

The Power of Literature

Libby Gleeson October 2008

Thank you for the opportunity to be part of your day today. As someone whose whole life is caught up with writing, in particular with writing for young people and with teaching of writing, I relish opportunities to talk to those who share that passion or who attempting to impart some of that to young people.

Let me begin with a disclaimer. I am not a teacher of reading.

I am a trained teacher of English and History in the secondary school and of English as a Foreign language in the adult area. And at one stage I was a teacher trainer for some years. But when the choice had to be made as to whether to stay teaching or to give it up and write full time, I made a choice in favour of writing. And I don't regret that for a moment. I am a regular visitor to schools and I do also work in-servicing staff more on creative writing than reading.

But we're here today to talk about story. The power of story or, more importantly, the power of literature. When I sat down to prepare myself for today I had a similar problem as I have when I begin a new novel or short story or picture book for very young children.

Where do I start?

And when I write fiction, I often begin with a brainstorm, with putting a few ideas down on paper to get my brain going, to sort out some of the ideas I have that are floating around the subject.

So I did that.

My brainstorm resulted in words like: empathy, emotion, change, being moved to tears, too scared to read it again, [Mary Grant Bruce](#), [Anne of Green Gables](#) and [The Faraway Tree](#).

Now how to make some order out of all of that.

Let me begin with the last one. [The Faraway Tree](#). It was written by [Enid Blyton](#) and, in my humble opinion was the best thing she ever wrote. It has endured. Well some years ago I was invited to speak on censorship at a children's literature conference. I was curious to identify books that had scared people when they were children and so I rang friends who were all writers and who had been avid readers as children. To my surprise, one of my writer friends identified the Faraway Tree as the book she was most terrified of as a child. That was almost incomprehensible to me. For those of you who can't remember it – or who never encountered it – the story is that a group of children climb a tree and disappear up into a land at the top. But the land is really lands – plural – and they are never sure which land will be there when they get up into the clouds. And the lands are inhabited by amazing people – Moonface and the Saucepan Man are two I remember. My friend explained that she was truly afraid for the children that they would go up into one of these lands and they would never come back. Their particular land might never again be the one at the top of the tree allowing them to get back. It's a story that has fuelled the imagination of tens of thousands of children for about 70 years, but for that sensitive child, it was too much. And yet she kept reading it, wanting to experience the thrill.

My friend's response interested me not only because of her choice, but also because of the speed

and the certainty with which she told me. No hesitation at all. And she'd have been in her late forties when I spoke to her. Equally I had no doubt about my own answer: *The Snow Queen*. Hans Christian Anderson. I find the memory of it almost unbearable. And unlike my friend, I cannot face reading it again. I'm sure if you were all to think about it you may be able to come up with something that you were afraid of as a kid.

Just as there were books that frightened us, there were others we loved. Mine is quite a long list beginning with the little golden book, *The Taxi That Hurried*, moving on to the Billabong books by *Mary Grant Bruce* and then *Anne of Green Gables* and another title some of you may know *A Girl of the Limberlost* by the American novelist and conservationist, *Gene Stratton Porter*.

Why did I love these? The *Taxi That Hurried* contained the words '*we're a speedy pair, we'll get you there*' .. and they did. It became a catch cry whenever we were late in my family. The Billabong books filled my fantasy life of growing up on a farm and riding horses with confidence. I was a town girl but my Mum had been a farm girl and she filled our heads with stories of her childhood. (Not a rich station life) I think *Mary Grant Bruce's* work somehow became an alternative life for me. *Anne of Green Gables* was a different kind of work. I identified with the clever outsider that Anne was. An orphan. And she was a red head. That meant a lot to me – the only red head in my family and certainly in my class at school. *A Girl of the Limberlost* was another independent feisty girl who fought the world – beginning with her mother – in order to get an education. The girl's name was Elnora and the first novel I wrote had as its main character, a red headed girl called Eleanor.

I read an enormous amount as a child and books were important but probably not as important as they were to *Alberto Manguel* who has written a marvellous book called *A History of Reading*. He talks there of his childhood journeying into books and says:

Jelly was a mysterious substance I knew only from Enid Blyton, and which never matched, when I finally tasted it, that literary ambrosia ... I believed in sorcery and was certain that one day I would be granted three wishes which countless stories had taught me not to waste. I prepared myself for encounters with ghosts, with death, with talking animals, with battle; I made complicated plans for travel to adventurous islands on which Sinbad would become my bosom friend. Only when years later, I touched, for the first time my lover's body did I realize that literature could sometimes fall short of the actual event.

