

ASLA XX

Adelaide 2007 Libby Gleeson

Thank them for the opportunity to be part of ASLA Conference. I particularly like the title of your conference –Hearts on Fire. To me it suggests passion, determination, a willingness to stick up for something you believe in, the nurturing of something valuable and important. It's a great start.

Is Literacy Education killing Our Storytellers?

Let me begin by a bit of a disclaimer – a bit about who I am and more importantly who I am not.

As you know, I write books for children and young people – fiction: picture books, junior novels, novels for older kids, short stories. And I have also written books about writing. Books that would assist the person who wants to write picture books or longer fiction. And at the printer at the moment there is a new book, a book called *Write like a Writer – Teaching Narrative Writing*. The intended readership of this book is the teaching profession – those who have the task of teaching and nurturing young writers, specifically in the craft of writing narrative.

What I am not is a curriculum designer, an examiner or a full on teacher trainer although I do run in-service seminars for people interested in furthering skills in the area of creative writing.

As a writer for young people- but also as a citizen - I care very much about what happens in education – particularly in the teaching of writing and the study of literature.

What I want to say today does not come from a research project or from an in-depth study. It is the result of about twenty years as a visitor to schools and the constant conversations that I have had with teacher, librarians, teacher educators, and with my fellow writers and illustrators. So yes, it's anecdotal. But I don't believe it is any less valid for that.

Having said that, what exactly are we talking about here?

Literacy education is killing our storytellers.

Literacy education – the way we teach our kids to read and write is failing to produce, or inhibiting the development of those who create our stories for us. The narratives that fill our lives or the lives of our children.

For some time now the members of the writing community that I know and speak to, have been voicing concern over what they see as the dearth of creative writing that happens at school.

We go into schools to talk books at book week and yes there are lovely displays in the library and we are welcomed. But if we go into classrooms, in the primary school, the odds are that what we see on the walls around or hanging from the string across the middle of the room, are twenty five accounts of the procedure of how to make scones, or details of the life cycle of a tadpole, or maybe the recount of a recent school visit to the local fire station.

All these show writing skills that are necessary. Whether they are as necessary as their frequency would suggest is a moot point as is the question of whether they need to occur at the stage of learning that they do.

What we see so rarely are stories, narratives, bits of writing that are a creative response to something or that reflect the creativity of the young writer.

So, as a writing community we have been muttering about this for some time. Then a little over twelve months ago, I was invited by the Primary English Teachers' Association to a meeting to discuss the writing of a book to assist teachers teach narrative writing. It seemed that the Association, PETA felt there was something wrong here too.

I said no at first. I was in the middle of writing my first longer novel for older kids in a few years and writing to order has never really been something I am attracted to. But PETA is nothing if not persuasive. And so it was that at the beginning of this year I began the task of writing the work called *Write Like a Writer: Teaching Narrative Writing*.

Apart from immersing myself in theories about writing, about creativity and about child development – stuff I hadn't read since academic days, I ran a very interesting focus group attended by a number of teachers from primary schools in Sydney. (And at this stage I should say that most of my knowledge and experience of this whole subject is NSW based although whenever I've raised the issue inter-state I get total agreement.)

Those who attended the group were primary school teachers from every level – first year out to primary principal. Here are some of the comments made that afternoon:

Narrative needs time and we don't have time.
Free writing only happens in journals
Give me a scaffold or give me death
Teachers like structure
Creativity has been killed off
Narrative is too hard to assess
It's not only their imagination that is killed off, it's ours too.

That last comment, for me, was the saddest one of all. Of course a lot more was said. But the overwhelming feeling I got from this group of teachers was that their time in writing lessons is spent teaching that which is **predictable, manageable and assessable**.

As Professor Julius Sumner Miller would say - *why is it so?*

I think we all know the answer – a crowded curriculum, an obsession with testing, a political imperative that demands kids be ranked, schools be ranked, systems and States be ranked, an obsession with skills or mechanistic processes rather than any other notion of what achievement is. Understanding how this has come about requires insights and social inquiry that goes beyond this paper and frankly beyond me. What I would like to do is talk about the implications of this and make a case for something other.

Politicians, educators and the community in general all agree that to be a strong and successful country in the twenty first century, we need to be innovative, imaginative and creative. That is a huge ask – particularly in a culture that publicly at least celebrates its sportsman ahead of its scientists, its writers and its practitioners of the creative and performing arts. This cannot be grafted on in adulthood but must be fundamental to the way we are taught from the beginning. How do we do this in the primary classroom?

Children come to school having learnt what they know largely through creative play. Children's play is not just 'mucking around.' It is through their play that young children explore their world: learning about social relationships, rule governed behaviour and the experience of trying on the persona of the other. Remember the childhood games: 'I must be the mother and you must be the baby ...' Children create scenes and act out dramas, all the while making sense of their world and themselves in it.

