‘A BATTLE FOR CHILDREN’S MINDS’:
THE CHILDREN’S BOOK COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA
BOOK OF THE YEAR AWARD FOR OLDER READERS

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Mark Macleod
SYNOPSIS

This study is an examination of one of Australia’s most prestigious and influential literary prizes: the Children’s Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Award. It aims to clarify the reasons the award was part of the brief when the Children’s Book Council was created in 1945, and to determine the extent to which the award’s subsequent development has continued to meet its stated objectives.

The study focuses on a single category: that of Older Readers. To be eligible for judging in this category, entries must be:

outstanding books of fiction, drama or poetry which require of the reader a degree of maturity to appreciate the topics, themes and scope of emotional involvement. Generally, books in this category will be appropriate in style and content for readers in their secondary years of schooling.

(CBCA 2009, p.4)

For the first ten years of the award’s history, there was just one category, Book of the Year, and definition by the age of a book’s implied readers only began in 1982, when Junior Book of the Year was introduced. In 1987, the two non-picture book categories were renamed Book of the Year: Older Readers and Book of the Year: Younger Readers.

Leaving aside the erratic development of the Picture Book of the Year category, which will be outlined in chapter 2, effectively for most of its history, the Older Readers category is the Book of the Year. The two remain practically synonymous today in media coverage of the awards and for those reasons alone, the restricting of this study to the Older Readers category would be valid. This is the Children’s Book Council’s flagship award. But because since the 1960s this category has been a highly contested site for defining ‘childhood’
and ‘literature’, an examination of its development yields significant findings about the function of the Children’s Book Council (‘the CBC’) overall.

This study interrogates the CBC’s claim that the role of the Book of the Year is simply to uphold standards of literary excellence. The clear implication is that its judges have no agenda other than adherence to these standards and that they are universally agreed. By considering the evolution of the awards in both historical and cultural contexts, the study aims to define the agenda of the Book of the Year in greater detail. It then tests that agenda in individual case studies of six winning novels in the Older Readers category. Each of the texts for case study is by a writer who has been acknowledged in the awards more than once – in some cases many times. So the study aims to determine the ways in which the text in question and its writer’s work as a whole are aligned with the criteria the awards are based on.

The case studies cover a 20-year period of rapid growth in the Australian publishing industry and in the influence of the CBC. They focus on the following winners:

*Bread and Honey* by Ivan Southall (1971)
*The Ice is Coming* by Patricia Wrightson (1978)
*So Much to Tell You* by John Marsden (1988)
*Beyond the Labyrinth* by Gillian Rubinstein (1989)
*Strange Objects* by Gary Crew (1991)
*Looking for Alibrandi* by Melina Marchetta (1993)

The awards given to these novels represent significant moments in the ongoing conversation between the CBC and its constituents and within the organisation itself about the process of choosing books for young readers. Should a winning book focus on Australian subject matter? Should it demonstrate inclusiveness of gender, sexuality, race, other physical differences and social class? Are city dwellers still interested in the bush and the outback? Will boys read novels about girls? Are young readers today interested in history? Do young Australians prefer realist narratives? Do they – or their adult carers – demand
narrative closure? Should the language of a Book of the Year be high-end literary, or accessible to readers with a wider range of abilities? How frank can it be in its treatment of sex, drugs and violence? What effect does using books in the classroom have on young people’s enthusiasm for reading? This study pursues such questions in order to clarify the CBC’s role in directing the conversation and its objectives in doing so.

There is, of course, a parallel conversation about the kinds of book young readers themselves choose, but the CBC has never regarded this as its main concern. It is only due to public pressure in recent years that the Book of the Year awards handbook advises judges to ‘ensure that their evaluation takes into account the responses of children who have read the books’ (CBCA 2009, p.9) and somewhat perfunctorily at that, so that the CBC cannot be accused of indifference to the issue of popularity. The organisation has generally left this conversation to the state-based children’s choice awards and to the growing number of websites that invite young readers to blog or post reviews.

An endorsement from the Children’s Book Council can have a direct influence on the income of all those involved in the production and distribution of a book, as well as a less tangible, but potentially more important, influence on the reading experience of thousands of children. And because the influence is frequently negative, there have been objections to it throughout the organisation’s history. There has been little sustained and reasoned analysis of that influence, however, perhaps due to a fear of diminishing its positive aspects while exposing the negative. Close scrutiny may also have been delayed by the fact that the CBC’s members are an enthusiastic band of volunteers who have had to fight against the subordination of children’s literature – unless the delay itself is further proof of that subordination.

And although aspects of this study will not please the CBC, it is not intended as an attack. Indeed it should be read as an acknowledgment that the CBC has been extraordinarily successful in achieving the aims set out in its constitution. On the other hand, the study argues that one of its undisclosed concerns has been the shoring up of a narrowly defined and reactionary set of literary and
cultural values and its own power to ensure that they are maintained. The aim of this study is not to invalidate the considerable pleasure many have derived from the work of the CBC. Nor is it intended to fuel the resentment of the many producers and distributors who feel they have been burned over the years by the CBC judges’ decisions.

Ironically by constructing itself as the last bastion of universally accepted values in the assessment of literature, the CBC may be undermining its ability to promote the enjoyment of books by children and threatening its own continued growth. So if the present writer may be allowed a personal wish, it is that the study may be read not just as a critical history of a remarkable cultural phenomenon, but also read by those who care about children and books and the Children’s Book Council as a wake-up call.
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Chapter 1 THE STUDY

Locating Myself in the Study

Two years into my research for this study, I was asked to accept nomination for the national presidency of the Children’s Book Council of Australia. It was suggested to me that I had the leadership qualities required, that my experience as a speaker and my contacts in the media would help raise the profile of the organisation and that having a man in the position would be significant.

Although inevitably I had started out with a broader topic, by this time I had begun to focus on the Children’s Book Council of Australia (generally referred to here by its popular abbreviation ‘the CBC’) Book of the Year Awards. I considered changing the topic of my research and declining the nomination, but for several reasons decided against either course. Book publishing for children in Australia is rarely supported by the kind of university research that could directly affect the choice of titles appearing on bookshop and library shelves, so publishers and booksellers make decisions on the basis of sales history, untested proverbial truths and anecdotal evidence. Conversely, much academic commentary on children’s books fails to acknowledge either the economic challenges of production in a small market or the realities of consumption by both children and their adult carers. So it seemed that my experiences as an academic and as a publisher, bookseller and promoter of children’s books might be complementary qualifications for conducting the research.

In addition, although I had been president of the New South Wales state branch of the CBC from 1986 to 1988 and understood some of the history and process of the organisation, the opportunity to participate in decision-making at a national level was unique. So at the outset I declare an interest, but one from which this study is likely to benefit more than I will.
In 1989, after having coordinated undergraduate courses in Children’s Literature for 13 years at Macquarie University and set up a new postgraduate course, I was approached by the newly merged company Random Century (later Random House Australia) with an offer to become their first children’s publisher. The directors had seen me as a regular television presenter on the Nine Network and ABCTV and felt that I could create a new list of Australian children’s books for them. From 1986 to 1990 I appeared sometimes monthly and sometimes every two weeks as a reviewer of children’s books on ‘The Midday Show’ with the Nine Network’s Ray Martin and from 1989 to 1994 I was one of a panel of three reviewers on the weekly ABCTV arts program ‘Review’.

The position with Random Century was an opportunity to test all the observations and inferences I had made in studying and teaching children’s literature. Although as a writer, an occasional publisher’s reader and copywriter, and as a radio and television presenter I had some contact with book production, the offer of my own name imprint involved a very public display of any inadequacy in my understanding of children and adults as consumers. So the challenge was both exciting and daunting. In the course of this research the appeal to a multinational publisher of having even a state branch president of the Children’s Book Council as its children’s publishing director has become clear, but I was not conscious of this at the time.

At the interview the managing director asked me two questions: ‘Can you predict what will win the Children’s Book Council Book of the Year awards?’ and ‘Can you predict what Myra Lee will buy for her book clubs?’ Predicting the Book of the Year winners is a game cleverly marketed by the Children’s Book Council and played in schools, bookshops, publishing houses and the media all over Australia for six months every year. Myra Lee was the manager of school book clubs for Ashton Scholastic (later Scholastic Australia), the most powerful buyer of children’s books in the country. Ashton Scholastic bought quantities of new titles that often equalled the first print run, and due to economies of scale in printing, therefore reduced the unit cost overall. Although
they bought at the highest discount on the recommended retail price, their business was sought by children’s publishers.

With a better grasp of interview technique than the truth, I said in answer to the managing director’s first question, ‘Some of the time’ and, clearly impressed, he leant back in his chair and nodded in silence. When I said in answer to the second question, ‘Wouldn’t every publisher like to be able to do that? She’s too quirky for me!’ he laughed and welcomed me to the company.

My interest in the present study began with such questions. By the time Myra Lee announced her retirement in 2004, buying decisions for school book clubs had become the responsibility of a committee of Scholastic editors rather than a single manager, and in addition another division of the company, Australian Standing Orders, had become a powerful buyer for school libraries, so the focus had shifted. But the question of the extent to which the Book of the Year award winners might be predicted remains.

**The Aim of the Study**

The aim of this study is to examine the terms of an ongoing conversation between one of Australia’s most powerful cultural institutions, the Children’s Book Council of Australia, and its constituents. The conversation centres on the CBC’s Book of the Year award. This award began as just one of a raft of measures that the organisation designed to raise levels in the production and consumption of children’s books in Australia after World War 2. But increasingly it has become the main, if not the only, means by which the CBC can achieve the objectives set out in its constitution and listed here in chapter 2.

The period covered by the study – from 1945 to the present, with the case studies focusing on the years 1971 to 1993 – is one of extraordinary growth in the Australian publishing industry generally, as documented by Sheahan-Bright (2005), but particularly in publishing for children. Much of this growth can be attributed to the promotional work done by the CBC. The anticipation and
controversy generated by the Book of the Year increased both publicity and sales dramatically after a major overhaul of the awards and the introduction of the short list in 1982. At the same time, during this period the direct influence of the short list on sales has diminished. Because the tracking of sales figures is kept confidential by publishers for fear of giving competitors a commercial advantage, it is not possible to cite published evidence of this change, although just after the short list was introduced, Alderman cites a 300 per cent increase in sales for the winner (Alderman 1983, p.17). In the present writer's experience as a publisher, the announcement of the short list guaranteed four or more immediate reprints of a title at the end of the 1980s, but now children’s publishers are grateful for one or two. Ironically, that change is also partly attributable to the Book of the Year.