I teach creative writing at the University of Sydney. The students are older people, many of them parents, wanting to become writers of books for the young.

In a conversation about what books they are reading at the moment I was struck by a couple of them who are reading, to their own children, the books that they themselves had enjoyed as children. They have nostalgia for the pleasure and the meaning they took from these works and they want their children to have it too. I recall doing the same thing when I was the parent of young children. And sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. Your child is not you and may well have to find different books, probably contemporary ones that will speak to him or her in a way that is meaningful to them.

Why is it that these books of our childhoods carry such a resonance for so many of us? What is it about us or about them?

Well there are those who believe, and I am one of them, that we are hard-wired for story, for narrative. Barbara Hardy, formerly professor of English Literature at The University of London wrote: *We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt,*

plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative. In order to live we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social, the past as well as the future.

When I tell you about the disaster of my attempts to do my tax earlier this week, I do it by creating a narrative, when my mother tells my children about her childhood and the pleasure or otherwise of riding a horse to school, she does it by creating a narrative and when that child comes home in tears because of something that another kid has done to her, she tells it by creating a narrative. What good literature does is partly the same: it puts together a sequence of events detailing an event or events that happen, creating characters that we will care about, or not and using language that is chosen with great skill and care to make a particular meaning.

This is the real mark of good literature. The language. It's not words chosen because someone thinks I need to know this word before I can read that word. It's words chosen because they are the right word – for their sound or their meaning. Maybe they have a certain rhythm that will help create a feeling in the story. Maybe they carry connotations that will add a layer of meaning, otherwise lost to the reader, or maybe they just sound right in the phrase or the sentence. Think of *Where the Wild Thing Are*. The wild things 'roll their terrible eyes and gnash their terrible teeth.' *Terrible* is perfect. Scary or frightening or amazing just wouldn't work in this context. In *John Brown Rose and the Midnight Cat* the word *midnight* carries so much more meaning than simply *black*.

In a book of my own, *Shutting the Chooks In* I refer to a fox, out there, hunting the chooks and I describe him as wide eyed, slavering mouth. Now slavering is not a word that is part of the vocabulary of the average 5 year old. I probably will never use it again, but it is the right word. So there is rich and varied language. But there is also content in the story that is meaningful and that will resonate for the reader. The best of our literature is stories that help us to understand ourselves. Somehow there is revelation about the human condition. I'm not talking pop psychology here. I'm talking story that shows us the way people respond to a situation – real or in fantasy – that adds to what we know. Sometimes we can't articulate what it is we take from a book but that doesn't mean we have taken nothing. And often we each take something different depending on our own life experience.

My friend feared the *Faraway Tree*. She was an orphan, a child abandoned by the death of one parent and the desertion of the other. I relished it. It never occurred to me that the children would not come back down. I was a safe and secure child in a loving family. Different life experience. Different responses.

Let me introduce you to a wonderful publication that I came across recently '*Waiting for a Jamie Oliver: beyond bog standard literacy*.' It comes from the University of Reading in the UK.: from the National Centre for Reading and Literacy.

Remember how Jamie Oliver took on the food that was being cooked in schools and served up to children across Great Britain. He called it pap and set about showing that you could be creative and health conscious and still deliver decent meals within budget. And he made a documentary about it and hijacked the whole community along with him.

Well, there are those, in Great Britain, who want the same thing to happen to the way that literature is treated in schools. And this is not any old unknown commentator. The list of contributors is a star studded one of the literary and successful writers for young people in England: *Phillip Pullman, Michael Rosen, Anne Fine, Jacqueline Wilson, Michael Morpurgo* and others. The brilliant cartoons front and back are by *Quentin Blake*.

