



NATIONAL CENTRE for
AUSTRALIAN
CHILDREN'S
LITERATURE^{Inc}

BEHIND THE IMAGINED



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AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE



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Welcome from the editor

We are very excited to bring the first online edition of the Journal of the National Centre for Australian Children’s Literature to you. Our journal’s new name - *Behind the Imagined* – was inspired by the incredible amount of work, talent and dedication required to produce children’s literature. We think it’s a fitting title, because we are going to give you a look behind the scenes of how, when, where and why children’s books come to life in every issue.

We also feel privileged that our first edition presents three different articles about iconic author Colin Thiele, and a fourth article explaining the story behind the success of EK Books in Publisher Anouska Jones’ own words. The mix of established and new work is also testimony that children’s literature was, and is, in safe hands.



Special thanks also to *Alice Carstens* for laying out this first edition for us. We are fortunate to have so many people who not only care about preserving our literary heritage, but who also step up to contribute when needed.

We hope you enjoy the first edition of *Behind the Imagined*. We are already preparing articles for the second edition, and imagining where this new virtual journal might take us after that.

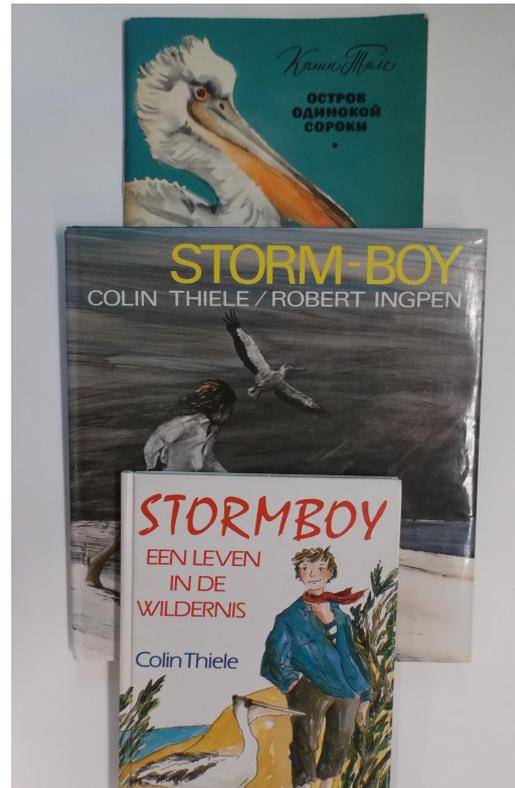
Jane Carstens
Editor

Publishing Colin Thiele

By Walter McVitty

In 1971, before I had ever met Colin Thiele, I had discussed, analysed and praised his writing for children in some detail in my book *Innocence and Experience*, in which I had said that he was generally held in a regard approaching reverence. That was certainly true for me: when I finally did meet him three years later I was in awe of him. Little did I imagine that I would one day be his publisher. Colin showed extraordinary confidence in my wife Lois and me—untried, would-be publishers—when I approached him in 1984 to see if he would allow me to publish his work in progress called *Seashores and Shadows*.

As it happens, I was very familiar with this unpublished novel, as I had been reading and reporting on it for his then publisher Rigby. By a lucky chance, one day I discovered that Rigby was about to fold, to go out of existence. I immediately contacted Colin to see if he would allow me to be the publisher of *Seashores and*



Shadows — which he did. Any big publishing company would have jumped at the chance to have Colin on its list, but for some reason he had enough faith in me to let me have a go instead, even though, at that stage, I had not yet published anything! Luckily, it worked. It was the start of a long and fruitful relationship.

On my first trip to the Bologna Children's Book Fair, I had no trouble selling rights to *Seashores and Shadows* to publishers in the USA, UK, Netherlands, Germany, Austria, France, Sweden, Denmark and South Africa, all of whom loved Colin's work. The big guns at the

Australian stand at Bologna were incredulous: one told me she had sold no books at all for the previous three years, not even to her parent UK company. That's the sort of start an author of Colin Thiele's stature can give you. (It's also proof of the universal appeal of writers who put storytelling first.)

From then onwards I published a book of Colin's almost every year. A highlight of those publishing days was receiving, unannounced in the mail, a new Colin

Thiele manuscript.

Something one learns in

publishing is that an author's own high regard for the quality of his/her writing may be in inverse proportion to its actual literary merit. Unpublished writers, especially, can be quite precious about their work. With over 100 books to his credit, Colin was the opposite. He once sent me a manuscript with a covering letter in which he expressed doubt as to its worth. 'I won't be surprised or offended if you tell me to throw it in the rubbish bin,' he told me. And that

is what I did tell him. And he did throw it in the bin!

Colin respected an editor's right to be critical, even brutally so. Yet he was the writer, not I, so it seemed a bit presumptuous of me to be telling him what he needed to do to make a manuscript better. However, he was always open to suggestion: he regarded nothing he wrote as being sacrosanct.

To work with him was therefore an editor's dream.

Colin spoke no English until he started school, where he became

fascinated by the sound of this brave new language. 'How,' he once wrote, 'does one arrange words on paper to recreate the most tremulous moments of human experience, or to reveal truths about our existence without platitude or sentimentality—and do all this in the context of a readable and entertaining story?' This sentence really tells you everything you need to know about Colin Thiele, the writer.

His life became a long love affair with words. He loved them for themselves, for their beauty and for their power.

To appreciate his love of the English language, and his passion to share it with others, just listen to these sentences from the scene-setting start of *Farmer Schulz's Ducks*.

In the hills of South Australia there is a little river with a big name—the Onkaparinga.

Once upon a time it flowed through a lovely valley full of apple trees and cabbage patches, pastures and gardens, red gums and poplars. In springtime there was celery on the breath of the wind and falling blossom like confetti on the slopes, as if the hills were having a wedding. In autumn the willows bowed down by the river with branches like arches of gold.

And in winter the tall trees whipped the air in the wind and the wet, and the high water in the river went fussing and scolding on its crooked way.

There were cows in paddocks with udders as heavy as backpacks. There were ducks with necks of opal and wings of amethyst; their colours gleamed in the sunlight, their feathers shone like jewels. There

were ducks with the sheen of emerald, of sapphire and turquoise and jasper, like the glint of Aladdin's treasure. There were ducks like burnished gold.

