

The National Centre for Australian Children's Literature Inc with Belle Alderman AM Joy Lawn interviews Dr Belle Alderman AM, Emeritus Professor of Children's Literature Director, National Centre for Australian Children's Literature Inc

NCACL's Vision is to be the Home of Australia's Childhood Stories

Australia's literary past, present and future are preserved in the National Centre, through the stories that touched our hearts and stirred our imaginations as children. It documents and shares the creative process and inspires the next generation of readers with research collections, exhibitions and outreach activities.

The NCACL's mission is to collect, document and preserve Australian children's books and literature. It aims to share the collection with all Australians through outreach activities. In order to reach national and international audiences, resources are available online.

The National Centre for Australian Children's Literature Inc. is an independent not-for-profit body registered with the Australian Government as a tax exempt charity that collects, preserves and shares the works of Australian children's book writers and illustrators, publishers and related organisations like IBBY Australia. Along with finished books, the National Centre also holds manuscripts, papers, artworks, ephemera, in depth material about creators and correspondence that show the creative process behind many of our nation's most beloved children's stories.



The NCACL's physical archives are based at the University of Canberra and are arguably the most wide-ranging and valuable part of the collection. What are some of its most rare or important artefacts?

We hold rare books, sometimes the only copy like the 1895 Dutch edition of **Seven Little Australians**. We also hold the unique Selby the Dog toy ephemera. From the 1970s, we have collected information about authors and illustrators. These 600+ research files document the development of Australian children's literature. How the literature has changed and developed over time is here for exploration.

What are some standout pieces by authors or illustrators?

Bob Graham is a much-loved and translated picture book creator. We hold many preliminary and final artworks for his picture books. These provide detailed insights into his creative process from the 1980s. We also hold artwork gems by Alison Lester and Leigh Hobbs. Then there's our massive collection of research material (filling a four-drawer filing cabinet) about May Gibbs' earliest work through mid-2005.

What is a particularly beautiful or surprising piece in the collection?

We are the proud home for a 1915 May Gibbs original watercolour preliminary artwork featuring her gumnut babies. Then there's an amazing tissue paper collage created by Patricia Mullins for **Crocodile Beat** and the stunning jacket cover artwork by Graeme Base for **The Eleventh Hour: A Curious Mystery**. There are too many to play 'favourites', but these three invariably mesmerise visitors.

What are some mind-boggling statistics related to the NCACL or its collections?

We began collecting translations of Australian children's books in 1979 to celebrate the International Year of the Child. These demonstrate Australia's children's stories have universal appeal. Our collection by 30 June this year includes 6,001 Australian children's books in translation in 115 languages. Knowing what translations exist and acquiring these is a challenge. We persist!

Thank you for speaking to Magpies, Belle.

What is your role at the National Centre for Australian Children's Literature Inc?

My role is to build the collection as a national treasure available to all Australians and the wider world. I guide the direction of the NCACL influenced by those in the sphere of Australian children's stories. We are designated a tax exempt charity by the Australian Government and report annually to the Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission. This enables the Centre to accept cultural gifts from authors and illustrators and also monetary gifts. Such gifts can be claimed by donors as an income tax deduction.

The National Centre for Australian Children's Literature (NCACL) has recently celebrated 50 years. What is the public perception of the NCACL?

We are seen as a 'home' for Australian stories for young people. Authors, illustrators, publishers and organisations donate their works as a record of Australian creations for youth. Our website provides access to all our collections. Internet searches feature NCACL prominently and result in queries from people from around the world.

What do you see as its greatest purpose, achievement or value?



Dr Belle Alderman in the Book Room

We aim to be a permanent home for Australian children's stories. Most importantly, we aim to share these treasures with all interested through NCACL exhibitions, loans and outreach activities for all ages. Ultimately, we aim to inspire future creatives!

Why is archiving and documenting Australian children's books and the creative process so important?

Collecting institutions like ours are important to ensure creative efforts can be showcased, shared and inspire future generations of creatives. In such a place—a home—stories can live on and ensure there are future generations of story makers. There are such institutions. Seven Stories in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and the Eric Carle Museum in Amherst, Massachusetts are just two examples. More than simply collections, these institutions and others around the world collect, create, share and inspire future generations of creatives. There is a need for such a place in Australia.

