



**A few words at the end of year celebration of
the National Centre for Australian Children's Literature.
John Faulks 14 November 2018**

One of the quintessential things about being human is the telling of stories. We are all storytellers. When we come back from seeing someone or experiencing some event or from looking at a movie, all of us like to tell others about what happened, how it happened, how exciting – or boring – or wonderful it was.

I guess bees go back to their hives and in some way communicate where all good pollen is. Dogs wee on trees to say: "I was here." But no other animal actually likes to spend so much time as we do informing another animal about what has happened.

This is at least in part because we learned from a very young age about the wonder of telling stories. Adults like to tell children stories: stories about when they (the adults) were young. Sometimes they are scary stories: and sometimes they are funny stories. It seems to be part of our DNA that we want to share experiences – real and sometimes not, with other human beings.

That is why children's books are so important. What is the first book you can remember? There is always **one** book that we remember; one story we remember. How many of you for example remember this?

"When Toad found himself immured in a dank and noisome dungeon, and knew that all the grim darkness of a medieval fortress lay between him and the outer world of sunshine and well-metalled high roads where he had lately been so happy, disporting himself as if he had bought up every road in England, he flung himself at full length on the floor and shed bitter tears and abandoned himself too dark despair. "This is the end everything" (he said),"at least it is the end of the career of Toad, which is the same thing; the popular and handsome Toad, the rich and hospitable Toad, the Toad so free and careless and debonair! How can I hope to be ever said that large again" (he said)," who have been imprisoned so justly for stealing so handsome a motorcar in such an audacious manner, and for such lurid and imaginative cheek, bestowed upon such a number of fat, red-faced policeman!"(Here his sobs choked him.)"Stupid animal that I was "(he said),"now I must languish in this dungeon, till people who are proud to say they knew me have forgotten the very name of Toad!

Don't you want to hear what happened next?

The National Centre for Australian Children's Literature Inc. began this life as the Lu Rees Archive. Lu loved children's books and determined to make a collection of them. That collection has now grown to be 42,000 books, multiple artworks, working papers and drawings and a whole wonderful resource for students and children – young and old.

From a start as what amounted to a very specialised library collection we have (and by "we" I mean every person in this room) adopted a vision – *"a vision splendid on the sunlit plains extended"* to provide a hub, a centre, a place to which children and their parents and families could come to read, to see, to laugh, and cry, to study, to learn, and most of all, **to tell stories**. And when people have come to the Centre they will go home and tell the **story** of going to the Centre. We would like the Centre to be in a place of national prominence as befits a temple of learning of national proportions for the whole of the nation.

Many of you will have seen the drawings that John Wardle has done for our building which, if we are able to convert them into reality, will be a monument not to us, because we are just the instruments, but to the children of Australia.

You will not have to put up with me again next year because I have told the Board that I will resign as chair as from the end of January next year.

The board has agreed to appoint Craig Sloan who is with you today and whom I urge you to meet. He will be your new Chair.

We have this year had 41 volunteers who have done 7,256 hours of work providing the equivalent of four full-time employed staff members. They had catalogued. They have cleaned. They have preserved. They have stacked and unstacked. They have worked in extraordinary ways to make this collection live and be alive.

It is always dangerous to single out anyone, but I would particularly like to thank Max Brown whose extraordinary work on our illustrations and in their conversion to a form that makes them more searchable online is beyond description.

Lynn Fletcher our indomitable secretary with Brenda McConchie and Trish Milne have built us the most extraordinary website. We determined earlier this year that this should be one of our priorities – and in fact a very high priority – because it made the collection, at least, vicariously, or perhaps electronically, available to everyone. If you have not visited the website, I urge you to do so. It is beautiful, and it is effective and it is a great tool for creating what we need to do.

Thank you to all the volunteers their work but more for the love and enthusiasm without which the work would never have been carried out.

Possibly a greatest volunteer is Dr Belle Alderman. If you were to get down on the floor now and put your ear to the floor you would hear a

steady heartbeat. That is the heartbeat of the National Centre for Australian Children's Literature and it beats at least, synchronously, with Belle's heart. I think it probably is Belle's heart.

In the time that I have been on the Board it has given me great pleasure to work with people whose dedication to the wonderful cause of Australian children's literature knows no bounds. Egos are surprisingly missing, but enthusiasm, intelligence, resilience, and ingenuity are the stock in trade of the members of your board.

This reminds me that we are also saying goodbye to Nick Klomp. Nick has been the University's representative on our Board for some time and his contribution has been intelligent, thoughtful and responsive. If we were able to clone him, I want to keep at least one clone of him on the Board forever.

We are meeting today in the library of the University of Canberra. There are some members of the library staff here today. Without their assistance and unflinching generosity, we could never survive. Thank you very much.

Our association with University has persisted for over 40 years and while we are the sort of old relative that came to stay and never left, it has been a happy and mutually rewarding partnership now for some time. The contributions in kind from UC are worth more than \$100,000 a year. There's a partner for you!

While it will not be a matter within my control, for my part, I would like to think that there will always be place at the table and by our side for the University – our wonderful partner.

To all of you here I wish you the very best for Christmas and New Year.

2019 will be an exceptional year to the Centre not the least because of our exciting joint project with the National Library of Australia. This will bring to the forefront of the imagination of Australians the

importance and the quality of Australian children's literature and I hope it will create for us and for the authors, illustrators and other publishers associated with children's books, the dawning of an era of recognition not for ourselves but for the wonderful business of telling stories – and in particular telling stories to children.