There were drakes as well—brown drakes, mottled drakes, muddy drakes. Drakes with eyes like night and bills like scoops. There were great white drakes with noses redder than roses. And ducklings as tiny as tennis balls and as soft as the bobbles of golden wattle when it bloomed on the hills by the Onkaparinga River.

Colin loved mellifluous words like Onkaparinga, and can't you see the smile on his face as he wrote down that delicious word 'bobbles'.

He loved telling jokes, and responded with his distinctive explosive laugh at the jokes of others.

In 1987 an 11-year-old girl wrote to Colin asking if he would write a story about a child with juvenile arthritis. 'My friends don't seem to understand why I can't run or play lots of games they play, and by you

writing this book maybe they will understand,' she told

him. And so he did, in *Jodie's Journey*, in which the gritty young arthritic says, 'You can't afford to drop your bundle. You have to get on top of it, or it'll get on top of you.'

That's Colin.

He once said ,
'Writers can't afford to sit and wait for

He once said, 'Writers can't afford to sit and wait for shafts of divine inspiration to fall upon them like rays of Pentecostal light. They need to rely on their own creative energy. They need, simply, to get on with it.'

shafts of divine inspiration to fall upon them like rays of Pentecostal light. They need to rely on their own creative energy. They need, simply, to get on with it.'

Which is what he always did.

His rapport with children was exceptional. He never forgot the boy he once was. His experience as a teacher gave him special insight into the inner lives of children, and how to use this insight not just in teaching them more effectively, but in writing for them as well. This is how he expressed it:

The influence of the emotions on human response interested me from

an early age. It seemed that while we taught with the intellect we learnt with the heart. As a teacher and writer I was therefore very conscious of the fact that children had feelings, and that these often dominated their days, buoying them up or weighing them down. There

was little point in trying to hammer principles of mathematics or science into them when their hearts

were breaking over the death of a pet or violence at home or a sense of personal failure.

Colin Thiele drew upon his own boyhood in a number of books, the first of which was *The Sun on the Stubble*, which kept me chuckling with laughter well into the early hours the night I first read it, way back in 1961. Thirty five years later I was proud to publish this wonderful book in a new edition, giving it renewed life in a deluxe format, with the kind of loving design I had always felt it deserved, with superb illustrations (OIL PAINTINGS) by John Lennox. Perhaps it's an expensive collector's item by now,

but if you haven't seen it, try to track it down. Then read it again, to remind yourself what a superbly enjoyable piece of storytelling it is.

I designed that sumptuous edition of *The Sun on the Stubble* as a kind of personal tribute to Colin himself, but the final publishing tribute was to be *With Dew on My Boots*, his non-fiction memoir of his own childhood, written for adults. As it was an account of growing up in a very particular place (the Barossa Valley) at a very particular time (the Great Depression), I wanted this book to have pictures to illustrate almost everything mentioned in the text, and so I spent 12 months searching through pictorial archives and old books and newspapers in the Mitchell Library and the Queensland State Library, collecting heaps of pictorial material. Colin, being the methodical, painstaking, detail-oriented man he was, had kept all manner of documents from the early 1930s, even down to a hand-written invoice for his first bicycle lamp (which cost five shillings and sixpence).

Colin's close friend Max Fatchen once said of him:

Colin Thiele is a quiet man and a gentle one. It's the gentleness of great strength and the quietness of an enormous well of peace and conviction that the man has inside of him. He has, without noise or sensation, reached out and with his warm genius touched the hearts and minds of countless people.

He offers us, without bombast, the proposition that the human spirit is alive and well, and that we can all coexist, that issues can be discussed and examined with friendliness, that we do not have to pound each other to pieces to impress society.

Colin Thiele, the most amenable, talented, hard-working, modest and versatile of storytellers, and the least egocentric, was the most remarkable and inspiring man I have ever met. I feel privileged to have known him.

E. B. White said at the end of *Charlotte's Web*: 'It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both.'

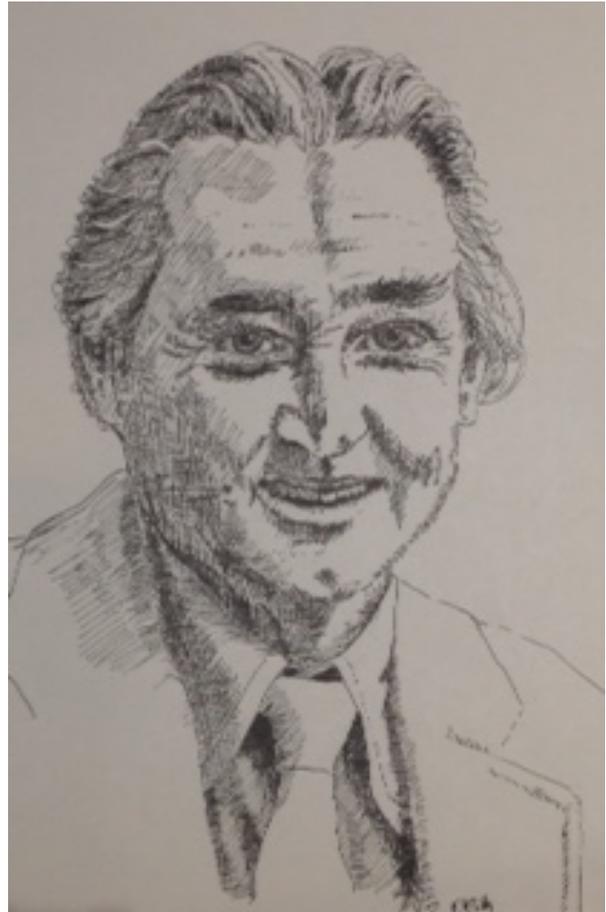
And so, for me, was Colin Thiele.

MEMORIES OF A GENTLE MAN

**Talk prepared by Janne Minge for
Colin Thiele, his life and his legacy
Lu Rees Archives of Children's
Literature *Colin Thiele Festival*,
June 2, 2015**

When I was six years old I went into Dad's study and said, 'There's a mistake in this book.' Dad looked at it and said, 'No dear, the book is right,' and then he explained that just as you would never say 'she gave it to I', you would also never say 'she gave it to Mummy and I'.

Eight years later I went into Dad's study and said, 'We have to learn this poem for homework and I've been trying for ages and I can't remember it'. Dad looked at it and said, 'Go to bed. Read the poem once before you switch off the light and then stop thinking about it. I'll wake you early so that you have time for more practice.' The next morning I woke and found that I knew the poem.