How do you physically store everything?

We store material to archival standards to increase their longevity. This means our string, tape, clips, folders and boxes are all of archival quality. The environment where our collection is stored is environmentally safe. When new material arrives we spend time, if needed, removing staples, pins, tape and other damaging material then rehouse items to archival standards. We are fortunate to have a conservation of cultural materials course on campus with staff and students who can advise and work with us.

What is the purpose of providing public digital access through the NCACL's website? How else do people know about the Centre and its work?

Our website was originally hosted by the University of Canberra. In 2018 we created our own website. This gives us greater scope for developing image galleries, databases and blogs. We can also respond quickly to new ventures.

The four databases are also essential to the core work of the Centre. They are the Cultural Diversity database, books by and / or about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, the Australian Verse Novels resource and Picture Books for Older Readers.**What database is coming next?**

Good question! We have a few ideas but we are interested to hear from people. What topic(s) would be of interest and value? We are listening! We also have other priorities such as digitisation.

What are some changes that you have seen during your time with the NCACL?

The growth and quality of amazing creations by children's authors, illustrators and publishers stands out. Another is the growth of organisations supporting developments and gaining new audiences. Here's just a few: Indigenous Literacy Foundation, Lighthouse, Australian Children's Laureate Foundation, Australian Children's Television Foundation, West-Words, Book Links, Story Box Library and the May Gibbs Fellowship. There are over 30 different Australian awards given to works for young people. Changes for us have included, in 1988, our becoming a deductible gift recipient and a tax-exempt charity eligible through the Australian government to receive donations of cultural gifts. Since then we have accepted over 70 such donations.

We created our own website in 2018 and continue to reach out to the world 24/7. Another essential development was joining social media in 2014. Our Facebook and X social media together have over 10K followers. In 2023 we launched monthly blogs profiling unique aspects about our Centre's collections and activities. We are big on communicating via our e-newsletters, e-annual reports, e-journal and blogs.

How is the NCACL funded and how are its highly qualified volunteers supported?

We are not funded by the Australian government, but we should be! We have run many campaigns to fund specific projects such as digitising our photographs and rehousing our artworks. Over June this year, we ran a campaign to raise funds to support the Centre. Our 38 volunteers (each has particular interests and works with our Centre volunteers) are scattered across Australia. A third of our volunteers work in the Centre, each with particular interests and skills.

Tell us about its collaborative (professional) partnerships (eg with CBCA or another group) and how they support each other?

We collaborate with related organisations to share resources and activities. Some examples? We document, hold and have exhibited the CBCA artwork created for their annual awards. We hold the papers of the Australian section of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), the publishers' papers of Omnibus Books and Working Title Press. We have collaborated with related professional organisations. For example, The Australian Children's Television Foundation created a television series based on Leonie Norrington's *Barrumbi Kids* novels. We created a related resource using artwork by Dee Huxley which we hold for Norrington's picture books. We loan our artwork to galleries across Australia. We have collaborated on several exhibitions with the National Library of Australia, State Library of NSW, and Canberra galleries such as the Belconnen Arts Centre (Graeme Base exhibition) and the Canberra Museum and Gallery (Bob Graham's body of work).

How does The NCACL need to change and grow?

We need a physical home, recurring funding and paid staff with particular skills and knowledge. Please note that we do greatly appreciate our volunteers.

Our goals now are to:

- Grow, enhance and share our collections more widely.
- Design and deliver programs.
- Generate income to survive and thrive.
- Acquire philanthropic support.
- Publicise our collections, and continue collaborations with related organisations.

We do aim for a home. We could then more easily share the riches of Australian stories for young people. We would pursue a collective of related organisations, share ideas and resources. What a bonanza for Australia and the world!

Who is working on this, what is proposed and what timeframe is mooted?

We are governed by a Board that is conscious of these needs. Visitors to the Centre invariably leave us with a list of often exhilarating ideas. We have an external advisory group who are conjuring up amazing ideas. We are currently talking with the University of Canberra to consider what we might do together, reach further and travel in new directions.

What help is needed? What do you need from groups and individuals in our children's book community?

We are likely to take a new direction, but that's still being formulated. We will let everyone know anon our forward plans via our Facebook page and newsletter. We may be asking for your help.