Too often, when they come to school, play becomes relegated to the periods of recess and lunchtime. Even there it is sometimes lost as extra school activities and organised sport take over. Much of the creativity that has sustained their learning is suppressed in order that so-called 'formal' learning takes place. Seated at a desk, their bodies are restricted and contained and so too are their minds. Too often, their previously wide ranging questions give way to simply trying to guess what the teacher is thinking, or demonstrating what they already know. .

Creativity involves curiosity, playing with ideas, challenging accepted views, imagining alternatives and experimenting. It is suppressed by anxiety, conformity, narrow questioning, simplistic demands, rigid control and time restriction

A creative classroom is one where children's ideas are sought and respected. Open ended questioning predominates. Here the answer is not known, but the question seeks to discover rather than to elicit the 'right' answer. Discussion and problem solving are key features of this kind of teaching and learning. Talk, teacher to student and student to student is not just encouraged, it is mandatory and the conversation is not always mandated or validated by the teacher.

Overwhelmingly the students are challenged to solve problems, and not just in the area of the creative arts. Across all subject content areas, there is stimulation to think beyond the simple absorption of information and then factual recall or regurgitation. Task based learning, constant group activities and the exploitation of the 'teachable moment' are ever present. There is not only time to carry out the activity, but time to reflect and learn from that activity as well.

The creative or expressive arts are important. Stimulation of the senses happens through, immersion in and reflection on fine examples of music, the visual arts, story, dance and drama. The children are able to experiment with problem solving, with making and doing, drawing, painting, sculpting, role-playing and making music in many different forms with different, often home-made instruments. They design and build things, act out dramas and write.

And in the context of a creative classroom, they don't just write procedures, reports, expositions or any other of the genres identified and mandated in the curriculum. They need to write **narrative**. Writing a narrative is different to and more complex than writing in any other genre. A class will produce many examples of procedures, reports, recounts descriptions and explanations that are almost exactly the same. Even if that class has been taught a mechanistic approach to the writing of narrative, and even if the plot line and the characters are given by the teacher, very different stories will be the result.

Writing a narrative is an act of creativity, of the imagination. What do I think and feel? What is this story about? Who are the characters in my story? How many are there? What do they look like?

Where are they? What are they doing? Who is telling this story? What kind of voice will I use to tell the story? Will I use dialogue? How will I start? What will I write next? What if ...?

Whatever the teaching, the writers are on their own, drawing on their experience of life, of language and of story to make meaning. Writing their story is an act of self expression and self validation. Individual success brings self confidence. But it does more than that. There is strong evidence that making narratives is about making meaning, about ordering reality and that it *'plays a central role in our efforts to make sense of the human world.'* (Bruner/Nicolopoulou 1986/97) In fact, the psychologist Nicolopoulou (1996) maintains that 'narrative activities prepare the way for abstract thought development and deeper meaning processes.'

Empathy comes from immersing yourself in stories that are about others. Creating a story about an 'other' forces you to see the world through the eyes of that 'other.' Some years ago, Paul Jennings said at a conference, *'I don't bash people up because I read books.'* I would add that I feel the same way because I write stories.

Writing stories, making up stories is not beyond the very small child. The creative play I referred to earlier is largely narrative based. There's good evidence around to show that the vast majority of children come to school with large vocabularies, complex grammar and a deep understanding of experiences and stories. (Gee/Labov)

Equally, when given the opportunity to tell stories on a regular basis, small children – preschool and the first year of school, did not just tell the stories that they had absorbed from the wider culture but were able to appropriate the elements selectively and use and rework them for their own purposes. (Nicolopoulou)

Culture is passed on via narrative, the culture of nations (look at the way politicians exploit the story of Gallipoli) the culture of communities and the culture of families.

Narrative is all pervasive:

we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative. In order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future.

Barbara Hardy in *The Cool Webb* p 13

Literacy is not just about decoding words and calling that reading, or putting together grammatical sentences and calling that writing. It is so much more than that. It's about creating and understanding written text at a much deeper than surface level: the nuances of meaning, inferred meaning, symbolic meaning. It's about taking the piece that you are reading or writing and subtly interpreting or adjusting that for the context of time of place and of audience. Which brings me to the books by which so much of our reading is taught. When I go into schools, as a writer, I see two types of narrative fiction: the library shelves full of what we call trade books, stories, narratives that are works of the imagination. And then in many classrooms, not all but many, I see box after box of graded readers, also narratives and also works of the imagination.