Pen Portrait Colin Thiele by Walter McVitty

These two unremarkable stories show some things about my father. We could usually find him in his study. He could always answer our questions. He never made us feel as though our interruptions were interruptions. He could teach a clear lesson with a few well-chosen words.

There was a time in my life when I considered my father to be different to other fathers. It wasn't because he was well known. He wasn't then,

although the day would eventually come when he would be delivered a letter that had been addressed to, 'Mr. Colin Thiele, Australia'. I knew that he'd written poetry and radio scripts and a couple of textbooks for his English and Geography classes but to a child those were merely interesting historical facts. The bulk of his life's work was as yet unwritten and I didn't understand then, the uniqueness of his intellect.

My perspective was based on the stereotypes I met in books. Critical literacy wasn't taught so much in those days and I must have been the kind of reader who didn't think very deeply, because I believed that normal dads were backyard-game playing kinds of people. Mine wasn't. He worked on his own in his study. It was rare for a three-bedroomed suburban post-war house to even have a study but we were able to have one because my sister Sandy and I shared a bedroom.

Later in life I came to understand that every dad is unique and that my own Dad's uniqueness was due to much more than working at a desk. The wonderful letters written to

members of the family, and especially to Mum, after his death had several recurring themes - his storytelling and conversation ... his giftedness as a teacher, educator, mentor, speaker and lecturer ... his love for the environment ... and of course his writing. And featuring just as much were personal qualities - humour ... diplomacy ... courage in adversity ... a generous spirit - for Dad's legacy was not only from the things he had done but from the man he had been. And my most special memories are not so much of the big things, like the success of Storm Boy or the Order of Australia award, but of a host of unremarkable moments.

Dad was mild mannered and his temperament was even. He never lost his temper. He didn't criticise, berate or hold grudges. He didn't waste energy on anxiety, panic or bitterness. He found whimsy and humour in situations that could well have exasperated others.

An elderly acquaintance wrote of him - *I recall a man so humble despite his success, a man of permanent good humour, a man of incredible fortitude.*

A publisher wrote - *He restored my faith in human nature every time I talked to him.*

From a lifelong colleague - *I don't think I have ever thought of Colin without a pervading sense of gladness.*

And from a fellow teacher in the 1950s - *It was a great experience being on the same staff as Colin. He enlivened the staffroom with many of his stories. He was so well organised and hardworking and so tactful, patient and helpful. And his students counted them very lucky to have been taught by him. I must admit that I was very glad some of them chose to put a snake in his case one day rather than in mine. Apparently he just quietly closed the case and borrowed a book for the lesson.*

For all Dad's gentleness he also had strength. He related well with people of all ages but also found joy in solitude. He was assertive. 'I'm sorry but it's a bad contract,' he wrote to someone who had submitted one for his consideration. He refused to

budge on the title of Sun on the Stubble or the length of Storm Boy.

A friend once said about him and to him - *Good teachers are not rare. Your talent as a teacher was of a different order. You could engage the interest of anybody – tots, kids, teenagers, lecture-weary students, educated adults, and of colleagues like me.*

A letter written to the Adelaide Advertiser in September 2006 elaborated on his ability to relate with the very young - *About 25 years ago, my late wife was teaching at a school that Colin Thiele visited. She was enchanted to see him sit and listen, intently, to a child telling him the story of a film she had seen called Storm Boy. Colin asked questions about the film as if the tale was new to him ... lovely.*

Pain was an integral part of Dad's entire adult life and he faced it with fortitude. He had rheumatoid arthritis as his parents had had, a condition that affects the joints in particular. He didn't complain much but it could be seen in his misshapen hands, fingers and feet and in his

everyday actions – the way he balanced his coffee cup on his palm ... the way he held a biro ... the way he balanced his baby grandchildren awkwardly across his elbows ... his hobbling walk.

He had great tolerance for pain. Four years before he died my aunt noticed a nasty sore on the sole of one of his feet. It was discovered that he had ulceration through to the bone and he had an arterial bypass operation. He later said, 'I knew it had been hurting a lot but I thought it was just the arthritis playing up again.'

On another occasion he said over the phone, 'My arm's sore. I must have done something to it when I rolled over in bed the other night.'

'Are you going to see the doctor?' I asked.

'If it's still hurting in a month I probably will,' he answered.

A few days later he had surgery. One of his seven artificial joints, an elbow, had moved a couple of centimetres out of alignment.

When asked once by a reporter to name his special virtue and his special vice, Dad gave the same answer for each, 'rigid punctuality'.



Walter McVitty

Dad always needed to know the time. When planning for an outing he would check the street directory earlier in the day, sketch a map if necessary and let us know when we would need to leave. For a year or two he tried setting the clock five minutes ahead of time but because we mentally deducted those five minutes whenever we looked at the clock, this strategy was unsuccessful. In the seventies and eighties when Mum and Dad visited my family at Victor Harbor on Saturdays, we would look out of the window at exactly noon and see their car pulling quietly into the driveway.

Dad was a busy man - a leader in his workplace, invited to many functions, asked to work on many projects and a prolific writer - yet he lived life in an unhurried manner. He was tidy, organised and disciplined. He received letters constantly and in large numbers, and he answered most of them within two or three days.

I remember when he was in U.S.A. on his Fulbright and he wanted a paper from his filing cabinet, wrote one of his former colleagues to Mum, and you rang me, relaying his exact instructions as to where it was, and of course I found it immediately.

Dad's fascination for language, its subtleties and its complexities was always within him. His mother said that he set off for school at the age of four and a half speaking only German and returned that day speaking entirely in English. At sixteen he met university entrance qualifications by learning four years of high school Latin in a few months. Throughout his life he could quote lengthy passages from literature.

I have treasured memories of Dad's more colourful, and occasionally politically incorrect, sayings:

When we were running late - 'Come on, we won't get to see the fat woman.' This was borrowed from the days when travelling freak shows had been popular.

When we went for family drives - 'Let's stop and get a Marilyn Monroe' - one of those old-fashioned side-by-side double-header ice-creams.

When he was seventy-five years old - 'Janne, I'm five years past my use-by date.'

One borrowed from Somerset Maugham - 'Only a mediocre writer is always at his best.'