Chapter 3 considers the CBC’s insistence that ‘objectivity’ in the judging process is achievable and that the most effective way of achieving it is to draw the judges almost exclusively from among teachers and librarians. The increasing alignment of the awards with the education market and classroom practice leads to a pedagogical tone in the judges’ reports, documented in Chapter 4, and to choices that have limited appeal to the general market and to some of the CBC’s sponsors. Through an examination of published commentary by the CBC on its judging criteria and the values embedded in its choices, which are unpacked in the case studies, Chapters 5-10, the study demonstrates that the CBC’s handling of changes in both society and critical theory has often been counterproductive. While on the one hand courting controversy in the hope that it demonstrates both integrity and a critical edge, the CBC adheres steadfastly to a belief in Jungian universals and critical concepts that derive from Arnold, Leavis and the ‘New Critics’, and make it appear increasingly out of touch in the period covered by this study. Repeatedly during the 65-year history of the award, one of the primary functions of the Book of the Year has been perceived as shoring up not ‘literary standards’, but the makers of such standards and the role of the CBC itself. Considering in various contexts the awards made in the Older Readers category and the published commentary on them, the study examines the relationship between the stated objectives and the
practice of the organisation in order to define and assess its agenda and its influence more clearly.

The proliferation of literary awards that at times confuses consumers, the increasing monetary value of the winner’s purse – though not necessarily the value of extra sales – to the producers, the narrowing focus of marketing and publicity on signs of worth such as foil stickers and best-selling lists, the organising of an international conference devoted to ‘Culture and the Literary Prize’ (Oxford Brookes University, 2003) and the publication of a full-length study on the subject, James English’s *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (2005) indicate the growing importance of the literary award as a cultural phenomenon. When Kidd (2007, p.166) remarks that ‘prizing has been a remarkably effective mechanism for publicity, sales and scandal, if not always for the production of Literature’, the implication of his upper case ‘L’ is clear. While the judging criteria emphasise the maintenance of literary standards as the aim of the major awards for children’s books – often specifically contrasted with criteria such as sales and popularity among children – their success in maintaining a market and readership is easier to demonstrate.

Nadia Crandall (2006) in an analysis of children’s publishing in the United Kingdom between 1995 and 2004 sees the increased emphasis on awards and other marketing strategies as the result of a mature industry confronting the proliferation of alternative entertainment media at a time of static profit margins below the rate of inflation. As will be seen later in this study, most of Crandall’s conclusions apply to Australian children’s publishing, too. And although the number of awards has proliferated, Australia’s first literary award originated at a time when the publishing industry faced a different kind of challenge.

The trustees of the Miles Franklin Literary Award advertise that award on its website as Australia’s ‘first and most prestigious’ (Trust, 2010), but in fact the Children’s Book Council of Australia’s Book of the Year Award, first made in 1946, predates it by ten years. And while stakeholders would give a variety of
definitions for the phrase ‘most prestigious’, the Book of the Year has far more influence on book sales than the Miles Franklin or any other Australian literary award. On those two counts alone a study of the Book of the Year Award would be worthwhile. But in its 65-year existence the award has become a volatile and vigorously contested site for shifting Australian cultural concepts of the child, the adult, the book, the author, spoken and written language, literary excellence, education, entertainment, the natural and built environments, race and gender.

As a site for the study of radical shifting in the ways a literary text is read, it is even more complex than the university teaching of English literature for adults. In addition to the lingering influence of Arnold, Leavis and the New Criticism, denounced by Thomson (1992) for its hold over teachers, and the embrace of successive postmodern thinkers from Barthes and Foucault to Derrida and Kristeva, the search for meaning and value in children’s books has been accompanied by the constant emotionally charged dialogue on what Postman called the ‘disappearance of childhood’ (Postman, 1982) – a concept that, as Griswold (1997) points out, coincides with a boom in children’s book publishing.

The close alignment of children’s books with the school syllabus and the increasing identification by children themselves of electronic media, rather than books, with entertainment have given a sense of urgency to those adults who regard the book as a last bastion of traditional consensus values. This conservatism has frequently placed those adults at odds with readers of all ages who are more open to contemporary views of the literary text as a site of deferred meaning. Although published statements by the CBC refer to ‘worthwhile books for children’ and ‘literature of quality’ as if an objective reading of any literary text were achievable, it is the view of this writer that such phrases derive from nostalgia for monocultural concepts of childhood and art, and from a determination to defend a position of cultural power that is perceived as being under threat. Both phrases are used (Smith & Hamilton 1995, p.7) by the Council’s first national president, the academic Maurice
Saxby. The present study asks how and why the CBC has used its Book of the Year awards to create and protect cultural capital.

The Method Adopted for the Study

Perhaps because many of its founding members were librarians, the Children’s Book Council has documented its history in meticulous detail. The sheer extent of the minutes of its annual general meetings by the 1980s and their repeated concern with public scrutiny indicate an organisation conscious of the important role it has defined for itself. Chapter 4 suggests, furthermore, that the desire to overcome the subordination of librarianship, women and children in Australian culture drives much of the image-making in that documentation. The constant citing of precedents is also used by some members to inhibit change.

At the same time, there is a distinct lack of transparency in the judging of the Book of the Year Awards. In response to public criticism of its withholding of awards, its apparent withdrawing of support for the work of a writer it has cultivated previously and occasional anomalies such as Ivan Southall’s winning of the UK’s Carnegie Medal for Josh, when it was not even short listed for Book of the Year, the CBC begins to articulate the qualifications of its judges. For most of its 65-year history, however, the unanimity of its judgements is emphasised. The ratings and written critiques that each judge must contribute on every title submitted for the awards are destroyed in order to maintain confidentiality. While this is standard practice for other literary awards, because there are so few analytical reviews of Australian children’s books, the lack of detailed documentation here can be frustrating. One judge confided to the present writer that there were clear reasons for the failure of Gary Crew’s No Such Country to appear on the short list, but because they are confidential, the researcher, the enthusiastic reader or indeed the author himself, must hope that those reasons can be inferred from the reviews. Often they cannot.

The first four chapters of this thesis are a historical study of the extensive documentation that the Children’s Book Council has made available for public
scrutiny. This section of the study is intended to clarify the aims set out in the CBC’s constitution and the evolution of its practice. In the six case studies that follow, individual Book of the Year winners are examined in the context of other works by the writer, the development of his or her relationship with the CBC and the organisation’s increasingly old-fashioned privileging of authorship, referred to in chapter 9. By interrogating the text from several cultural perspectives, the case studies attempt to clarify the unacknowledged assumptions in the judges’ decisions and in some of the silences that punctuate the extensive documentation considered in the first four chapters.

By offering my own process as a participant-observer for examination, I also intend to contest the CBC’s defence of objectivity and hope to demonstrate an alternative way of achieving useful critical outcomes.
Chapter 2  ‘UNITED THROUGH BOOKS’

The Constitution of the Children’s Book Council of Australia

In September 1945, Mary Townes Nyland of the United States Information Library in Sydney hosted a dinner of twelve Australian authors, publishers, librarians, teachers and ABC employees to discuss the possibility of a children’s book week. The first book week was held less than two months later, 12 – 18 November 1945, with a slogan ‘United Through Books’. This slogan somewhat ambitiously attempted to reposition Australia in a shift of cultural and political power. After the devastation of a second world war fought over six years in Europe and the Pacific, the idealistic rebirth and renaming of the defunct League of Nations and the less explicitly stated assertion of the United States as the world’s newly predominant political power were signalled by the inauguration of the first United Nations charter in October 1945. The timing of two minor cultural events in Sydney – one a month before and the other a month after the inauguration – cannot be read as coincidental. Just as the naming of the United Nations by United States President Franklin D Roosevelt and its first meeting and eventual headquarters on United States soil announced the power base of this new organisation, so the significance of the catalyst for Australia’s first children’s book week and its slogan is persuasive.

It would, however, be difficult to demonstrate that the Australian participants in the setting up of the new organisation were conscious of this significance. The persistence to the end of the century of London rather than New York as the centre of multinational book publishing in Australia makes it more likely that the word ‘United’ was read in the context of a world recently divided by war. And the prevalence of Indigenous Australian subject matter in books promoted by the organisation throughout its 65 years indicate that its conscious concerns with a ‘United’ community lay closer to home.

Whatever the reading, the symbolism of a new cultural beginning being made with books for children rather than adults is clear, although Nodelman (1997) and Pennell (2003) point out that for writers in the Romantic tradition of
childhood, such as Hazard (1944, pp.1-2), children are always ‘Happy beings…playing light-hearted without a care’, however horrific their actual living conditions. It was the second time in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century that war had made the arts an important site for renewal. At the end of World War 1, Children’s Book Week was introduced in the United States in 1919, the first children’s book award, the Newbery Medal, was in 1922 and will be discussed in some detail in chapter 3, and Kidd (2007) points out that the Academy Awards began in 1917.

Two years after that first gathering of Australian professionals in Sydney, a name was chosen for the new organisation: the Children’s Book Council. Again, this followed a United States model: the Children’s Book Council in the United States had evolved from a publishing industry association of junior editors that began to co-ordinate their Children’s Book Week in 1944 (http://www.cbcbooks.org/about/history). In her account of children’s book awards for the Early Childhood Education Journal, Zeece (1999) confuses the two Children’s Book Councils. Locating the various US awards in the context of other awards around the world, she lists the:

Children’s Book Council Book of the Year Award. The CBC has traditionally comprised United States children’s trade book publishers, packagers and book-related multimedia product producers. The nonprofit organization is dedicated to encourage literacy through the use of children’s books…CBC also produces biennially the Children’s Book Awards and Prizes that references over 200 literary awards and prizes…Each year the CBC identifies Book of the Year recipients in four categories: Older Readers, Younger Readers, Picture Book and Eve Pownall Award for Informational Books.

(Zeece 1999, p.236)

It is only on repeated reading, and given the reference to Australia’s Eve Pownall, that the error from the second sentence on becomes obvious. Clearly, the provincial borrowing of a metropolitan name for the organisation was more effective than the founders could have hoped.
Australia’s Children’s Book Council developed rapidly. It began, as it remains, an organisation based in the state branches, and was not national until 4 November 1958. In a sense the national body is only evident on the rare occasions during the year when all state delegates meet; the daily work is done by the states. This is one of the reasons that the terminology quoted and used to refer to the CBC changes frequently in the course of this study. The Annual Committee Meeting becomes the Annual General Meeting. It is conducted by the Federal Council, National Committee, National Executive. And the names given to the Book of the Year awards change repeatedly during their history, always failing to retain the marketable succinctness they achieved on their first appearance. While these changes could indicate an organisation acutely aware of the importance of branding in the commercial world of the past 65 years, a reading more consonant with the CBC’s commercial practice is that, under its confident exterior, this is an organisation unsure of its reach and constantly trying to define itself.

The president’s report given at the annual committee meeting on 27 August 1959, after the state branches had federated, records that ‘the national emphasis and the use of the term “The Children’s Book Council of Australia” gave much added weight and importance to Book Week.’ (President’s Report, AGM 1959, CBCA archives, National Library of Australia, ACC 04/227, box 10). Reflecting on his role in the creation of the organisation, Maurice Saxby says, ‘From the outset its aims have been twofold: to encourage children to read while pointing them to literature of quality; and to promote the publication of worthwhile literature for children.’ (Smith & Hamilton 1995, p.7).

