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Our great stories need a place in the classroom

Brian Johns



As a child I was not given “children’s” books. During our weekly visit to the local School of Arts Library in Cairns, my mother steered me to the “serious” adult section. It wasn’t until later that I discovered the delight and joy of gems like Mem Fox’s *Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge*, Pamela Allen’s *Who Sank the Boat* and Libby Gleeson’s *Amy & Louis*.

These books resonate with our children (and us) because they are surprising, engaging reads written by superb storytellers and brought to life by talented illustrators.

These books and many more have been given a new lease of life through the ambitious new website, Reading Australia, which was started when it became obvious to me and others that Australia’s great books were barely getting a look-in at schools. Somehow our books had dropped off the reading lists of most teachers.

I couldn’t fathom that a child could go through school without walking hand-in-hand with our literary treasures. After all, if a love of literature hasn’t started at home with the bedside story, then the classroom is surely the next touch point.

That’s not to say schools aren’t doing a great job, but our homegrown stories reflect our natural surroundings, and what makes us who we are.

So a few heads got together to find out what was missing. As it turns out, many books were out of print, but more urgent than that was the availability of resources

for teachers.

To solve the problem, the not-for-profits Copyright Agency, the Australian Society of Authors and the major English and literacy educator associations have all worked hard to create resources for teachers to bring Australian stories back into the classroom.

As teachers are preparing to return to school, they can now source 62 curriculum-linked resources for books, plays and poems for kindergarten to year 12 at Reading Australia. Essays responding to the works from writers such as Germaine Greer, Malcolm Knox and Geordie Williamson bring deeper perspectives to the texts for young adults.

Some of the books teachers and students are rediscovering include new classics, such as Oscar-winner Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* and Jeanie Baker’s *Mirror*, as well as old

favourites such as Miles Franklin’s *My Brilliant Career* and Ruth Park’s *Playing Beatie Bow*.

The president of the Australian Literacy Educators Association, Robyn Ewing, reviewed all of the junior primary resources and praises the fact they are written by teachers from across Australia. This geographic spread recognises the knowledge and insight teachers have about what will switch children on to reading. She says: “Quality literature can and should be a centrepiece from which teachers can build students’ reading, writing and language skills”.

Brian Johns is former managing director of the ABC and SBS and publishing director of Penguin Books Australia. He has just finished 13 years on the board of the Copyright Agency.

Our homegrown stories reflect what makes us who we are.



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Books. Remember them? The big lumps of wood pulp that used to clog up your shelves? Well, they’re back, and hotter than vinyl records.
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