Annotations he made to his rainfall records at Dayboro in Queensland - 'piddling little showers' ... 'another useless dribble' ... 'ferocious storms' ... 'tanks gushing over' ... 'a miserable total' ... 'whole communities out of water'

Dad loved to yarn and tell stories and dinner was all the richer for the

lengthy conversations that followed. *What a wonderful conversation we had at our meal*, wrote a friend from the 1950s. *Colin led the way with his stories of life and people on Eyre Peninsula. We were there with him.*

A story that was retold about his days as a teachers college principal was when Dad had become concerned about a boy who was *walking around the college with a large book titled How to Hug, until he realised it was only Volume 13 of the Encyclopaedia Britannica.*

And a young neighbour from the 1980s remembered *rushing into his study at Wattle Park after mowing the lawn to listen to the stories that would flow forth.*

I was fond of Dad's war story about the young Tiwi islander who he'd discovered watching wide-eyed while he was washing his false teeth. He called the boy over and put on a bit of a performance, replacing his teeth and taking them out again a few times. Minutes later the boy returned with friends and beckoned to Dad to repeat the trick for them.

Another story was about when he and a friend who studied anthropology were invited by the islanders to watch some ceremonial dancing. Part way through the display it was explained that they were about to see a very special dance being performed for its first time. During the dance the friend whispered, 'You know what you're watching don't you? They're reenacting the bombing of Darwin.'

Dad was my personal encyclopaedia. His knowledge of Australian history and geography and Australian and English literature was vast but he could chat at length about a variety of subjects: the culture and history of the Kurds, for example ... the writing of Virgil ... Shackleton's leadership in the Antarctic On family driving holidays, he would stop occasionally, perhaps to explain the Snowy Mountains Scheme or to show us where an explorer had walked.

A few hours after his heart valve operation, having first praised medical technology for allowing him to attend to his toileting needs without even leaving his bed, he

talked at length about Macbeth. Our niece had a school assignment that focused on feminism and he believed that this distracted from the play's essence and richness.

In August 2006, when Dad's artificial mitral valve was failing and he'd known for a month or two that he was dying, I sat with him in the spot he liked under the shed verandah and he talked for forty minutes or so about the history of the Palestinian people.

Three weeks later I had the privilege of sitting beside him when he died. Soon afterwards I rang my husband, who rang our children. Our daughter, a teacher, took the call and then called her Year 1 class around her.

She said - 'The reason I'm crying is because I've just found out my grandpa has died.'

'Oh no! Not Colin!' said a five year old girl.

'I don't understand why you're crying,' said a boy.

'When someone you love dies it's very sad,' explained our daughter.

'But, **he's** not sad,' said the child.

'He's probably eating chocolate with Jesus now.'



Later one of his illustrators wrote to Mum - *I could hear, when we last spoke on the telephone that he was sounding fragile, yet he still made me laugh and laugh.*

My last words come from a reader -

It surprises me that I have shed so many tears for the loss of one I didn't really know personally - and yet his gift is that I feel I did. How much more the grieving - and joy - of you who shared his life and heart.

“Birds like Mr. Percival do not really die.”

Margaret Carmody

Paper presented at Lu Rees Archives: Colin Thiele Festival. Colin Thiele His Work and Legacy, Ann Harding Conference Centre, University of Canberra, 2 June 2015.¹



“People seldom saw Hide-Away or Storm Boy. Now and then they sailed up the Coorong in their little boat, past the strange wild inlet of the Murray mouth, past the islands and the reedy fringes of the freshwater shore, past the pelicans and ibises and tall white cranes, to the little town with a name like a waterbird’s cry – Goolwa!”¹

In *Storm Boy* we are presented with the tale of a boy, Storm Boy and his father, Hide-Away who live in a shack on the Coorong in the South East of South Australia near the

mouth of the Murray. The Coorong is a long lagoon full of fish and birdlife with a sandbar that separates and protects it from the relentless crashing seas of the Southern Ocean. Storm Boy does not go to school. He spends his days in much the same way as Aboriginal children living in

the Coorong before the advent of Europeans. His father is a fisherman and their life is a peaceful relaxed and non-materialistic one - totally in harmony with the environment. Storm Boy has a pet pelican Mr. Percival.

Fingerbone is an old Aboriginal who is the last of the Ngarrindjeri people, who originally occupied the

¹ 2015a. *Colin Thiele: his work and legacy* [Online]. Canberra ACT: University of Canberra. Available: <http://www.canberra.edu.au/lurees/news-events>.

Coorong.² He lives close to Storm Boy and Hide-Away and is Storm Boy's companion and tutor during the long days when Hide-Away is out in his boat fishing. Fingerbone teaches Storm Boy to love and respect the environment. When shooters come into the Coorong there are many issues poignantly raised.³

When people break the rules they suffer. Nature is wonderful. At the same time it is unpredictable and harsh, unforgiving and destructive.

The Coorong

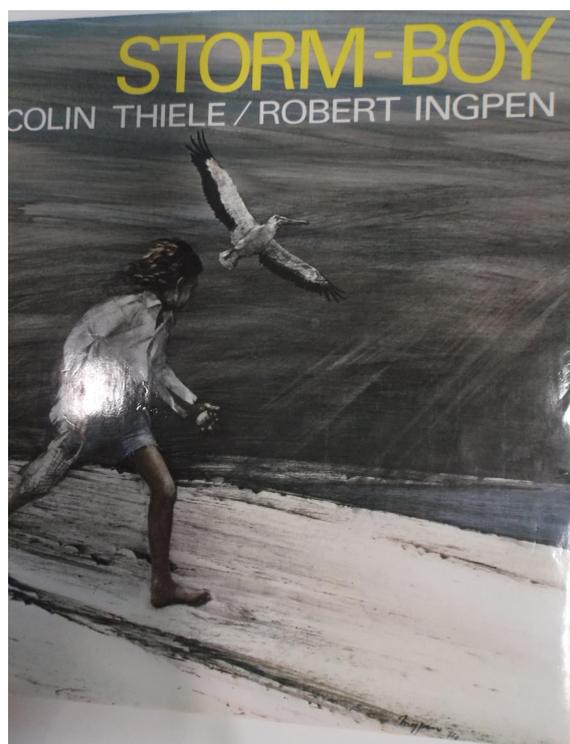
Storm Boy was not the first book set in the Coorong. Simpson Newland's books *Paving the way* 1893 and *A band of pioneers* 1919 are descriptions of the European settlement of the Coorong and nearby Encounter Bay.⁴ They include commentary about the

² ANGAS, G. F. 1844b. South Australia Illustrated. Adelaide SA. 2015b. *Indigenous Ngarrindjeri culture* [Online]. Norwood SA: Murray River Tourism Available: <http://www.coorongcountry.com.au/html/indigenous-culture.html>.