It is significant that, looking back here on 50 years of work by the CBC, Saxby reduces its aims to two. There are, however, six means of encouraging children’s reading set out by its first constitution in 1959 and cited in the same celebratory volume that includes Saxby’s reflections:

a) the establishment of children’s libraries and library services as part of a comprehensive free library pattern
b) the dissemination of information about children’s books among children, parents, teachers and librarians

c) the promotion of high standards in reviewing and grading of children’s books according to the ages and interests of children

d) the improvement of books for children

e) the organization of periodical Book Weeks and Book Exhibitions; and

f) the establishment of awards for the best children’s books in subject matter, illustration and format

(Smith & Hamilton 1995, p.22)

Australians take free libraries for granted now, but their future was uncertain at the time the CBC was established. As David J Jones (2005) points out in his history of public libraries in New South Wales, the war had interrupted full proclamation of the Library Act, which was to enable local councils to establish free public libraries, until 1 January 1944.

The impact of the Act was startling. Within eighteen months thirty-two New South Wales councils had adopted the Act and seven were already providing library services. Sixteen were planning to begin operation during 1945…By the end of 1946 a quarter of the three million inhabitants of New South Wales were being served by a free public library.

(Jones 2005, p.135)

This, then, is the context for the first aim listed in the constitution of the CBC: to ensure that children’s libraries and children’s library services were included in the growth of a free library network.

Until the 1980s CBC members participated in a wide range of activities designed to promote children’s books, such as displays, storytelling, the
production of posters and pamphlets to encourage reading, the creation and distribution of gift packs for new parents and personal appearances by writers and illustrators. But the extension of the free library network (which Jones argues was basically completed by the 1980s) and the growth of children’s departments in publishing houses, with dedicated publicists, marketing managers and education consultants, at the same time replaced much of the voluntary work of CBC members with that of paid professionals.

In Western Australia, the success of Children’s Book Week had grown steadily since the first event in 1945, until by 1951, ‘two exhibitions could be held in successive weeks, first at the Perth Town Hall and then at the equally impressive Town Hall at Fremantle.’ (Gregg 2001, p.21). But after this energetic start, the Western Australian state branch of the CBC became a victim of its own successful lobbying. The WA Library Board was established in 1953 and set out among its aims the provision of children’s library services across the state. Librarian and former president of the CBC in Western Australia, Alison Gregg makes explicit the connection between this development that the branch had worked towards and its own demise.

With this new emphasis on integrating children’s services within the larger public library system, the WA CBC gradually became less sure of its role.

(Gregg 2001, p.21)

So much so, that its promotion of Children’s Book Week in Western Australia was suspended after 1953 and was not reintroduced until 1968.

Gregg’s reading of this hiatus highlights a problem with the voluntary nature of the CBC that the organisation has rarely confronted. The level of commitment among its volunteers inspired others to join them, and the significance of a diverse group of people giving their free time to nurture children was folded back into cultural myths of Australia as a society of enthusiastic amateurs. These myths were celebrated in iconic imagery of young men enlisting to fight in World War 1, volunteer fire fighters, lifesavers, and amateur sportsmen and
women. By the time of the second Australian Olympic Games in Sydney 2000, the development of sport in the United States and Europe as big business and Australia’s desire to win at sports had resulted in government funding of elite Australian athletes. But the prominence given to Olympic volunteers in 2000 clearly masked contemporary economic reality by reviving myths of amateurism that had been cherished in Australia’s past.

Economic factors inevitably limited the likelihood that the CBC would succeed in some of its aims. The pool of available voluntary labour was diminished, particularly among women working outside the home. Working hours were extended beyond the Monday-to-Friday, nine-to-five model. And as cities spread, the prospect of longer journeys home was discouraging. Added to those challenges is the observation by Mackay (2007) and Salt (2006) that younger generations of Australians are not the joiners that their parents and Baby Boomer grandparents were. For various reasons including the growth of internet communities, they are less interested in physically attending a monthly meeting of a service organisation, however lofty its aims.

Proposals for a stable national secretariat with a salaried staff have been discussed at the CBC’s annual general meetings intermittently since the 1980s, although a national office, essentially for mail distribution, was established in Adelaide in November 2005. Plans for anything more extensive have not progressed for two reasons: first, however cumbersome the two-yearly rotation of the national executive from state to state may be, it acknowledges the equal rights of all state branches; second, and more importantly, the idea of paying staff professional salaries threatens the sentimental image the CBC has of itself as a band of volunteers.

The maintenance of that image is paralleled in Australian arts policy even as late as the 1970s. Throsby refers to:

the clear dissociation from economic values evident in some aspects of Australian cultural policy; much of the specifically arts policy enshrined in the charter of the Australia Council, for example, speaks of quality,
excellence, access and so on all of which relate to issues judged on artistic or cultural rather than economic grounds. Yet even here – of course – an economic implication is but one step away; the Council’s capacity to pursue these pure goals is directly determined by the funding made available to it by the government.

(Throsby 1997, p.29)

As government-funded libraries and multinational publishing companies in the 1980s increasingly assumed aspects of the role the CBC had initially defined for itself, it was not their superior creativity or their understanding of children and their reading preferences that drove the change, but the superior security and extent of their funding.

The response to this change in the voluntary nature of children’s book promotion was general, although not as extreme in other state branches as it was in Western Australia, and as a result the CBC has focused subsequently on its literary awards as the most likely method of achieving its aims. The first Book of the Year award was made in 1946 at the end of the new organisation’s first year, and if the growth alone of these awards since then does not demonstrate any achievement in the area of ‘quality’, it does indicate the remarkable success of the CBC in promoting the awards themselves. This is mainly due to the introduction of a short list in 1982, although Nadia Wheatley voices a growing concern ten years after that development in 1992, when she says that ‘the CBC awards are death to the great majority of all the other books published each year that don’t make the short list.’ (Bell 1992, p.22).

In 1946, there was only one category – Book of the Year – and although the judges continued to endorse the prolific output of illustrated storybooks by the inaugural winners, Rees and Cunningham, the winning titles tended to be novels or information books for older readers. In 1952 it was decided that a second category, Picture Book of the Year, should be added, then in 1982 a Junior Book of the Year category was introduced. In 1987, the non-picture book categories were renamed Book of the Year: Older Readers and Book of
the Year: Younger Readers. (The punctuation changes from a colon to parentheses and then from 2008 the awards are restyled ‘Older Readers Book of the Year’, ‘Eve Pownall Book of the Year’ and so on.)

To mark the Bicentenary in 1988 the Eve Pownall Award for non-fiction books was offered as a one-off, funded by a bequest from Pownall’s family. This category was made permanent in 1993, but renamed the Eve Pownall Award for Information Books in recognition of contemporary academic definitions of ‘fiction’. In 2001 the Book of the Year: Early Childhood award was added in response to a growing number of picture books for older readers being entered and a feeling that the Picture Book of the Year category had been hijacked and was offering fewer choices for the youngest readers. The impact that these additional categories had on what evolved as the Book of the Year: Older Readers will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 8.

Each year, from about 400 titles overall now that are entered, a short list of up to six titles in each of the five categories is published four months before the winners are announced on the third Friday in August, at the beginning of Children’s Book Week. By the time of the announcement, publishers have booked advertising space, parents have bought the short listed books, libraries have bought multiple copies and displayed them, adults and children have read them, teachers have planned units of work around them, booksellers have had time to reorder and publishers to reprint, and producers and literary editors have had time to promote them by guessing which of the titles might win. And the CBC has had time to publish its Notable Books list, which includes those titles that made the short list and others that came close, along with the judges’ comments on each of them.

In almost every year, the number of books entered has increased. And the impact the awards have on the sales of Australian children’s books is, therefore, impressive, although, as mentioned earlier, not as impressive as it has been. The perception of publishers and booksellers that the short list now makes less sales impact on an individual title than it did ten years ago may be due to the greater number of categories and therefore short listed titles, to the increased
opportunities for the public to inform themselves about and become more selective in their buying of children’s books, and to the increasing identification of the short list with its use in education.

Chapters 2 to 4 and several of the case studies will consider a range of reasons why the CBC has focused on the classroom as its best forum for encouraging reading. There might, however, have been an equally, or even more, productive choice. The findings of the first national survey of young readers, published in 2001 by the Australian Centre for Youth Literature and the Australia Council, are unambiguous: only 11 per cent of all 10–18 year olds claim to really like reading for school, 81 per cent don’t like being told what to read, but 42 per cent read books that are recommended by their peers. Although a long way behind students’ peers, the primary school librarian is the second most popular source of recommendations, but English teachers come a long way down the list of priorities. Only 10 per cent of young Australians say they read books recommended by them (Woolcott Research 2001, pp.19-28).

Surely, promoting the books that have been enjoyed by friends and family (interestingly, fathers rather than mothers) would yield more readers for the CBC than getting its preferred books onto the syllabus – or even into the school library, which the survey finds is a place of work rather than pleasure for its respondents. The Australia Council’s Hilary McPhee concludes from these findings that, to young Australians, ‘reading as a chore is not real reading’ (Nieuwenhuizen & Mayor Cox 2002, p.3). Perhaps, then, the CBC’s emphasis on schools is misplaced.

Of course, imaginative promotions that reach the wider community are expensive, and for the teachers and librarians who are members of the CBC, schools are a captive market. Apart from what publisher and former national president Margaret Hamilton calls ‘the heady days of the Myer/Grace Bros sponsorship of $50,000 a year’ (Hamilton 2000, p.8) for five years 1989-1993, the CBC has never had the kind of publicity budget it would need for even a modest media campaign to promote the Book of the Year awards to the general public. Nor has it had access to the necessary professional skills. Publicity is
notoriously an area of burnout and high staff turnover in publishing houses, so the CBC has rarely been able to attract experienced publicists willing to attend committee meetings and donate their services free of charge after hours.

Comparing the CBC unfavourably with the UK’s Booktrust, Agnes Nieuwenhuizen argues that the lack of professional publicity is one of the main reasons it does not provide high-profile advocacy for reading, or promote Australian books internationally. The voluntary status of the organisation simply isn’t up to the scope of the task anymore.

Unless the archaic structures, rules of governance and operations of the CBCA are thoroughly revamped, it may find itself superseded by a new high-level, national organisation that will also engage with the global book community.

(Nieuwenhuizen 2008, p.2)

The ominous note here sounds almost as if she has been drawing up job specifications, but the point is well taken. Because the CBC clings to its origins as a voluntary collective, it has been forced to rely on free publicity by way of reviews, along with feature articles and interviews centring on the writers and illustrators. But, given the clear lack of interest in children’s issues by the Australian media, these are commissioned rarely and the organisation has therefore constructed for itself the passive role of a mendicant or – worse – a persistent and irritating child.