But there is a great distinction between them and I'd like to share that distinction with you from the writers' perspective. In 1999 Armin Greder and I published *The Great Bear*. It was the culmination of four years intense collaboration. In 1990 I published two titles in a reading scheme. That was the result of a number of hours fiddling with words on the page. A look at the two different writing

processes is very revealing both for the creative tasks involved and I believe the reading experiences that result.

The origin of the **Great Bear** was this: One morning in 1995 I woke with a series of images from my dream strong in my memory. So strong that I wrote them down, pondering their meaning. The sequence was a huge dancing bear in a medieval village, somewhere in mountainous Central Europe. The bear was tormented and tormented and finally broke free. She ran to the centre of the village square, climbed the flag pole and balanced on the top. I knew she could never climb down but I was unafraid for her. Then she launched herself into the stars and I thought of Ursa Major, the Great Bear constellation. It felt very satisfying. I knew there was a story there and so wrote out the sequence of events. This was an aid to memory - not even a first draft. The next step was to relate the dream to **Armin Greder**, the illustrator I have most often worked with. He grew up in Switzerland and brings a strong European sensibility to his art. He immediately related to the story (which had not yet been written) and began drawing. I struggled to write the tale to accompany the pictures he was sending me. It was prosaic to begin with, a simple story relating the events as dreamt. It was not 'good' enough. It needed to be lifted to a level of intensity. I wanted the reader to feel the bear's anguish and to understand the desire to break free. I wanted drama and poetry. I wanted the levels of psychological and mythological insight to be available to very young readers. I talked at length with Armin and then went back to my desk and struggled with the ideas, with the structure of the story, with the language - every every nuance of meaning.

He kept drawing. He sent me rough images of brutish cruel faces, those who bully and torment. We discussed the role of the sky and how to show it as a character in the story - a potential place of freedom. How could he draw those stars to depict them as vital and inviting? The action takes place at night, how could we use colour to alleviate the overarching evil of the villagers? What perspectives could draw the reader into the story?

Armin Greder believes strongly that his role is to draw in the spaces between and beyond the words. It's a view echoed by Ron Brooks and I regard them as two of the finest illustrators working in this country today. They don't decorate texts or draw to give a visual rendition of the words. They are there to create the visual narrative that takes you beyond the words, that helps the reader to construct meaning from the whole.

We were nearing completion of this book when Armin told me that in the last third of the text, he could find no place to illustrate. There were no 'spaces between the words' and he felt he could create nothing but a visual rendition of my text. Would I consider dropping the words? I barely hesitated. By the time the reader arrives at the point where the written text ceases, the story line is so powerful that there is no danger of a lack of understanding developing. In fact, some readers have suggested that the silence of the last section of the work renders the first sections of written text all the louder and more powerful. We also decided at this point to add the star charts as endpapers. We felt these added a layer of suggestion to the reader that the mythical element, the origin of Ursa Major was there in the story.

We took the book to our publisher, Alf Mappin at Scholastic, aware that he would have to really understand and like what we had done and be prepared to champion it through the process of evaluation by his colleagues in sales and marketing. He did.

Compare this process with the way in which two short books were written by me for a reading scheme. **Hurry Up** (illus Mitch Vane) and **Walking to School** (illus Linda McClelland). I was approached by the publisher in 1988 and invited to submit work for a reading scheme that would not be 'readers' but would be 'real books'. I was at home with a newborn baby and two other

children under four. I was between novels and the idea of writing picture book texts was very appealing. It was quickly apparent that complex, subtle stories were not what was wanted. I persisted. I pondered everything I could imagine that was relevant to a young child and created little stories from them. Sometimes I worked on two or three a day, creating texts of no more than a dozen lines. I cannot call them stories though someone else may do so. Thankfully only two were accepted. Once I had the idea, the writing took hours and days, not months and certainly not years. There was no pondering of layers of meaning or subtlety, little drama and certainly no poetry. I never met the illustrators of these texts and had no discussion with them or with an editor about the different readings possible. The pictures in these books are visual renditions of the story, assisting the reader to guess the meaning of a word on the page. In retrospect, these books were about words and syntax, not about meaning.

I am not proud of the latter two works. I am proud of [The Great Bear](#). And yet I suspect the two little stories may well be the ones that find their way into the classroom where young children are learning to read. That saddens me. Those two stories are not works of literature although they are better than the simple exercises in labeling that pass for books in some early reading schemes. In them there is no real characterisation, little dramatic tension, and little incentive for real engagement of the reader with the text. There is no room for varying interpretations of the story, no inspiration to interrogate the text, no place to play.