³ THIELE, C. M. 2002. *Storm Boy*, Frenchs Forest NSW, New Holland Publishers. p. 51

⁴ JENKIN, G. K. 1988. Newland, Simpson (1835 - 1925. *Australian dictionary of biography*. Melbourne VIC: MUP. NEWLAND, S. 1912. *Paving the way: a romance of the Australian bush*, London, Gay & Handcock.

Aboriginal people which did not make Newland popular. Newland wrote of the "eternal roar" of the sea. About the mouth of Murray he spoke of "the terrors of the conflicting waters" and about Encounter Bay, he described the "stormy waters of that tempestuous bay".⁵



Thiele's Coorong in the late 1950s was a remote place.

Communications: there were none. There were no telephones, no radio or television, no newspapers, no postal deliveries. There are some remarkable photographs of the Coorong taken from the water in the late 1950s; however, no camera in

⁵ NEWLAND, S. 1919. *A band of pioneers: Old-time memories*, Adelaide SA, G. Hassell & Son.

the 1950s could possibly capture it as Thiele did with words.

A few Aboriginals still lived in the Coorong in the 1950s. It is a long distance by water to Goolwa. The mouth of the Murray must be crossed where there are typically enormous waves, demonstrating the energy in the sea and then quiet: it is dangerous and unpredictable.

Snakes were everywhere in the sandhills of the Coorong and on the islands in the 1950s. There were



some dairy farms on Hindmarsh Island, but there was no farming in the salty Coorong.⁶ There was just

sandhills and a stretch of water with the sea beyond. To most people it was an unproductive, uninspiring landscape. But, it is Colin Thiele's imagination that makes the Coorong inspirational.

*"After a Big Blow ... in places the sand would be rucked and puckered into hard smooth ripples like scales. Storm Boy liked to scuff them with his bare soles as he walked or balance on their cool curves with the balls of his feet."*⁷

Storm Boy has a sensual, tactile appreciation of nature. He spends his days in the vast Coorong environment barefoot and dressed in shabby old clothes: "most of the time he wore nothing but shorts, a shirt and a battered old Tom Sawyer hat". And in winter, in his father's old coats, he was "snug as a penguin in a burrow".⁸ By referencing a previous work, Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*, we can see that Colin Thiele's approach is at times post-

⁶ PAYNE, R. 2014. *Isotopic analysis links Coorong salinity to water regime* [Online]. Perth WA: Scitech. Available: <http://sciencewa.net.au/topics/fisheries-a-water/item/2952-isotopic-analysis-links-coorong-salinity-to-water-regime/2952->

isotopic-analysis-links-coorong-salinity-to-water-regime.

⁷ THIELE, C. M. 2002. *Storm Boy*, Frenchs Forest NSW, New Holland Publishers. Pp. 14-15

⁸ Ibid. P. 15

modernist.⁹ The world for Hide-Away has fallen apart and he avoids the modern consumer culture.

Thiele essentials

The essentials of Colin Thiele's children's books are: remote, unattractive locations; the end of childhood for the protagonist; his complex, beautiful, unforgettable and original language and the values he imbues into his stories.

"A terrible ruin of white water and spray".¹⁰

Colin Thiele brought to life places we do not value or see much. He depicted childhood in the Barossa before it was a fashionable winegrowing district.¹¹ He wrote

⁹ TWAIN, M. 2006. *The adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Project Gutenberg, KLAGES, M. n.d. *Postmodernism* [Online]. Boulder: University of Colorado. Available: <http://www.bdavetian.com/Postmodernism.html>.

¹⁰ THIELE, C. M. 2002. *Storm Boy*, Frenchs Forest NSW, New Holland Publishers. P. 6

¹¹ THIELE C.M. & LENNOX J. 1996. *Sun on the stubble*, Montville, Qld, Walter McVitty

about the Coorong with its dangerous waters, many shipwrecks, swampy environment. He told tales about Port Lincoln, that remote town with its dangerous deep sea



International Children's Book Day 1978. Artwork based of the film 'Storm Boy' starring Greg Rowe by Robert Ingpen.

fishing industry and its horrible tuna processing plant.¹² This was not the Australia that the Queen saw on her Australian visit in February – March 1953.¹³

The 1950s was a time of examination of the Australian way of life. Ward's *Australian legend* 1958 argues for the equality of bush life.¹⁴ This is the real

Australia depicted in popular books such as *The Australians* by

Books, THIELE C.M. & HALDANE R. 1974. *Blue Fin*, New York, Harper & Row, THIELE, C. M. 1973. *Fire in the stone*, Adelaide SA, Rigby. THIELE, C. M. 1982. *The undercover secret*, Adelaide SA, Rigby, THIELE, C. M. 2002. *Storm Boy*, Frenchs Forest NSW, New Holland Publishers.

¹² THIELE C.M. & HALDANE R. 1974. *Blue Fin*, New York, Harper & Row.

¹³ CONNORS, J. 2015. *Royal visits to Australia*, Canberra ACT, National Library of Australia.

¹⁴ WARD, R. 1958. *The Australian legend*, Melbourne, VIC, Oxford University Press, ALDER, B. 2008. The Australian legend fifty years on. *Quadrant*, September 1 2008.

Goodman.¹⁵ Like Henry Lawson, Colin Thiele has expanded the narrative to include people and places not usually written about.¹⁶

Childhood

“Everywhere there were crisscrossing wakes of ripples and waves and splashes. Storm Boy felt the excitement and wonder of it; he often sat on the shore all day with his knees up and his chin cupped in his hands.”

17

In *Storm Boy*, we can see Colin Thiele’s particular view of childhood. The child has: freedom in natural settings; a tutor in the Rousseau tradition; duties and responsibilities; is part of a family, often representing the diversity of families in our community; and finally the child is acutely aware of natural beauty.