At one vast publishing industry gathering in the 1990s, the present writer heard publisher Margaret Hamilton ask one of the influential media representatives on her panel why so little review space was given to children’s books in Australia. The answer was prefaced by a world-weary theatrical sigh and the words, ‘There’s one of you in every crowd, isn’t there...’. Perhaps some literary editors and producers now feel that they have done their bit for children’s literature by joining the multinational gravy train hurtling along behind a few books by writers such as Rowling and Meyer. The advantage of those promo-
tions to sales of Australian books has yet to be demonstrated by research. Nevertheless, in 1990 and 1992 Pausacker and Wheatley (Nieuwenhuizen ed. 1994, pp. 304-305) surveyed the percentage of review space in Australian newspapers given to children’s books and found that young adult titles, for example, scored 1.9 per cent. In contrast, adult fiction was given 30.5 per cent of review space. There is no reason to think that the situation has improved for local publishing; quite the reverse.

And reviews are regarded as the most reliable source of free publicity. The other source of publicity has been the willingness of teachers and librarians to derive units of work from the short list. It must be said, however, that since most CBC members are teachers or librarians, the classroom is what they know best and what is to hand, so focusing on the education market has been inevitable and relatively easy. Australian Standing Orders now requires detailed teachers’ notes for conducting a lesson on a book before they will make a bulk purchase from a publisher. Saxby clearly anticipates criticism of the increased importance of the education market and the inference that the constituency of the CBC has narrowed when he says:

the Council has always been broadly based and, from the beginning, has shown its awareness of the broad spectrum of child readers and their varied needs and interests. Early exhibitions included displays on such themes as the making of books, the printing process, Braille and talking books, books from cultures other than our own (labelled in the early days ‘Foreign Books’), books and magazines on sport, hobbies and other cultural pursuits…

This has largely been because the Council itself – always a voluntary body made up of dedicated and enthusiastic individuals and representatives of cultural groups – has represented diverse interests and emphases: teachers and librarians, of course; editors and those associated with the making of children’s books (rightly so); those with a concern for literary standards and the multi-racial nature of our society; representatives from radio, television and the arts; academics; along with parents, grandparents and anyone with a passion for books for the young.

(Smith & Hamilton 1995, p.8)
Although children may become members of the Children’s Book Council, the members are mostly adults. State branch meetings are held monthly, and each of those branches appoints two delegates – one voting delegate and one observer – who attend the annual meeting at which decisions affecting all branches are made.

If the broad constituency of members outlined by Saxby is placed alongside the criteria for selecting Book of the Year judges, it is immediately apparent that not all of these groups are allowed to participate in what is now the CBC’s main activity, and this will be the subject of detailed discussion in Chapter 3. Generally speaking, those who are involved in any aspect of book production are excluded, although a recent change permits judges who have read a book in manuscript or launched it, for example, to declare their interest. Saxby’s parenthesis ‘(rightly so)’ indicates some defensiveness about what was being seen increasingly as an anomaly on the part of the CBC by the mid 1990s. (The book in which his essay is published is co-edited by Margaret Hamilton, who, among her other roles, is head of the CBC Awards Foundation, which she set up with June Smith, a former national vice-president and bookseller, to raise one million dollars to fund the awards in perpetuity).

Clearly, the twin aims of those who set up the Children’s Book Council – to promote the reading of ‘literature of quality’ by children and a publishing industry that produces ‘worthwhile literature for children’ – have proved to be not entirely compatible. If the consumption of children’s books is considered, as the growth of children’s choice awards from the 1980s on demonstrates, children and adults do not necessarily agree on the criteria for excellence. Just as adults read for sheer entertainment some of the time, children will not always reach for ‘literature of quality’. And from a production perspective, a publisher in a small market like Australia is unlikely to be profitable if it tries to depend without subsidy on ‘worthwhile literature for children’ alone. To say so, of course, is to accept for the moment the CBC’s implication that mass-market literature for children is not ‘worthwhile’. 
If books came from England, comics, films and music came from America. Yes, there was Ginger Meggs and, very occasionally, a film with Chips Rafferty, but the usual fare for children's matinees and family viewing was from Hollywood or — less frequently — the London studios of J Arthur Rank. The most popular comics — featuring the Marvel family, Black Hawk, Superman, Donald Duck, and Archie and Veronica — were American. In short, when lamenting the fact that so much of the culture consumed by contemporary Australian children derives from the boardrooms of Los Angeles, it's as well to remember that what has changed is not the fact that the culture is imported. The difference is more in the nature of the subject 'hailed' by that culture, and the relationship of centre to periphery that it presumes. What we have is not a shift from 'local' to 'global' but rather a shift from the culture of empire to the culture of capital.

The culture consumed by Australian children at the turn of the twenty-first century hails a very different kind of 'subject' — a pleasure-seeking consumer rather than a willing servant of empire.'

(Langer & Farrer 2003, p.119)

Fear of popular culture and American influence contributed to the valorising of book reading for Australian children as both an educational and social good.

**The Influence of HM Saxby**

One name has been cited several times already in this study, but few Australians have exerted the degree of influence in a single field of the arts that H M (Maurice) Saxby has had across the history of the Children’s Book Council. Although his vision of the organisation has been broad enough to include publishers, writers, illustrators, booksellers, journalists, media presenters and parents, the fact that he is one of the most prominent educators of his generation has been the driving force behind the CBC’s development. So the potential for an increasing emphasis on the educational use of books, discussed here and in the case studies – particularly Chapters 7 and 9 – is there from the beginning.
One of those present at the meeting in 1945 when the CBC was mooted, Saxby became its inaugural president, was made its first life member in 1991 and at the 60th anniversary dinner in 2005 gave the formal address. Throughout that period and since, he has been an office bearer for the CBC and other organisations, acted as a judge for various literary awards, including the Book of the Year, given frequent conference papers, written reviews and articles in Australian and international refereed journals and taught children’s literature to generations of students in teacher training and librarianship courses, principally at Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education, Sydney Teachers College and Kuring-gai College of Advanced Education (later the University of Technology, Sydney).

Saxby has brought to each of these roles the values encoded in the CBC’s constitution and its awards handbook, but nowhere has this been more clearly evident than in his major scholarly work, *A History of Australian Children’s Literature* published in three volumes 1969, 1971 and 1993. If now, 40 years after it began to appear, the limitations of this history are immediately apparent to those immersed in the context of published research on children’s literature, the reasons are implied in the opening sentence of the second volume.

The purpose of this book is twofold: to bring up to date the record of the author’s earlier work, *A History of Australian Children’s Literature 1841-1941*; and to provide a guide for parents, teachers, librarians, and students who are discovering that there is now a considerable body of Australian fiction for children.

(Saxby 1971, p.1)

The needs of this target audience are diverse and may even be incompatible. The narrative analysis and contextualising required by those with an academic interest in the history of Australian children’s literature, for example, may obstruct parents pursuing succinct recommendations for voracious young readers. Most of the work of the other Australian pre-eminent in children’s
literature studies, John Stephens, would be too specialised for, if not impenetrable to, non-academic parents seeking guidance. It is significant, then, that Saxby’s list begins with ‘parents’ – emphasising that they are the child’s first point of contact with reading, and perhaps indicating the author’s desire for an audience beyond his own profession.

Across the three volumes of Saxby’s history and the revised 2002 compilation in one volume, the breadth of reference is the most prominent characteristic of his work. Due to the economics of publishing in a small market like Australia, many of the texts referred to are out of print and only available on restricted access in the major public libraries. So in these publications Saxby has provided for his readers the convenient bibliographical resource that he himself did not have when he began his research (Saxby 2004, p.81).

It should be said at the outset that any critical reading of Saxby’s writing and his role in the Children’s Book Council is complicated by his personal involvement with so many aspects of the production and consumption of Australian children’s books. Now 85 and ostensibly retired from his last formal academic appointment at the University of Technology, Sydney, he continues to work with teachers and librarians, academics, publishers, booksellers, editors and producers, both in Australia and internationally, at a surprising pace. He writes, edits, lectures and examines, but his attendance at conferences, festivals and other literary and educational events such as book launches and exhibitions as an invited speaker is an equally important aspect of his role. Ever-present, generally nurturing and occasionally admonishing, the role is that of a benign parent. And to define the limits of such a role is difficult enough – let alone having to evaluate it.

Bunbury’s charge (1997) that the History is sexist and cringing is, therefore, unusual. It may be that the main reason for the obvious critical silence is a feeling that the field has moved on and that other projects have a higher priority. Bunbury indicates as much when she comments on his reservations about some of the women writers in the 1950s:
women writers who not only wrote stories of family life, but who combined this with a strong sense of self-awareness in childhood and adolescence and the beginnings of a questing after a sense of belonging in the land: Nan Chauncy, Mavis Thorpe Clark, Joan Phipson, Patricia Wrightson, Eleanor Spence and Hesba Brinsmead remain significant writers of the period. In writing about such works, Maurice Saxby, an early influential critic of children’s literature in Australia, dismissed them as being ‘as predictable as those of the adventure stories a hundred years earlier’ (Saxby, 1969: 164). In retrospect, few would agree and such comments are now recognised as part of the cultural cringe of the times as much as an alignment against the value of subject matter chosen by women writers.

(Bunbury 1997, p.12)

Bunbury herself unconsciously demonstrates the way in which context determines reading, as she goes on to defend Wrightson with no comment on the potential racism in her work later identified by Bradford (2001).

It may be that the field has to some extent left Saxby’s major work behind and that it is now regarded mainly as a convenient bibliography. But the constant and benign presence of the author, his warm personal relationships with a wide range of people in the field, including the present writer, and the fact that he has taught so many of his potential critics, are at least possible reasons for the absence of any thorough re-evaluation.

Saxby’s description of his major work as a ‘guide’ is useful when it is read in the context of subsequent critical works by writers including Bradford and Stephens. Their application of theoretical perspectives to subjects in children’s literature defined more specifically, and not exclusively Australian, is a clear point of difference. Stephens in his influential Language and Ideology in Children’s Fiction (1992) refers to a broad range of questions in narratology unexplored at the time he is writing and later refers dismissively to the ‘celebratory practices’ of the Children’s Book Council (Stephens 1996), but he doesn’t acknowledge the role played by Saxby and others in enabling his own work.
Part of Saxby’s project is to convey the breadth of Australian children’s literature and thereby confer credibility on it as a subject for study. Sheahan-Bright (2005) sees the relegation of children’s books and children’s culture generally as a consequence of the predominance of women in children’s publishing, librarianship and the teaching of reading. So if Saxby’s narrative appears now to be emulating in an outdated approach the narrative accounts of the ways Australian literature for adults developed (by, for example, Morris Miller & Macartney 1956, Phillips 1958, Green 1961, Hope 1963, T Inglis Moore 1971), it can be read as an attempt to counter that relegation.

