning artist Julie Vivas. "Possum Magic" has sold millions of books and is at the forefront of picture books taking Australia to the world. Today Australian picture books challenge every boundary in colour, text, presentation, theme. The 2001 multi award winning "Fox" by Margaret Wild, illustrated by Ron Brooks is an amazing combination of art and theme as friendship and betrayal are exposed.

Authors, especially in the growing area of young adult literature, increasingly reflect the larrikinism, tell-it-as-it-is edge of Australian culture. John Marsden, Australia's

best selling young adult author powerfully explores adolescent issues in modern society. Bill Condon's award winning "Dogs" brilliantly confronts father-son relationships set against the background of greyhound racing. Nick Earls, Sonya Harnett, Jackie French, Maureen McCarthy, Libby Hathorn and other outstanding young adult authors are part of this brave new Australian literature that reveals humour, despair, redemption.

There is an exciting originality and bravado in Australian children and teenage writing which makes it different, relevant and which is taking it to the world.