Colin Thiele poses the questions: “how does Storm Boy learn if there is no school? What does he know?” When we look closely at *Storm Boy*, we can ascertain significant

influences on Colin Thiele’s attitudes to education. Vygotsky asserted that reasoning emerges through practical activity in the social environment.¹⁸ He emphasized the role of play in a child’s development and the importance of imagination in learning. If we consider Piaget’s stages, we can discern that Storm Boy is at the concrete operational stage where he thinks logically, is no longer egocentric, is aware of logic and has classification skills.¹⁹ Storm Boy progressively builds understanding by acting on and reflecting on his previous knowledge for instance the episode with the snake. Storm Boy builds his learning and his learning is supported by instructors such as his father who teaches him how to train Mr. Percival to take a line out to sea. Generally Colin Thiele challenges Piaget’s theory of a hierarchy of learning. Storm Boy is unaffected by organized education or religion. He constructs his own moral world view and forms his ideas of right and

¹⁵ GOODMAN, R. B. 1966. *The Australians*, Adelaide SA, Rigby, WARD, R. 1958. *The Australian legend*, Melbourne, VIC, Oxford University Press.

¹⁶ LAWSON, H. 2001. *Henry Lawson: selected stories*, Sydney, NSW, A & R Classics.

¹⁷ THIELE, C. M. 2002. *Storm Boy*, Frenchs Forest NSW, New Holland Publishers. P.17

¹⁸ GALLAGER, C. 1999. *Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky* [Online]. Available: <http://www.muskingum.edu/>.

¹⁹ EDWARDS, L., HOPGOOD, J., ROSENBERG, K. & RUSH, K. 2000. *Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development* [Online]. Available: <http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/education/DLiT/2000/Piaget/stages.htm>.

wrong based on his observations of the world.

Storm Boy owes much to Rousseau's *Emile* which was about the relationship of the individual and society, that is, how the individual can retain their innate human goodness while being part of a corrupt society.²⁰ But, *Storm Boy* is not in society. Like Rousseau's adolescent, *Storm Boy* has empathy and sympathy for the shipwrecked sailors, who like many before them have come to grief in the rough waters of the Southern Ocean.²¹ Like *Emile*, *Storm Boy* has the ability to draw inferences from his senses. And just like Rousseau's boy with the kite, the Pelican flies with the string.²²

"It was the year of the great storm."

23

*"We must help them. They will be drowned'."*²⁴

Storm Boy is about the end of childhood. It has hard themes: death, loss of parent, loneliness.²⁵ It features a catastrophe where the child, *Storm Boy* must assume an adult role when he buries Mr. Percival.²⁶ After that, life is never the same again. Colin Thiele holds that children are and ought to be interested in financial, mechanical, industrial and environmental issues, mental health, politics, law. In Thiele's view the definition of literacy includes political and financial issues. In *Storm Boy*, we are presented with the reality of attending school in a remote location, with a child helping his father by digging up cockle shells to sell.²⁷ *Storm Boy's* childhood includes grief, bereavement and loss: first of his mother, then his pet pelican, Mr. Percival. In this tale, Colin Thiele has captured that significant moment when a child becomes an adolescent.

²⁰ ROUSSEAU, J. J. 1979. *Emile: or, On education* New York, Basic Books.

²¹ 1961. Tug Moree being salvaged 11 August 1961: Coorong. Adelaide SA: News Ltd.

²² THIELE, C. M. 2002. *Storm Boy*, Frenchs Forest NSW, New Holland Publishers. P. 44

²³ Ibid. p. 39

²⁴ Ibid. p. 42

²⁵ Ibid. pp. 55, 57

²⁶ Ibid. p. 58

²⁷ Ibid. p. 13

Seen better days

*“Hide-Away tied wires to the walls and weighed down the roof with driftwood and stones ... he spread extra clothing on the bunks”.*²⁸

Storm Boy and his father are poor. Their life style is like that of early whalers who had “seen better days” of whom Newland said “the silence that characterised these men living clings to them dead”.²⁹

In Hide-Away Tom there are implications of mental health problems, of retreat, of escape from the catastrophe of his wife’s death. The missing element is women. There are no women in *Storm Boy*. In the early days, of life on the Coorong and at Encounter Bay, it was the mothers who taught the children, as described by Newland.³⁰

There is a long tradition of recreational use of Coorong for motor car racing, fishing and shooting.³¹ But it has always been a

place to escape to: it is remote, lonely and harsh.³²

Australian language

*“Again and again through the night he slipped out of bed and tiptoed across the dirt floor to the fireplace to make sure the baby pelican was warm enough”.*³³

*“A thin stream of black glass barred with red hot coals”.*³⁴

*“A snippery - snappery, snickery - snackery sort of sound like dry reeds crackling”.*³⁵

Colin Thiele’s language is Australian, he is using Australian English. His descriptions are highly technical and scientifically accurate, such as his description of teaching Mr. Percival to catch a ball.³⁶ There is powerful landscape description, accurate setting, and precise plot. The themes, moods and meanings are conveyed by literary elements: there were neither photographs nor illustrations in the original short

²⁸ Ibid. p. 39

²⁹ NEWLAND, S. 1919. *A band of pioneers: Old-time memories*, Adelaide SA, G. Hassell & Son. P. 24

³⁰ Ibid. p. 24

³¹ 1930. COORONG: The Pipe Clay Track on the Coorong beach, where long distance record races were held in the 1930s. Adelaide SA: State Library of South Australia.

³² c. 1900. Fisherman's camp, Coorong. Adelaide SA: State Library of South Australia.

³³ THIELE, C. M. 2002. *Storm Boy*, Frenchs Forest NSW, New Holland Publishers. P. 22

³⁴ Ibid. p. 10

³⁵ Ibid. p. 23

³⁶ Ibid. pp. 35-36

story in the collection *Rim of the morning*.³⁷

Storm Boy has powerful characterization with character development and change. This is quite unlike the meagre chars of Blyton or Mary Grant Bruce.³⁸ We have a poignant sense of the feelings of Storm Boy as he sits by the fire with the injured Mr. Percival:

*“All day long Storm Boy held Mr. Percival in his arms. In front of the rough iron stove where long ago he had first nursed the little bruised pelican into life, he now sat motionless and silent.”*³⁹

Colin Thiele captures the scene with his use of poetic imagery when he describes the sun rise as “like a blazing penny”.⁴⁰

The pelican is a bird with deep Christian meaning.⁴¹ Thiele uses it to symbolize self-sacrifice and

nurturing, as in the Psalm, “I am like a pelican of the wilderness” in *Storm Boy* and in other writing such as *Pannikin and Pinta*.⁴² The Pelican is regarded traditionally as a Christ figure because it vulns itself, that is, it pecks at its chest to provide blood to nourish its young. Thus when Mr. Percival is injured and has a chest wound, he becomes a Christ figure of self-sacrifice as he died trying to protect other birds, with “Blood moistening his white chest feathers”.⁴³

Indigenous Australia

Fingerbone is a complex character, a friend to Hide-Away, who plays the role of a tutor for Storm Boy in the tradition of Rousseau.⁴⁴

“He could read all the strange writing on the sandhills and beaches – the scribbly stories made by beetles and mice and bandicoots and anteaters and crabs and birds’ toes and mysterious sliding bellies in the

³⁷ THIELE, C. M. 1966. *The rim of the morning: six stories*, Adelaide, Rigby.