This relegation of children’s literature is by no means limited to Australian culture or to the past. Thacker (2000) argues energetically that, apart from Bakhtin and Bennett, children and their reading are absent from the work of major European theorists. Williams and Bourdieu, for example, whose critical perspectives have enabled much contemporary criticism of children’s literature, have little to say on the subject, and as Kidd (2007, p.166) points out, James English’s major study of literary prizes, referred to in the introduction to this thesis, avoids it because children’s books are ‘utilitarian rather than literary’. Among the narrative accounts of Australian literature, only Niall’s Australia Through the Looking-Glass (1987, 1st edn. 1984) comes close to Saxby’s project in the time frame covered – 1830 to 1980 – but it restricts the discussion to fiction, whereas Saxby includes other genres.

The introductory nature of A History of Australian Children’s Literature is evident not only in the brevity of comment on individual texts and writers, but in the relatively extended commentary as well, such as that on Nan Chauncy, for whom Saxby becomes an advocate:

Of all Nan Chauncy’s books, They Found a Cave, Tiger in the Bush and Devil’s Hill are the soundest expressions of her own personality; as British as Margaret Rutherford yet proudly and fiercely Australian; a lover of the bush rather than the city; and one to whom a waterfall meant more than a motor-car.
Although she never lost her own integrity as a writer Nan Chauncy did resort in later years to using hackneyed situations to establish a point of characterization. The imaginative, volatile but courageous and honest-to-the-bone Lizzie in *Lizzie Lights* (1968) establishes her virtues by acting as a foil, in expedient circumstances, to the brash, empty-headed Myra and by being forced to make decisions which are thrust upon her, to the point of conquering her fear and accompanying her sick mother on a helicopter flight to hospital. *Lizzie Lights*, like the Badge books, is all about security and the need to be wanted as a person, but the statement of theme is a step back in time in the development of children’s literature rather than a step forward.

(Saxby 1971, pp.105-106)

It is difficult to imagine a critical text now commenting on the fictional expression of the writer’s personality. Saxby’s perspective is partly that of someone who knows the writer personally – in this case, Chauncy died in 1970, while the study was in preparation – and partly that of a teacher mindful more of Arnold’s concern with the education of the child and the potential of culture to lead the individual towards ‘the idea of perfection’ (Arnold 1869) than it is of Leavis, whose work dominated the study of literature for adults among Saxby’s contemporaries.

Even more than the incongruous reference to popular culture in comparing the author’s personality to that of the British actor Margaret Rutherford, Saxby’s description of a character in a novel he judges unsuccessful indicates the importance of character in his reading of the literary text. And, along with the tacit endorsement of Chauncy’s preference for the romantic image of Australia as ‘the bush rather than the city’, it positions an implied reader of his guide as someone involved with the formation of character and values in children.

Although much of the commentary on individual texts in the *History* is descriptive, the frequent evaluations are the work of a cataloguer, who has actually read the books being listed and described. When analysis of some scene or character in a particular text is embedded in generalisations about the
author’s work or the narrative genre that it exemplifies, the effect is both satisfying and frustrating: satisfying in the breadth of reading that is implied; frustrating, because the reader is unable to evaluate personally either the text or the analysis and must take Saxby’s word for it.

In the chapter titled ‘Adventure’, his highlighting of the almost forgotten work of Margaret Paice is characteristic:

Even though Mrs Paice is limited by a style that lacks bite and by plots that are made up of routine elements, her locations are individualized and her settings are real, and this is her strength. Characterization is surer in *The Bensens* and *They Drowned a Valley*. Mrs Downey who refuses to leave the valley is a remarkable character who in her cantankerous old age learns a valuable lesson:

She had thought she would feel sad when the time came to leave the valley, but strangely it did not tear her heart the way she had expected it to. She had thought a great deal, lying there in her hospital bed: she had come to realize that it was people, not places, that mattered most. To be with those who loved and wanted her was better than living alone with the past.

Nan Chauncy, Joan Phipson and Margaret Paice, more than most writers, have established fairly firmly in Australia the bush adventure story with the family or group element as important as the action. Of the three, Joan Phipson has worked the most movement into her plots, but to the perceptive reader it will be Nan Chauncy’s Tasmanian setting and her Lorenny family which will linger on in memory.

(Saxby 1971, p.64)

The writing here is both authoritative and tentative. Saxby is plainly aware that he is a pioneer, mapping out the territory, pointing his readers in useful directions and warning them about probable dead ends. Frequent generalisations unsupported by specific references may appear to privilege his reading of the text alone, though it would be difficult to argue that this can be read as arrogant. Rather, the tone conveys a desire to avoid wasting the reader’s time.
on pursuing texts that are out of print, difficult to access and of doubtful literary value.

This section of the discussion on adventure concludes with the following reference to 1959 Book of the Year winner John Gunn:


(Saxby 1971, p.65)

To a reader approaching this passage a generation later and without the value judgments indicated by that final impatient sentence, the prospect of genre fiction co-written by children may be far more interesting than Saxby assumes.

The confident assumption that the reader would accept his judgment, if given the opportunity, is in marked contrast to the claim that Chauncy, Phipson and Paice have established the family bush adventure ‘fairly firmly’. Given the breadth of reference in the history as a whole, the tentativeness in this awkward phrasing seems related to the author’s awareness both that the pace of change in his field of study is gathering, and that there are few peers he can compare notes with. It also suggests that he is conscious of the pace of change in Australian society generally during the period he is writing about.

The opening chapter in volume 2 of the *History* is titled, ‘Australia 1941 – 1971 The Social, Educational and Literary Background’ (1971, p.9). It comments on the post-war population growth that made the need for greater educational opportunities urgent, and with it specialist children’s publishing, library collections and librarianship training. They are the concerns of an educator and create an important context for reading his involvement in the setting up of the Children’s Book Council, the drafting of its first constitution and the regulations governing the Book of the Year awards. His overall aim is to educate the consumers and producers of children’s books at every point in the process.
At the time he is writing, Saxby is looking back on the successful employment of the different strategies designed to achieve that aim. Australian publishing houses have by the 1970s begun to appoint specialist children’s editors, the number and quality of children’s books originated in Australia have increased, the first children’s bookshop has opened and the second is about to, courses in children’s librarianship are offered and the network of free public libraries with substantial children’s collections has expanded. The rueful note in his chapter on these changes helps identify the basic assumptions of his research. While acknowledging in the growth of Australian children’s literature a ‘blending of professionalism and commercialism which has been good for writers and readers alike’ (1971, p.20) he goes on to say:

…writing for children in Australia is now a serious business. One might even suspect that our writers and critics are taking themselves too seriously. Earnestness is admirable provided it is brushed with enthusiasm and tempered with light-heartedness. It would be tragic if the death of Norman Lindsay in 1969 removed all gusto and rumbustiousness from the children’s book world. Mercifully the children themselves are beginning to speak up and scratch at the stuffiness of academic do-gooders. Human insights, fine writing, and a message, they will accept – provided these are embodied in a lively and gripping story. (p.20)

The ambivalence here is that of a pioneer wondering whether he has been too successful in promoting the growth of his field of interest. It’s a note that sounds repeatedly in his writing throughout the rest of his career. If elsewhere Saxby constructs images of himself as the occasionally weary cataloguer, the arbiter of literary values and the somewhat tentative academic analyst, here he is primarily the benign parent as educator, with a child who is waywardly vigorous and independent. That parental tone will be identified, too, in public statements by the CBC judges in chapter 4 of this thesis and in the case studies of novels by Ivan Southall and John Marsden in chapters 5 and 7.

Saxby’s commentary on Margaret Paice referred to earlier selects a ‘valuable lesson’ learnt by the main character as exemplifying the writer’s achievements.
That it is a lesson about the wisdom acquired with maturity indicates that Saxby regards socialising as the primary function of the literary text. Subsequent generations of critics, including Stephens (1992), Nodelman (1997), Bradford (2001) and Mallan (2002), agree that this is the primary function of the literary text for children, but emphasise its potential for damage more often than Saxby does.

His romantic emphasis on the role of the imagination in that process is embedded in the titles of two of Saxby’s later works: *Give Them Wings: the Experience of Children’s Literature* (1987) and *Books in the Life of a Child: Bridges to Literature and Learning* (1997). Although Saxby has written frequently on the fairy tale traditions of European folklore and refers often to fantasy novelists such as Lewis and Tolkien as he emphasises the transformative power of the imagination in writing for children, he acknowledges somewhat regretfully that Australia has given him little material of this kind to work with, when he says that ‘very little fantasy of consequence has been produced in this country in the past thirty years’ (Saxby 1971, p.142). Compared with, for example, his 63-page chapter ‘Adventure’, the chapter titled ‘Fantasy’ at just 14 pages is one of the shortest chapters in the volume.

In it, he points out that the popular *Digit Dick* series by Leslie Rees was effectively ‘painless social studies’. And although in Wrightson’s *Down to Earth*, he finds a novel he can enthuse about – in retrospect, however, not one of her strongest – he devotes two pages to celebrating the virtuoso performance in Randolph Stow’s one children’s book, *Midnite*. Then, finding Wakefield’s *Bottersnikes and Gumbles* difficult to place in any literary context, he celebrates it too simply as a ‘zany creation’ (p.149). Until the prolific publishing of Australian fantasy from the late 1980s onwards, the emphasis in Saxby’s work is on realist fiction and transformation as education.

Saxby’s involvement with IBBY, the International Board on Books for Young People, gave him an opportunity to promote both Australian children’s literature and celebrate the growth of Australian fantasy. Set up six years after
the CBC by a benefactor who had fled Nazi Germany, IBBY lists in its mission statement aims similar to those set out in the constitution of the CBC:

- to promote international understanding through children’s books
- to give children everywhere the opportunity to have access to books with high literary and artistic standards
- to encourage the publication and distribution of quality children's books, especially in developing countries
- to provide support and training for those involved with children and children's literature
- to stimulate research and scholarly works in the field of children's literature

(http://www.ibby.org/index.php?id=about)

One of the means IBBY has used to achieve those aims since 1956 has been to award the biennial Hans Christian Andersen Medal to a writer, and from 1966 to an illustrator, for an outstanding body of work. When Saxby was nominated to the international jury for this award in 1984 and 1986, his advocacy resulted in the 1986 medal going to Patricia Wrightson and Robert Ingpen – the one time it has been awarded to an Australian writer and illustrator. Given Saxby’s lament referred to earlier, the award to Wrightson was particularly significant to his role as an educator in its endorsement of both high fantasy and the imagination in Australian books for children. However, when he turns in the History to chapters on the construction of the natural environment and Indigenous Australians in fiction for children, Saxby positions himself at some distance from the ‘adults with didactic tendencies [who] have sought to instruct young Australians in the natural science of their country indirectly by means of narrative, heavily laced with data’ (1971, p.157).