What do you see as the legacy of the NCACL?

We are collecting and documenting the development of Australian stories for young people. We are supporting and promoting future creatives, the publishing industry, booksellers and all those involved in Australian children's literature. At this point in time our collections are growing through generous donations. Our collection is documented and easily identified through our website—not just books in English and 115 other languages, but also artworks, manuscripts, ephemera and emerging formats that capture the world of Australian literature for youth. Knowing where, how, and in what shape stories have emerged and where stories might go and in what form in the future is of great interest to us, and we think, you too.



The NCACL:

Mission

Guardian and home of our childhood stories.

Sharing our nation's heritage.

Vision

Our literary past, present and future are preserved in the Centre, through the stories that touched our hearts and stirred our imaginations as children. It documents and shares the creative process, and inspires the next generation of readers with research collections, exhibitions and outreach activities.

Objectives

The Centre's objectives are:

- To collect, preserve and document developments in Australian children's literature.
- To make the collection available to the people of Australia, including all ages and all communities, in recognition of our cultural heritage in children's literature.
- To make the collection available to students, researchers and others interested and to assist them in their study and research.
- To extend the availability of the collection by using digital technologies as appropriate.
- To provide encouragement and inspiration for current and future authors and illustrators of children's literature.
- To assist in the recognition and contribution of Australian children's authors and illustrators to children's literature around the world.
- In connection with these objectives to:
 - (i) Preserve the creators' works.
 - (ii) Nurture the children's literature industry.
 - (iii) Support future professionals in the children's literature industry.
 - (iv) Support the research community in Australia and particularly those engaged in researching children's literature.
 - (v) encourage reading in children, and celebrate children's literature.

Dr Belle Alderman with *Seven Little Australians*
Dutch Edition



We hunt down every Australian book created for young people, in every edition and reprint. (Dr Belle Alderman in *Incite*, Volume 45, Issue 2, 2024)



NATIONAL CENTRE for
**AUSTRALIAN
CHILDREN'S
LITERATURE Inc**

Below are suggestions outlining what the 50-year-old NCACL presently offers through its collection professionally valued at \$14.5M in August 2025. There is no limit to extending what NCACL offers. Presently NCACL delivers the items below. The future potential is unlimited.

NCACL & Young People

- Offer insights into authors' and illustrators' creative process.
- Inspire young people to create their own stories and artworks.
- Provide in depth physical items to explore attitude changes over time.
- Explore visual literacy through art resources.
- Document changing language usage and interpretations of the written word.
- Offer collections that demonstrate artistic techniques.
- Compare and contrast English language and books in translation.
- Provide practical and theoretical experience with cultural heritage collections.

NCACL & Teachers / Homeschooling Parents

- Deliver databases & catalogues highlighting resources on Cultural Diversity, Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander Peoples, Picture Books for Older Readers and Verse novels.
- Deliver quick and easy searching of topics in the Australian curriculum.

- Offer cross-curriculum resources.
- Deliver resources specifically for Australia's curriculum.
- Trace developments in changing literature over time, for example, cultural diversity and Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander Peoples' resources.
- Provide resources documenting LGBTQIA+, neurodivergent and emerging social groups.
- Offer resources that enhance visual literacy.
- Offer workshops and programs to satisfy professional development requirements.

NCACL & Researchers

- Examine the publishing process through NCACL's publishers' archives.
- Deliver unique historical and contemporary resources.
- Offer 80 collections of papers, manuscripts and artworks relating to seminal authors and illustrators.
- Offer insights in the creative process through collections of business papers of seminal creators like Graeme Base and Narelle Oliver.
- Trace output and reactions to seminal creators from the mid-1950s-current time.
- Explore translations (over 6,000) revealing countries around the world's interpretation of Australian creations for young people.
- Explore interaction and output of children's literature organisations' archives held by NCACL.
- Research the publishing process through NCACL's archives of Omnibus Books and Working Title Press.

NCACL & Cultural Heritage Students and Experts

- Preserve historical and cultural heritage projects.
- Create exhibitions of culturally significant items.
- Create descriptions and public documents about significant objects.
- Offer programs and events that showcase existing and future collections.
- Document ephemera collection plus link & exploit its use.