³⁸ BLYTON, E. 1980. *Five on Kirrin Island again*, London, Knox Hodder and Stoughton. BRUCE, M. G. & MACFARLANE, J. 1910. *A little bush maid*, London, Ward, Lock & Co.

³⁹ THIELE, C. M. 2002. *Storm Boy*, Frenchs Forest NSW, New Holland Publishers. P. 55

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 53

⁴¹ BRAIDWOOD, E. 2007. *The medieval pelican* [Online]. Available: <http://donna.hrynkiw.net/sca/pelican/>.

⁴² 2015c. Psalms Chapter 102. *The official King James Bible online*. THIELE, C. M. & P. GOULDTHORPE (ILLUSTRATOR.) 2000. *Pannikin & Pinta*, Port Melbourne, VIC, Lothian Books.

⁴³ THIELE, C. M. 2002. *Storm Boy*, Frenchs Forest NSW, New Holland Publishers. P. 54

⁴⁴ ROUSSEAU, J. J. 1979. *Emile: or, On education* New York, Basic Books.

night. Before long Storm Boy had learnt enough to fill 100 books".⁴⁵ Writing about Indigenous Australians, Colin Thiele has a particular view of Indigenous history both mythical and real which is represented in the character of Fingerbone Bill.

"there are certain histories we cannot opt out of here and now, for instance, the history of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians".⁴⁶

The values embedded in Storm Boy make it a very special tale.⁴⁷ The first value is care and compassion for self and others. Then there is the value of a fair go, of mateship that is, "a sense of shared experience, mutual respect and unconditional assistance".⁴⁸ This means that we

⁴⁵ THIELE, C. M. 2002. *Storm Boy*, Frenchs Forest NSW, New Holland Publishers. P. 9
⁴⁶ CARTER, D. 1999. Good readers and good citizens: literature, media and the nation. *Australian Literary Studies*, 19, 136-151.

⁴⁷ DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION SCIENCE AND TRAINING. 2005. *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* [Online]. Canberra ACT. Available: http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/_resources/framework_pdf_version_for_the_web.pdf.

⁴⁸ AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT. 2015. *Mateship diggers and wartime* [Online]. Canberra ACT: Australian Government. Available: [should protect the common good and treat people fairly. Storm Boy has integrity; he acts with moral and ethical principles. In Storm Boy and his father, we have fine examples of honesty and trustworthiness, sincerity, truthfulness. Another value that underpins this tale is understanding, tolerance and inclusion. Finally, there is a strong message of respect for the environment: "All living creatures were his friends".⁴⁹](http://www.australia.gov.au/about-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

This leads to the question of why is *Storm Boy* a classic? It is a classic because it deals with the great themes that face us all. It provides a commentary on life. It shows us what it is to be a good citizen. It examines what constitutes education and it provides an Indigenous view of landscape, education, friendship. Moreover, Colin Thiele uses creative language which is original, evocative, descriptive and analytical. It is a classic because it is good literature about the human condition, beautifully written. This is Colin

[australia/australian-story/mateship-diggers-and-wartime](http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/mateship-diggers-and-wartime).

⁴⁹ THIELE, C. M. 2002. *Storm Boy*, Frenchs Forest NSW, New Holland Publishers. P. 12

Thiele's unforgettable description of the boat coming home after Storm Boy and his father have left the three pelicans in the park.

"The sun was flinging a million golden mirrors in a lane across the water. It glowed on the bare patches of the sandhills and lit up the bushes and tussocks till every stem and twig shone with rosy fire. The little boat came gliding into shore through the chuckle of the ripples".⁵⁰

Colin Thiele is a major figure in the movement to define what it is to be Australian. In his writing there is the idea that Australia is something worth thinking about in itself. He is building the Australian identity around the people and what they do. He embraces the Australianess of the people he writes about. Colin Thiele was ahead of the movement in the early 1970s, the Whitlam era. It is not surprising that the movie *Storm Boy* was funded by a Government grant.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 30

⁵¹ 2015d. *Whitlam institute* [Online]. Penrith NSW: University of Western Sydney. Available:

Ordinary lives

More than anything else, Colin Thiele writes about the ordinariness of people's lives. In *Storm Boy* we can see echoes of the themes and concerns of great Australian writers and artists. The bush is revered as a source of national ideals by Lawson moreover Australian self-identity is defined by Lawson in characters who struggle in the bush.⁵² The characters of the bush are imbued with particular qualities: they are resourceful, independent in their outdoor life and they only trust their mates.⁵³ Lost children are a recurring theme in Australian

literature and art which has become a myth: McCubbin's

painting *Lost* 1886 and Strutt's painting *The little Wanderers* 1865 are part of our national consciousness.⁵⁴ But while *Storm Boy* is isolated, he is not lost. Writers

http://www.whitlam.org/gough_whitlam/achievements/environmentcultureheritage.

⁵² LAWSON, H. 2001. *Henry Lawson: selected stories*, Sydney, NSW, A & R Classics.

⁵³ CLARK, M. 1981. *A short history of Australia*, South Melbourne VIC, Macmillan.