As late as 1995, when he delivers the annual Lawrie Ryan Children’s Literature Lecture at the State Library of Queensland, the impression Saxby’s research gives is still of a mission to interest an audience with little knowledge of Australian books for children in as many of those titles as possible. The approach in this paper is perhaps determined by the venue and audience, and by his major work of the 1990s, *The Proof of the Puddin*, which is more complex in structure than volumes 1 and 2 of the *History*, but adopts the same perspect-
ive of a historical survey that reads at times like an annotated catalogue. Both *The Proof of the Puddin* and the Ryan lecture refer to so many titles that Saxby has clearly decided to leave most of the analytical commentary on them to those researchers who will come after him. The question mark in the title of the lecture, ‘Challenging the Young Reader? Changing Perspectives in Australian Children’s Literature’, indicates the author’s own perspective. Tentative warnings 25 years earlier about a growing adult-centred elitism in Australian books for children are now replaced by alarm at what he perceives as dumbing-down.

Saxby’s presence in publishing and education as the benign parent referred to earlier prevents his claiming this view as his own, so, with some irony, he quotes an unnamed visiting academic:

> At a reading conference held in Sydney a visiting professor of language education warned against the ‘crass commercialism and play-it-safe mentality of most children’s book publishers’, the ‘hucksterism’, the ‘bottom-line mentality that is ubiquitous to our mass culture.’ He confessed to being ‘deeply troubled by the remarkable amount of junk published that reflects the desire to play it safe, to appeal to a lowest common denominator, to capitalise on the latest fads and to publish sequels or copies of someone else’s best seller’. There are those who would apply this to the Australian scene.

(Saxby 1996, p.83)

Saxby concedes repeatedly elsewhere that a story for children must be entertaining. And here, after denouncing the scatological element in contemporary Australian children’s books (a repeated theme of the CBC judges’ reports in the 1990s), he makes the concession once again, but, in doing so, uses a scatological metaphor of his own.

> Personally I don’t think that a certain amount of junk or pulp reading hurts. As was once said, it adds bulk to the diet and keeps the reading regular.

(Saxby 1996, p.83)
Having used the code of the metaphor to position himself above scatology, he then turns to the perspective he feels most passionate about: the lack of moral clarity in these books as he reads them.

They lack a firm moral stance, not because they condone antisocial or what could be regarded by some puritans as immoral behaviour or negative attitudes or even personal malpractice. Rather they set out to ridicule some undesirable element in society or the individual – say beauty quests or sneaky behaviour – but exploit the humour or pathos of what they are supposed to be criticising. They milk what is intrinsically sleazy – for humour, pathos and melodrama.

(Saxby 1996, p.83)

The fact that the preceding metaphor for the therapeutic potential of popular literature to some extent does what Saxby is complaining about indicates the complex nature of his own morality. But it is clear that for him the role of literature in developing the child’s moral perspectives has a high priority.

In a later article (2004, p.81) reflecting on the increased availability of sources for research in Australian children’s literature, Saxby expresses satisfaction that so many others have joined him in the field, albeit repeating his note of caution that research might become self-serving and waver from its focus on young readers. He acknowledges the international publication of Australian children’s books and research by Australian academics, but in his conclusion emphasises the role of Harry Potter in promoting literacy.

To someone with a passion for high fantasy, who has spent more than 60 years trying to attract serious critical attention to any kind of books for children, let alone his favourite genre, the high media profile given to the *Harry Potter* series – and its popularity with children, parents, booksellers and educators alike – must itself seem like another kind of fantasy. Given Arnold’s thesis that, together, religion and culture can lead society towards the idea of perfection, Saxby’s triumphant conclusion that now ‘Academic respectability is added to evangelical zeal in promoting reading among children’ (2004, p.82) is telling.
While Arnold acknowledged that his beliefs were ridiculed on both sides of the Atlantic as a “‘religion of culture’, as the objectors mockingly call it, which I am supposed to be promulgating’ (Arnold 1994, p.2) Saxby uses the phrase ‘evangelical zeal’ without irony.

The language here is consistent with the rhetoric of battle, often invoked by the Children’s Book Council and which Sheahan-Bright argues (2005, p.4) is used throughout the history of publishing books for children: a battle for children’s minds between educational ideals and commercialism. The imagery draws together neatly the battle for children’s books and the epic battle against both the Muggles and Voldemort and his cohorts.

Noting the marketing hype surrounding the publication of the fifth Harry Potter novel, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, Saxby quotes editorials published on the same day by two of Sydney’s daily papers – a profile for children’s books itself unknown before the advent of Harry Potter.

An editorial in the Sydney Morning Herald (21 June 2003) claims that the Harry Potter hype ‘has made books cool’ and improved literacy: ‘Non-readers have turned into readers, book-haters into bookworms’. It might also be argued that despite the lure of the visual media there are still an enduring number of children committed to print. An editorial in the Australian on the same day claims: ‘The war against the dark digital lords is not lost and books can defeat the supposed spells TV and video games cast on the young.’

(Saxby 2004, p.89)

Here Saxby seizes on copy that could be a battle cry for the CBC, from leader writers increasingly concerned about the future impact of the digital environment on their own traditional print medium.
Chapter 3
THE BOOK OF THE YEAR AWARD

The Eligibility of Books and Judges

The imagery of battle applied to the promotion of book reading constructs the relationship between adults and children as an oppositional ‘us and them’. And as Stephens (1992, 1996) and Scutter (1996) point out, that is the relationship underpinning the realist tradition in children’s fiction. That tradition constructs childhood as a site for the individual child’s playful rebellion against adult social values that are eventually reasserted, so despite the images of freedom involved, the ideology is deeply conservative (Pennell 2003) and continually restates adult power. Scutter argues, however, that a paradigm shift occurs in the dystopian fiction of the 1980s, when the narrative is focalised through young adult characters who ‘refuse the perceived values of the adult world’. (Scutter 1996, p.5).

It is no coincidence, then, that with the growth of publishing for young adults in the 1980s, challenges to the relevance and authority of the CBC and its awards become more insistent. But before concerns about literacy strengthen the battle imagery, the CBC resists change by positioning the Book of the Year judges metonymically as upholders of immutable laws of literary excellence, as determined by adults. The eligibility of judges, their identity and the full wording of their judgments therefore become the main points of contest.

Each year at its annual general meeting, the national executive of the CBC debates motions submitted by state branches to revise the judging criteria for the Book of the Year awards. What began as a statement of the Mechanics and Rules for Judging became the Judges’ Handbook and is now the Awards Handbook, which is distributed annually and extends to around 70 pages. Although half this publication consists of specimen application forms, form letters and media releases, the extensive treatment of the awards criteria is in
stark contrast to the brief lists of criteria for comparable awards in the United States and the United Kingdom.

The American Library Association, for example, issues a John Newbery Medal Committee Manual, which focuses on procedures for selection of judges and for voting. But its three ‘Terms’ for the judging are remarkably succinct: two main terms and a third confirming the absolute nature of the first two:

1. The Medal shall be awarded annually to the author of the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children published in English in the United States during the preceding year. There are no limitations as to the character of the book considered except that it be original work. Honor Books may be named. These shall be books that are also truly distinguished.
2. The Award is restricted to authors who are citizens or residents of the United States.
3. The committee in its deliberations is to consider only the books eligible for the award, as specified in the terms.

There follow ten brief definitions of terms such as ‘distinguished’, ‘resident’ and ‘the preceding year’. Then under three main points, the manual lists the criteria for judging.

1. In identifying "Distinguished Writing" in a book for children, Committee members need to consider the following:
   - Interpretation of the theme or concept
   - Presentation of information including accuracy, clarity, and organization
   - Development of a plot
   - Delineation of characters
   - Delineation of setting
   - Appropriateness of style

Note: Because the literary qualities to be considered will vary depending on content, the committee need not expect to find excellence in each of the named elements. The book should, however, have distinguished qualities in all of the elements pertinent to it.
2. Each book is to be considered as a contribution to literature. The committee is to make its decision primarily on the text. Other aspects of a book are to be considered only if they distract from the text. Such other aspects might include illustrations, overall design of the book, etc.

3. The book must be a self-contained entity, not dependent on other media (i.e., sound or film equipment) for its enjoyment.

   Note: The committee should keep in mind that the award is for literary quality and quality presentation for children. The award is not for didactic intent or for popularity.


Even more surprising than the relative brevity of the criteria is the footnote: ‘Adopted by the ALSC board, January, 1978. Revised Midwinter, 1987’. The 23-year period since the Newbery criteria were last revised is in sharp contrast to the annual revision of the Book of the Year criteria and the degree of detail specified. Although the greater page extent of the CBC document is, of course, partly due to its covering five categories as opposed to the Newbery Medal’s one, the overriding reason becomes clear when relevant sections are compared.

Because the Book of the Year is awarded in separate categories for fiction and information books, the criteria for both those categories should be taken together, when they are being compared with the Newbery definitions of ‘Distinguished writing’ quoted above.

The Children’s Book Council of Australia Awards are for books with an implied readership under the age of eighteen. The Judges assess entries for the Awards primarily for literary merit, including cohesiveness in significant literary elements; language chosen carefully for its appropriateness to the theme and style of the work with proper regard to the aesthetic qualities of language; and originality in the treatment of literary elements as they apply to the form of the work. Appeal to the implied readership under the age of eighteen is also taken into account. Judges should also consider quality of illustrations, book design, production, printing and binding. (CBCA 2009, p.4)
The Eve Pownall Award for Information Books will be made to outstanding books which have the prime intention of documenting factual material with consideration given to imaginative presentation, interpretation and variation of style. As general guidelines, the Judges may consider the relative success of the book in balancing and harmonising the following elements:

- style of language and presentation;
- graphic excellence;
- clarity, appropriateness and aesthetic appeal of illustration;
- integration of text, graphics and illustrations to engage interest and enhance understanding;
- overall design of book to facilitate the presentation of information;
- accuracy with regard to the current state of knowledge.

(CBCA 2009, p.5)

The brevity of the Newbery criteria appears to confer a greater degree of trust in the way the judges for that award will choose to interpret them. The detail in the criteria for the CBC’s Eve Pownall Award, on the other hand, seems to derive from some uncertainty, either about the judges’ competence or the newness of the field and their understanding of the range of features that might be taken into account. The language used in both lists of criteria allows those who are employing them considerable latitude in interpretation, so in the ‘us and them’ world of literary awards, it is quite clear where the power resides. The Newbery’s ‘truly distinguished’ and the CBC’s use of such phrases as ‘significant literary elements’, ‘proper regard’ and ‘graphic excellence’ invoke the concept of a universally accepted aesthetic and they function to fend off possible challenges to the judges’ eventual choices.

