



A Place for Australian Stories for Young People

**By The Board of the National Centre for Australian Children's Literature Inc
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Retiring the Centre for Youth Literature

Recently the State Library of Victoria announced that it is 'retiring' the name (and existence) of a much-loved and well-known 'institution', the Centre for Youth Literature (CYL). Justine Hyde, Director of Library Services and Experiences at the State Library of Victoria, comments that the CYL is being 'retired' and programs for audiences of all ages will be brought under a single banner as part of the renewal of the Library's programs and services for its Vision 2020 redevelopment. She commented further that the CYL was a 'brand' and never a physical space.

Does this matter?

The demise of this well-known institution has generated anguish, strong comments, and a cry for action. Lili Wilkinson, now a well-established author of young adult novels, was inspired by the CYL as a teenager to establish the Inky Awards given by young adults to novels for young adults. She commented that 'It's pretty hard to see that legacy and that institutional knowledge vanish.'

Mike Shuttleworth, a Program Manager for the CYL for many years, goes further in arguing for a new organisation. He points to organisations that exist worldwide. Ireland, the Netherlands and Sweden all have agencies dedicated solely to promoting reading and their national children's literature. The Eric Carle Museum in Massachusetts and Seven Stories in Newcastle (UK) are two such successful examples alongside the eldest of these, the esteemed International Youth Library in Munich, Germany.

A dedicated 'place' for Australia?

With such a strong and rich young people's literature sector worldwide, surely it is time for Australia to have such a *place*.

Australian literature for young people is respected internationally shown by the large number of books translated into other languages and the contribution these sales make to the national economy. Australian authors' and illustrators' world-class achievements, to name a few, include Patricia Wrightson and Robert Ingpen awarded in 1986 the prestigious Han Christian Andersen Medal for their lasting contribution to children's literature worldwide. Australians Sonya Hartnett and Shaun Tan won the world's most generously funded international prize—the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. Libby Hathorn and Gregory Rogers won the British

Kate Greenway Medal for *Way Home*, as did Bob Graham for his book, *Jethro Byrd, Fairy Child*. Shaun Tan's picture book, *The Lost Thing*, received the American Academy Award for animated short film based on his book.

Although the concept of '*place*' infers a specific geographic location, today through a whole plethora of technologies we are not limited by geography and can explore, exploit and share story through immersive and virtual experiences. Such a *place* would draw from successful overseas examples in devising story experiences through multi-modes including online resources, virtual reality, apps, interactive exhibitions, play spaces, theatre, film, ballet and music. However, to achieve this there does need to be a home where collections can be managed and programs developed and offered.

What would it take to create such a *place*?

It would certainly need support from individuals and some of the numerous organisations involved in Australian literature for young people. Most importantly, such a *place* would need support from government, investors and philanthropists.

Even more significantly, we believe it would require those already working in various ways and in a range of organisations dedicated to promoting children's literature, reading and literacy to unite in the common cause. We must become politically active, all speak with a single voice and demonstrate a level of commitment until governments, investors and philanthropists do listen and act. It will take a true coalition of minds, ideas and drive.

Is there anything to build on?

It is important to acknowledge that there are many collections relating to children's literature held in a range of institutions around Australia. However, none of these institutions has the collecting and sharing of children's literature as its primary focus. Because of this they can never be that dedicated *place*.

With the National Centre for Australian Children's Literature Inc (NCACL) we do have the embryo of such a *place*. It has developed over 45 years and is now valued at over 10 million dollars. Among the collection are over 43,000 books as well manuscripts, art works and research files on 520 Australian authors and illustrators.

Students, researchers, teachers and anyone with an interest in Australian children's literature use the collection on a regular basis. Other activities include major exhibitions, hosting visits by school and university students, professional development programs for teachers and librarians, and programs for children.

An important part of the collection is the 4,400 books that have been translated into 59 other languages. Many books in the collection are not held in any other library in Australia. Publishers' archives in public institutions are rare with only five held in Australia. Of these NCACL holds two: the Omnibus Books Publishing Archive and the Walter McVitty Publishing Archive. The overall potential for research is considerable.