⁵⁴ MUSEUM OF VICTORIA. 2015. *Lost in the bush* [Online]. Melbourne VIC: Museum Victoria. Available:

<http://museumvictoria.com.au/forest/humans/bush.html>, STRUTT, W. 1865. *The little wanderers*.

and artists have used the bush for inspiration hence Heysen's capturing of the light, colour and mood of the Australian bush: this is a clear expression of Australian identity.⁵⁵ In each case, in Colin Thiele's books, the character who is adventurous, who is able to range freely, who is free at some time has to come to terms with our society, with a society that holds that a sense of responsibility is all important, that people must work hard to earn their living and justify their existence. This view of our society is based on the Calvinistic work ethic which held that hard work was the means to personal salvation. In each of Colin Thiele's books, this concept is closely examined and found to be flawed. *Hide-Away* and *Storm Boy* have no money and very few possessions, yet they are good people and we admire them a lot. There are four reasons to believe in Colin Thiele. First, his imagination brings uninspiring landscapes to life. Next, his language captures the feelings of the moment. Then in his

⁵⁵ ART GALLERY NSW. 2015. *Works of Hans Heysen* [Online]. Sydney NSW: Art Gallery NSW. Available: http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/?artist_id=heysen-hans.

writing, Indigenous People are valued for their knowledge and role in the history of the environment. And finally, his books provide opposition to prevailing materialism: they are stories about ordinary people who are good people. We need to promote his books. We need to keep his legacy alive. Who else will so effectively and enduringly champion those causes?

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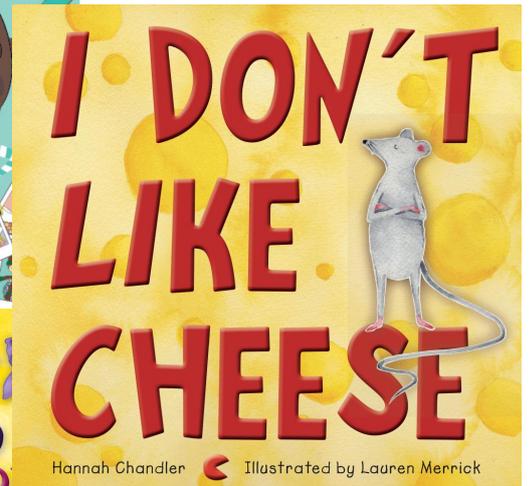
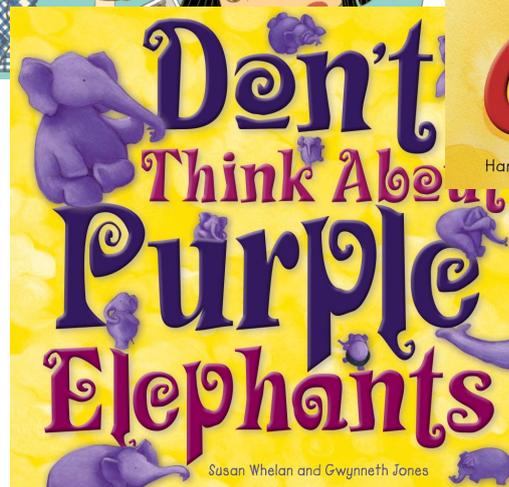
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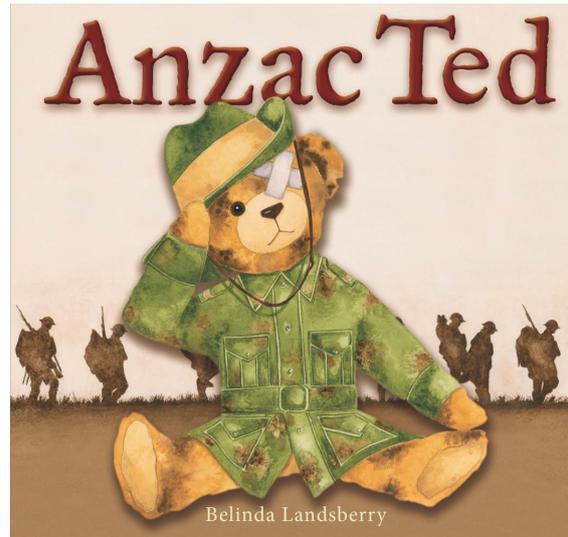


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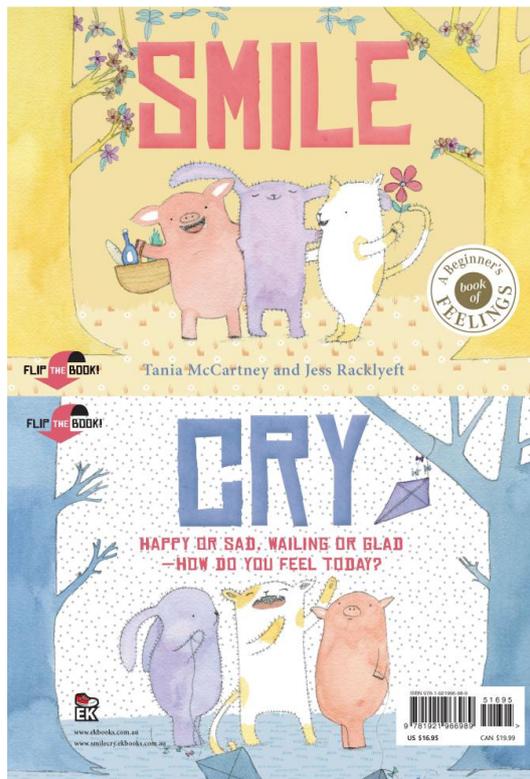
just involve an elephant or two! Preschools, schools and psychologists — as well as parents — have embraced this title, using it to help ease kids' concerns about transitioning to 'big' school or going on their first camp, or simply as a way of creating a less stressful bedtime routine.

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reminds us that appearances can be deceiving — while the battered old bear might not attract a single vote at the school's Toy Show, he has a powerful and moving legacy to bestow.

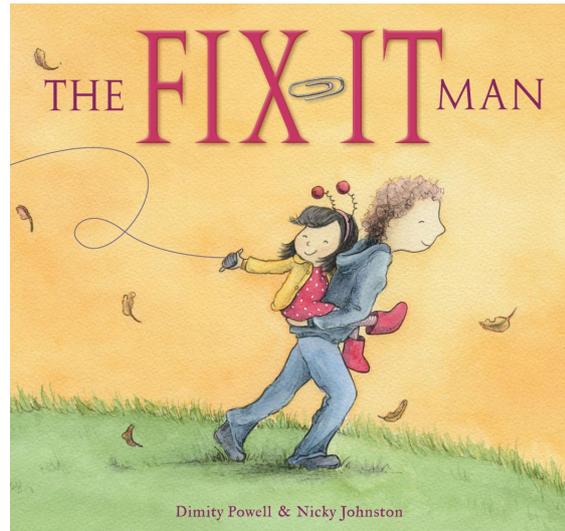
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