Like the Newbery Medal, on which it was modelled, the United Kingdom’s Carnegie Medal is awarded annually for a book in any category that has originally been published for children and young people. It was first awarded by the Library Association in 1936. That organisation merged with the Institute of Information Scientists in 2002 to form CILIP, the Chartered Institute of
Library and Information Professionals, which took over administration of both the Carnegie Medal and the Kate Greenaway Medal for illustration in that year.

Perhaps reflecting the combined professions of the new institute, the Carnegie differs from both the Newbery and Australia’s Book of the Year in its specification that electronic books are eligible for the award. And unlike those awards, the Carnegie does not make the nationality of the author a criterion. No doubt nationality is more important to postcolonial societies. Instead, the significant criteria are publication and the date of publication in the United Kingdom:

The book must have received its first publication in the United Kingdom or have had co-publication elsewhere within a three month time lapse. In the case of e-books and short stories previously published in a magazine or elsewhere, the point of publication should be considered as the date when the work is published as a whole.

(CILIP Carnegie Greenaway website http://www.carnegiegreenaway.org.uk)

Like eligibility for the Man Booker Prize, these criteria appear to be further British vestiges of empire.

Where the Carnegie criteria differ most sharply from their American and Australian counterparts, however, is in the emotional preamble that introduces a list of questions which judges are to ask themselves, under headings that make no concessions to any narratology formulated later than Forster’s: ‘The Plot’, ‘Characterisation’ and ‘Style’.

The book that wins the Carnegie Medal should be a book of outstanding literary quality. The whole work should provide pleasure, not merely from the surface enjoyment of a good read, but also the deeper subconscious satisfaction of having gone through a vicarious, but at the time of reading, a real experience that is retained afterwards.

Individuals, regional branches of CILIP or special interest groups may nominate by the last week in October up to two titles for the Carnegie, which must have been published in the preceding education year – that is 1 September to 31 August. Each nomination is to be accompanied by a statement of 30-50 words, outlining the ways in which the book meets the criteria for the medal. The Youth Libraries Group appoints a panel of 12 librarians from among its members to act as judges. The judges read and assess each title and a short list is released in April, followed by the announcement of the winner in June.

Although CILIP considers e-books eligible, whereas the CBC doesn’t, the CBC does appear to acknowledge some changes in the publishing industry. It debates motions to revise its criteria annually and makes often minor amendments to them in a process that seems designed to acknowledge the evolving nature of both narrative and publishing. At the 1973 AGM, for example, more than half of the 24 motions debated focus on the awards. At the 2005 AGM, one branch alone, Queensland, submitted 22 motions related to the awards. (AGM 1973, 2005, Minutes, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227 box 10).

Under the heading ‘1.3.1 Eligibility Criteria for Books’, the CBC awards handbook specifies a number of textual variations – such as a newly illustrated version of a story previously published – and variations in the number and nationality of the creators involved. However it then adds the following:

Please note:

(a) These awards are only for books in the printed format, as distinct from digital and audiovisual formats.
(b) Any entries with accompanying non-book materials will be judged solely on the merits of the book component.
(c) Books written as part of a series or published in serial form will be judged as separate entities and must be able to ‘stand-alone’.
(d) Books that have not previously been published as separate entities and are entered as a boxed set with an ISBN for the set, will be judged as a whole and attract one entry fee.
While the criteria therefore acknowledge and appear to embrace change, the CBC still falls back on the position that its standards are universally agreed, require no explanation and are immutable. The extent to which the American Library Association shares that ambivalence is concealed by the relative succinctness of its stated criteria, although that succinctness indicates a conviction that the ALA’s judgments need no defence. CILIP appears to be less conservative, but its insistence on a ‘real’ reading experience as a criterion echoes both Arnold and Leavis.

As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, the CBC added new categories to the Book of the Year award in 1955 (Picture Book of the Year), 1982 (Junior Book of the Year), 1993 (Eve Pownall Award for Information Books – originally, as mentioned earlier, a one-off award in the Bicentenary year, 1988) and 2001 (Book of the Year: Early Childhood). But while further proliferation to include a Young Adult category has been discussed and an awards handbook sub-committee meets regularly to revise entry and judging criteria, few motions to broaden the eligibility of members for the judging panel have succeeded. Victims of the long lead time in academic book publication, for example, Nimon and Foster (1997, p.19) announce the impending introduction in 1998 of a Young Adult category that never eventuated.

Each state branch of the CBC nominates a judge from among its members to serve on the panel for two years. On the model of half-Senate elections for Australia’s federal parliament, nomination is staggered so that in any single year half the judges are in their first year of office and half in their second. The two-year rotation of the national executive among the state branches is used to determine the membership of a separate panel to judge the Eve Pownall Award for Information Books. Since 1993 the state that provides the national executive has the right to nominate ‘no less than three and no more than four’ of its
members as judges for that award (the stipulation almost ludicrously precise), and those judges may not serve on the Book of the Year panel simultaneously.

Although the criteria for being appointed or elected as a judge were covered in a single clause until 2007, the same criteria are now spelt out in three separate clauses: ‘Conflict of Interest’, ‘Vested Interest’ and ‘Associations with an Entry’. The change makes the three areas of concern slightly more emphatic, but does nothing to address the issues that have made this one of the most contentious sections of the handbook. As the number of entries and therefore the unpaid reading load increases, it becomes less likely that any candidate for the position of judge will be able or willing to meet these criteria.

2.1.1 Conflict of Interest
It is important for perceptions of fairness in the Awards that Judges have no conflict of interest in the outcome of the awards during their term of office.

2.1.1.1 Vested Interest
A person with a vested interest in the Awards may not be a Judge. For the purposes of these Awards a vested interest is taken to be any financial gain obtained from or other financial association with the actual publication process of a current entry in the Awards. Generally this would exclude publishers and their employees and may also exclude authors, illustrators, editors and others whose works would be entered in the awards during their term of office.

2.1.1.2 Associations with an Entry
A Judge who has a non-financial association with a current entry or a financial association that is subsequent to the publication of a current entry (such as a paid review, a bookselling position or preparing readers’ notes) is encouraged to declare that association to the other Judges and National Executive through the Awards Coordinator. Should National Executive consider a Judge’s association with a current entry is sufficient to influence a public perception of bias in the judging of the Awards, they should ask the judge to clarify his/her position and then decide to what extent the Judge should continue with judging related to that entry.

State branches are also advised that a judge must have:
• recognised standing and qualifications in the field of children’s literature
• wide and recent knowledge of children’s literature, especially Australian children’s literature
• awareness of illustration techniques, design, editing, printing and production processes.

(CBCA 2009, p.9)

The requirement that a judge declare any association with an entry by means of reading, mentoring, launching or reviewing is a relaxation of the CBC’s original position that ruled anyone with such an association ineligible. And whereas previously a ‘person with a current vested interest in the Awards’ (CBCA 2006, p.8) was ineligible, the change to ‘during their term of office’ is intended to clarify ‘current’, but also to indicate that those involved in book production may be considered eligible, as long as they have no vested interest in or associations with an entry during their two-year tenure as judge. Due, no doubt, to the limited pool of potential judges, this is not standard practice in a relatively small literary community such as Australia’s. In the experience of the present writer as a judge for various literary awards, judges not infrequently declare an interest and simply absent themselves from the room for the discussion of particular titles.

The slight relaxing of the rules on eligibility by the CBC acknowledged a degree of contradiction inherent in asking that a judge have recognised professional standing in the children’s book community, but not perform any of the functions related to publication. Even apart from the question of whether a writer, illustrator or other publishing professional were willing to take two years off work to meet these criteria, the CBC’s concession is less generous than it appears. Since the lead time in publishing a book is at least one year, and sometimes as many as five in the case of picture books, the period a judge would need to be professionally inactive in order to avoid vested interests or associations could be far longer than two years. The new wording is therefore
essentially a public relations exercise designed to disarm critics and give the appearance of greater inclusiveness in the judging process.

Perhaps unexpectedly in this instance, even with the new wording the CBC’s definition of vested interest is less extensive than the ALA’s. The five categories of vested interest in the Newbery Committee Manual include authorship not only of texts, but of educational and reading guides, family or personal relationship with an author or any employee of a trade publisher (including a publisher that has not submitted an entry), and personal or family investment exceeding 5 per cent in the stock of any trade publisher (ALA 2007, p.13). In contrast, the framers of the Carnegie criteria for eligibility appear to be unaware of such possibilities for commercially motivated judgments.

Until the introduction of specialist tertiary courses in children’s librarianship, children’s literature and publishing in the 1970s, any attempt at the demarcation of roles in the children’s book community was difficult. The Executive Board of the ALA decided that from its inception, the Newbery Medal should be voted on by members of the Children’s Librarians’ Section, and by 1924, this had become unwieldy and a special judging committee was chosen from that section. Lundin, however, cites a listing in the 1929 Children’s Library Yearbook of 40 women who were both librarians and children’s authors (Lundin 1996, p.843). Many of these women were also reviewers. So although there was specialisation in the field of children’s librarianship earlier in the United States than in Australia, within the field roles were not specialised.

The later development of the children’s book industry in Australia produced specialist editors such as Joyce Saxby and Barbara Ker Wilson, and, as publishing houses expanded their children’s lists towards the end of the 1980s, high profile figures such as Julie Watts, Leonie Tyle, Erica Wagner and Rosalind Price, who, although frequently asked to speak at conferences and writers’ festivals, specialised in editing and publishing, rather than either creative or critical writing. A slightly older generation of children’s booksellers and librarians such as Anne Ingram, Margaret Hamilton and Robin Morrow were reviewers who became editors, children’s publishers and writers.
Academics such as Walter McVitty, David Harris and the present writer became children’s publishers. And editor and publisher Jennifer Rowe became one of Australia’s most successful writers in the international marketplace under the name ‘Emily Rodda’. Rowe left book publishing to become editor of the *Australian Women’s Weekly* (1988-92), and eventually left publishing altogether to devote all her time to writing. Dyan Blacklock and Sue Whiting, on the other hand, are both inhouse editors and writers, who have sought publication of their own writing outside, but do not feel their roles to be in conflict and have continued to seek publication with the publishing houses that employ them.

In a market the size of Australia’s, earning a living from any one role within the children’s book industry remains a challenge, and the CBC was clearly acknowledging that reality in its move to relax its initial opposition to judges mentoring, launching or reviewing not just eligible titles, but children’s books generally. In both the United States and the United Kingdom, the first awards for children’s books were set up and continue to be judged by librarians. Although in Australia the Book of the Year awards were not set up and controlled by a single profession, both public librarians and teacher-librarians were among its founding members and dominate the judging panels throughout its history.

Whereas awards for adult books are often made by judges who have a high profile in the arts community, and therefore high publicity value, in many cases the Book of the Year judges have been little known outside their respective constituencies. In the early years of the awards this was not raised as a problem. Indeed the judges’ relative anonymity is consonant with the CBC’s assumption that its standards are universally agreed. The phrases ‘up to standard’ and ‘not up to standard’ are invoked by the judges’ reports and appear in the minutes of the annual general meeting frequently, with no hint of justification.