What is it they are protesting about that is happening schools? It is more money spent on testing than on books for the children. It's the emphasis on texts and text types and not on the whole story. By that I mean that bits of stories are given to students and analyzed for whatever purpose and the whole book is rarely seen. It is the ranking of schools and of students according to the test scores which these authors feel is not a true measure of the understanding the student may have. And as far as writing is concerned, it is the rigorous adherence to formulae, to writing a type of text, and to a particular process in order to create it. These authors feel that there is far, far too little understanding in the schools in Britain of what creativity is and how to set up the situations that allow it to flourish.

Here is a taste of the introduction:

There are two competing ways to conceptualise literacy:

- *as a skill based activity which demands discipline, practice and repetition*
- *as a means of making the world meaningful ... with motivation, and appropriate materials at a premium.*

As professional writers, we recognize the validity and the necessity of both approaches (though not necessarily in that order). If only the National Literacy Strategy did the same. Its relentless prioritizing of the first by way of drilling and testing and 'texts', has so undermined the second that bog-standard literacy is now not merely the norm but presented as some kind of success story. In reality its modest achievements are bought at an extraordinary price. According to figures gathered by the Educational Publishers Association, the state system currently spends somewhere between three and six times as much on testing as it does on books.

It's a theme picked up by **Quentin Blake** in his contribution – **(Read the cartoon)**

There is an excellent contribution by **Michael Rosen**. You may know him particularly for his poetry for children. He's recently been appointed as a Visiting Professor at the University of Middlesex. The quotes I'm going to use come from his inaugural lecture.

*'Many of us - he said – have been witness to the fact that the way books are read in schools has changed. We are full of anecdotal evidence of say, year 5 and 6 classrooms where whole books are not being read; where books are being chopped up into fragments and then turned into worksheets; and these fragments are then used as examples for exercises on spotting verbs and similes. We can offer eye witness accounts of how the word **literature** has been abolished, it is now **literacy**. ...'*

He goes on to talk about why people like him, and I include myself in this category, got into writing for young people. It was, quote: *for reasons that are complex and diverse but amongst them you can find a notion like wanting to say things that matter to young people ... wanting to intrigue, to entertain, educate, amuse, excite, stir up and challenge our audience. I don't know many writers of books for young people who might say, 'I write books for young people so that a class of year 5 or 6 can count the adjectives on page 43.'*

Earlier this year I published a book called **Mahtab's Story**. It's the tale of a young girl and her family and their escape from the Taliban in Afghanistan during the nineteen nineties. They journey in great fear across Afghanistan, they are stuck in Pakistan for a long period and then they journey on the leaky boats to what they think is freedom in Australia. Of course they end up enduring a long and difficult period in a detention centre. It is a novel but it is based very closely on the real life

experience of a young woman I met in Sydney four years ago. I wrote it because I was angry at our government for the way it treated refugees and particularly for the incarceration of children. I thought it was a terrific story of courage and bravery, of the human spirit rising above terrible adversity.

And it is the story of the main character, the Afghani girl that is the focus of the book. The story is the main thing, not the issue that is around it. As I say to my students, write about something that you care deeply about. But don't make it a propaganda exercise. If all you are doing is hammering an issue, you will probably write a bad book. Story is the key. And character, events and language are the ingredients.

Let me read you an email I received earlier this week.

Hi Libby,

My 10 year old daughter, Emily, came home with Mahtab's Story from her school library one afternoon. By 9pm that evening she had finished it, and has since been excitedly telling everyone that they should read this. I am yet to read the story, but i will, if not for the reason to have something to share with my daughter. From what Emily's has described to me about the story, and the impact that you have had on her, you have brought a distant problem to the forefront of a young girls mind, which in my opinion, a story like this one needs to be told to her generation. By reading this story Emily has shown more interest in world news, events, and the lives and tragedies of other who are not necessarily less fortunate, but definitely, have a different upbringing to "Australian suburbia".

What I think is happening here is what happened to me when I read **The Diary of Anne Frank** and another book called **I am David**. Empathy. It is putting yourself in the shoes of another person. It is taking to heart the tale of another's suffering or tragedy. It is certainly what I was trying to do with Mahtab's Story. It won't work for everyone but clearly it did work for this little girl.

Paul Jennings once said *I don't bash people up because I read books. I know what it is to be other.*

When I think of that, in the context of people being violent to others I can only wish that they too had been brought up as readers, that somehow they had found the book, the story that had enabled them to feel as another human being feels, that they had been subject to the **power of literature**.