Australian publishers have supported the NCACL by donating their new books, many including translations, since 1981. Author collections began in the 1950s, so that large components of these are almost complete. Formed collections from donors, over many years,

have added significantly to the collection's depth and breadth. Creators give their papers, manuscripts and artwork including 62 large collections donated under the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program.

Over the years NCACL has been successful in obtaining grants that have enabled us, for example, to digitise our photograph and audio collections. Grants and other support have also enabled the NCACL to conserve, document, house, and store these resources then make the details about these collections available on the website.

In 2018, the NCACL created a public argument for a national institution for Australian children's literature. That argument was presented to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Canberra's National Institutions as submission number 17, which is available as a public document.

The argument for a national institution outlined in the submission was briefly canvassed from a business perspective:

- Australian children's literature is a major contributor to the economy through international sales.
- Arts and Education are the fastest growing sectors over the past three financial years for both jobs and export income, with the rate of increase climbing.
- Our rich children's literature and nonfiction industries are two of the keystones of our educational 'export' industry, which attracts students from overseas thus contributing to our economy.
- 'Children's literature tourism' has the potential to equal or even surpass this, as Australia's children's literature, including the film, television and theatrical productions based on it, increasingly appear on best seller lists. The *Tree House* series, *Possum Magic*, *Nim's Island* and *Diary of a Wombat*, to name just four, all appear in multi-formats and translated into over forty languages, with yearly sales of each growing overseas.

Thus NCACL has laid the groundwork as a national centre reaching across Australia and around the world. There are commonalities and synergies between the NCACL and all of the organisations Mike Shuttleworth highlighted. This is shown in the following ways. NCACL:

- serves schools, educational centres, libraries and galleries through loaning its collections locally and to such centres as the Maritime Museum in Sydney, Literature Centre in Fremantle, Geelong Regional Gallery in Victoria and the State Library of Victoria as part of its three-year travelling exhibition *Look!*
- engages collaboratively with exhibitors to achieve wide audiences, for example over 12,000 people visited the Bob Graham Retrospective exhibition in 2014 resulting from our partnership with Books Illustrated and the Canberra Museum and Gallery.
- pursues national engagement through its upcoming five-month collaborative exhibition with the National Library of Australia titled *Story Time: Australian Children's Literature* opening mid-August 2019 and running through early February 2020.
- supports cultural understanding through the International Board on Books for Young People's (IBBY) collection of 191 recent children's books in 75 languages. This collection, borrowed from Basel, Switzerland, promotes an appreciation and sharing of cultures as it travels around Australia during 2018-2019.

- promotes its resources and more widely Australian literature for youth through its active social media presence on Twitter and Facebook, its e-newsletter, its e-journal, blog profiles, features on websites, public talks, published articles, research studies and university theses.
- draws on its collection and knowledge expertise to create products such as the Cultural Diversity Database of Australian children's literature, one of only three such databases in the world.
- attracts researchers from around Australia and the world who explore and convey research of importance to the world of literature for young people.

Call to arms

Mike Shuttleworth calls for a 'politically savvy alignment of players, drawing upon research and planning, to create a centre for young people's literature.' We support his call and believe this is the time to bring together a coalition of those who wish to achieve such a place.

Let us be clear. Achieving such a *place*, including a purpose built building, with staff and government funding, is no mean feat. It would take a coalition of minds and hearts and above all a determined will to succeed. It would also need a convincing well-researched business plan and a commitment to build solid backing through the support of like-minded organisations, and funding from the Australian government, private investors and philanthropists. This is a vision worth pursuing.

References

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Centres for Youth Literature

Eric Carle Museum <https://www.carlemuseum.org>

International Youth Library <https://www.ijb.de/en/about-us.html>

National Centre for Australian Children's Literature <https://www.ncacl.org.au>

Seven Stories <https://www.sevenstories.org.uk>

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