Good picture books offer the space for readers to play different games. Illustrators like [Armin Greder](#) invite readers to think beyond the words, to ask questions of the story. His images in [The Great Bear](#) are varied from the small crayon drawings of the bear on the lower, left hand page to the brooding, menacing dark images that dominate the centre of the book. In them he shifts perspective, drawing the reader into thinking they are the bear. You cannot read this work without feeling as the bear feels, identifying with her suffering, celebrating her liberation. As such it is a book that encourages contemplation and discussion.

And contemplation and discussion are the behaviours I engage in as a reader. They are what adult readers do with fiction. I am in a reading group – what middle aged woman in this country isn't – and we sit around arguing – discussing - challenging each other's view of the book until it's time to go home. I am constantly provoked into new thoughts about a story when one of my friends begins with a phrase: *'Is that what you thought? I thought ...'*

Incidentally I find it interesting that whenever I go out to a school to talk with students, the best and most provocative discussions come from [The Great Bear](#).

Why does he (they always say he and I always think she) leap from the pole?

Why do the villagers treat the bear so badly?

What happens after he leaps?

What exactly are the endpapers?

And teachers tell me that they have also had moving discussions with their students about how the bear would feel.

I also encounter the suggestion that the Bear falls down dead. A simple, realistic understanding of what would happen if you jumped off a tall structure. Then I suggest we look at the images, the body language of the final large image and then the smaller picture that follows the final page of story.

Read the visual.
Visual narrative.
Visual story telling.

Maybe it's a comment on the students limited exposure to myth and legend.

Back to our notion of the different feelings one brings to a work of literature. When we published [The Great Bear](#), I believed, and I still do, that I had written a version of a myth about the creation of the constellation. The book was launched by [Maurice Saxby](#), the grand old man of Australian children's literature. In his speech, launching the book, he said he believed it was not a book about bears at all: it was a book about human suffering and man's inhumanity to man. It was written in the late nineteen nineties and he drew our attention to all the places where terrible things were happening to people: think Rwanda, Kosovo, and East Timor. When he said that, the light went on in my head. When I had the dream, I was writing *Refuge*, a story that deals with an East Timorese asylum seeker in the days when the Australian Government was trying to send back to East Timor young East Timorese whose families had sent them here to escape murder or rape or other atrocities at the hands of the occupying Indonesian forces. I was reading of these things in my research and I am certain that the ideas were transformed into the dream that I had.

Hearing Maurice's speech gave me a whole new insight into my own story. And this is not the first time that I have benefited from another person's reading of my work. I believe that good literature teaches us so much more than the simplest understanding of the meaning of the text. A good book can push us into identifying with the characters and the events of the story, to learn more about ourselves and the world. Let me share with you an encounter I had with a young teacher at the beginning of last year.

She knew she would be teaching a novel of mine – actually a collection of short stories: [Love Me, Love Me Not](#). Did I have any ideas or lesson plans that might help? Let me read you my reply. Insert reply.

My suggestions are all intended to provoke students to think further than the text, to think beyond any simplistic understanding and to connect this story, with their own lives.

And that's not just for the adolescent reader. I heard a wonderful – sad – story recently.

A teacher of year 2, realising that she had not encouraged a enough of a questioning attitude in her classroom, told the students of her habit of always having a book on her bedside table, and asked them why they thought she did this. They decided, with no dissent, that she had the book there so that she could practice her reading! After nearly two years of learning to read, they viewed reading simply as something to be practiced. (Ken Watson).

Where was there any understanding in this class of the power of story to move the reader. To arouse passions and emotion, to teach them something about life?

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](#), [Jaqueline 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 changes. 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 adjective on page 43.'*

This work has focused on the situation in Britain but there are similarities here in Australia that are worrying: the emphasis in the National inquiry into decoding and word reading accuracy last year, the emphasis on assessment and the tracking of students across all systems and states.

We live in an age of constant measurement and assessment. And I'm not arguing for abandoning all that. But the world of the creative arts, and literature is part of that, is not easily quantifiable. It does not lend itself to easily assessed closed questioning. Is it really examined by reducing the larger work to something fragmentary and then devising questions of it that examine one kind of understanding – perhaps the verbal definition or the meaning of a sentence when the work is so much more.

If a piece of writing is subtle and complex, then so too should any response to it be. The whole point of it is to open the mind, to enlarge the experience, to broaden the horizon of the viewer or, in this case, the reader. We need good books, wonderful books that stimulate and challenge the reader. And we need teachers confident enough in their beliefs to let their students play: let them muck around with words, let them question, let them imagine, let them allow thoughts and ideas to mingle in their minds such that their response to a piece of work or their act of creating a piece of writing, becomes original, delightful and genuinely theirs.

Only then will we find we are stimulating the development of the storytellers of the future: those who will allow their imaginations to roam free, to come up with new ideas or to take old ones and develop them in new ways for the readers of the future.