Furthermore, one inference of a South Australian motion for an internal Book of the Year review process in 1960 is that the judges were not making personal choices, but proxy decisions on behalf of the state branches. The
corollary was that, therefore, each branch had the right to endorse or challenge the judges’ decisions. The South Australian branch moved:

(a) That the State Book Councils judge as at present, and that in the event of any State Council objection to the award, the findings of the judges be submitted to a National Review Committee made up of three members nominated by the Book Council of Australia and three members nominated by the Children’s Libraries Section of the Library Association of Australia.

(b) That all States be sent a copy of the judges’ report as soon as it is available. Any State may lodge an objection to the Award within seven days. If this is done, the objection must be referred to the National Review Committee, which will make the final decision.

(AGM 1960, Minutes, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 10)

Throughout the 1960s discussions about the quality of Australian picture books are minuted. Because the subject attracted public criticism of both the judges and the CBC generally, it created debate about both the calibre of the judges and the unanimity of their decisions. Although at the fourth AGM in 1964 the Canberra branch moved that the CBC review its method of appointing judges, the field from which judges are drawn and the special qualifications required, the motion was lost. At the AGM in 1969 the South Australian branch moved:

That each member Council selects its judge from people who have the following qualifications: university degree or registration certificate of the Library Association of Australia (including a pass in the Children’s Literature paper) or its equivalent or Diploma in Education, together with considerable experience in the field of children’s literature.

(motion 3a1, AGM 1969, Minutes, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 10)
This motion, too, was lost, although it was recommended that for the first time the list of judges’ names be accompanied by biographical notes. And when the judges for 1970-71 were announced, for the first time their degrees and honours were included, most notably at the head of the list, ‘ACT Mrs L Rees MBE’.

After referring briefly to controversy about the judges’ qualifications, the president reports:

In the main, the activities of the Council centre around the selection of a ‘Children’s Book of the Year’ and a ‘Picture Book of the Year’, followed by the making of Awards if and when justified. All entries submitted to the Council are considered and approved by our panel of competent and qualified judges.

(Annual Report, AGM 1970, Minutes, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 10)

Although the tone of ‘competent and qualified’ is somewhat muted, general public consumption of the president’s annual report has always been limited, so this defence is aimed at bolstering internal confidence within the CBC in its judging process, rather than at providing a spirited answer to criticism in the media. As the report continues, however, it is evident that, despite minor concessions to the demand that judges be identified more clearly, the CBC’s resistance to questions about the judging process has become entrenched.

Following the announcement of the Award, there was criticism of the selection, commendations, comments in the report and the qualifications of the judges. This is not new. The Council has complete faith in our panel of judges. It is noteworthy that this unfounded criticism does not appear to originate from those most vitally concerned – the Authors and Publishers. The number of entries each year confirms this. A suggestion from outside the Council has been voiced that we should relinquish, or, at the least, share the control of the Book of the Year Awards. The Children’s Book Council of Australia has competently and successfully administered the Awards since 1946 and I see
no reason to fear that our competence has diminished in any way.

(Annual Report, AGM 1970, Minutes, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 10)

The assumption that the problem can’t be too serious because there have been no complaints from ‘those most vitally concerned’ is naïve, to say the least. The lack of complaints from authors and publishers might just as easily indicate their fear of being ostracised and disadvantaged financially for questioning the awards process.

In addition to defending the qualifications and competence of its judges, the CBC made it clear from quite early on that the judging panel spoke with a single voice. With one amendment, a 1969 motion from the Queensland branch was carried:

Where there are discussions among the judges, the majority vote shall be accepted, and dissensions shall not be expressed in the judges’ report.

(AGM 1969, Minutes, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 10)

The final phrase was amended to ‘published judges’ report’, signalling that, while differences of opinion were acceptable in the committee room, a united front was to be presented to the general public. Such a stipulation is a corollary of the assumption that a single standard of excellence has been applied in the judging.
**Book of the Year: Changing Categories**

When, as mentioned in chapter 2, the first award was made in 1946 to Leslie Rees and Walter Cunningham’s illustrated storybook *Karrawingi the Emu*, there was only one category: ‘Book of the Year’. If it were entered in the awards today it would be eligible in the Book of the Year: Younger Readers category, which the awards handbook defines as:

> outstanding books of fiction, drama or poetry for readers who have developed independent reading skills but are still developing in literary appreciation. Generally, books in this category will be appropriate in style and content for readers from the middle to upper primary years.

*(CBCA 2009, p.4)*

Over the 65 years of the awards, the categories have been redefined and added to as the nature of the books eligible for them has become more complex. Whereas, it was argued earlier in this chapter, the CBC has been extremely reluctant to broaden criteria for the eligibility of judges, since 1988 it has appeared eager to increase the number of categories of books – thereby constructing itself as both responsibly conservative in judgment, and open to all new narrative developments.

As noted earlier, the labelling of categories in this discussion will occasionally be problematic, because they are constantly changing. This may well reflect the constant renaming in the education system. For the first nine years, for example, the Book of the Year was fiction or non-fiction for readers of either primary or secondary school age. Although the CBC acknowledged a change in terminology when the ‘Eve Pownall Award for Information Books’ was made permanent in 1993, for most of the awards’ history, books in this category were referred to as ‘non-fiction’. However, while the terms ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ have been increasingly displaced in departments of school education by a focus on ‘K-12’, ‘stages’ and the concept of ‘middle school’, they still appear in the awards handbook. Again, the language the CBC uses to
define its categories signifies both a desire to accept change and a resistance to it.

Contrary to the redefinition of other categories, the emphasis on fiction for older readers is a constant. Of the 60 titles that have won either Book of the Year or, later, Book of the Year: Older Readers, 49 are novels. Stephens (1992) argues that this is consonant with the prevailing liberal humanist ideology of traditional children’s literature in English. The other 11 winners are information books or collections of legends or short stories. When early winners such as Joan Phipson’s *Good Luck to the Rider* (1953) or Patricia Wrightson’s *The Crooked Snake* (1956) were published, the concept of ‘young adult’ fiction had not yet developed. Placed beside later winners such as Gillian Rubinstein’s *Beyond the Labyrinth* (1989) or Gary Crew’s *Strange Objects* (1991) they would clearly be better described as books for Younger Readers.

Even taking into account such variations among the winners in the Book of the Year/Book of the Year: Older Readers category, it is clearly identified with, not just fiction, but the novel. After ‘fiction’ the awards handbook definitions cite the eligibility of ‘drama’, but a playtext has never won or been short listed in any category. This may simply be due to the fact that playtexts are sold almost exclusively to the education market and the general (or ‘trade’) market for them is negligible.

Whiting (2000) argues that by the 1990s the teaching of reading had become dominated by whole language and the use of ‘real books’. One consequence was that sales of fiction to the education market became increasingly important to general publishers, particularly through bulk sales to Scholastic and Troll book clubs, which sold directly into schools: both to the young readers themselves and their teachers and parents. Nevertheless, print runs of such novels as *Beyond the Labyrinth* and *Strange Objects* were only partly determined by club sales; they also depended on the level of pre-publication subscription in the trade.
An economically viable print run for any of the six major trade publishers in Australia that contract books like these is in the thousands; trade sales of a playtext would be unlikely to amount to hundreds. As the demise of poetry publishing by those six houses since the 1980s indicates, the trade sales of poetry are little better. However, the repeated short listing of poetry titles in the Book of the Year awards from the 1970s to the present indicates that for the CBC judges, poetry is a privileged genre and supports Thomson’s claim (1992) that the ‘New Criticism’, with its emphasis on poetic language, continued to dominate literature studies into the 1990s. Thomson’s view is supported by Wendy Michaels’ content analysis of the 1982 New South Wales English syllabus, for example, which finds that poetry is ‘the most highly valued of the areas. This is evident in references to poetry as the “most demanding” and “potentially the most rewarding”.’ (Michaels 2001, p.182).

The privileging of poetry by the CBC begins with the award of Picture Book of the Year in 1971 to Desmond Digby’s illustrated edition of Paterson’s *Waltzing Matilda* and in 1975 to Quentin Hole’s *The Man from Ironbark*. The Jean Chapman titles *Tell Me Another Tale* (1977) and *The Sugar-Plum Christmas Book* (1978), which were given Commended awards in the Picture Book of the Year category, are not full colour picture books as the term had been understood in the UK since the publication of *Brian Wildsmith’s ABC* in 1962. They are illustrated collections of poems, stories and activities in the annual and bumper book tradition, and their short listing as picture books demonstrates the slow evolution of awards in that category, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The sequence of poetry short listings in the late 1980s and then from the late 1990s to the present can be read as evidence either that authors and publishers pursue the judges’ lead, or that the judges themselves are pursuing an agenda – or both. In 1986, the short listing of poetry titles shifts from the Picture Book category to Book of the Year: Older Readers and Book of the Year: Younger Readers.
In 1986, Clare Scott-Mitchell’s anthology *Apples from Hurricane Street* is short listed for Older Readers, in 1987 Doug MacLeod’s collection *Sister Madge’s Book of Nuns*, illustrated by Craig Smith is an Honour Book for Younger Readers. Then in 1988, *Rattling in the Wind*, an anthology by Jill Heylen and Celia Jellett is short listed for Older Readers and Max Fatchen’s *A Paddock of Poems* is an Honour Book for Younger Readers. Both *Rattling in the Wind* and *A Paddock of Poems* are from the same publisher, Omnibus Books.

In 1994, Elizabeth Honey’s collection *Honey Sandwich* is an Honour Book for Younger Readers and in 1997 Robin Morrow’s anthology *Beetle Soup* is short listed for Younger Readers. 1997 is also the first of an extraordinary sequence of short listings for the popular performance poet Steven Herrick, with *Love, Ghosts and Nose Hair* short listed for Older Readers. This is followed in 1999 with *A Place Like This*, short listed for Older Readers, in 2001 with *The Simple Gift*, short listed for Older Readers, in 2003 *Tom Jones Saves the World*, short listed for Younger Readers, in 2004 a Younger Readers Honour Book award for *Do-Wrong Ron* and an Older Readers Honour Book award in 2005 for *By the River*. Other writers such as Patricia Wrightson, Eleanor Spence, Nan Chaunci, Ivan Southall, Gillian Rubinstein, Victor Kelleher, Gary Crew and James Moloney have also featured in sequential awards and short listings. But the short listing of Margaret Wild’s *Jinx* for Older Readers in 2002 suggests that if the judges have an agenda here it may be the verse novel, rather than Steven Herrick.

The former children’s publisher at University of Queensland Press, Leonie Tyle, who first published Herrick, primarily aimed her list at the education market and the awards. Their adult appeal is therefore significant, because they did not have to compete for the attention of young people in the marketplace. Apart from the literary feel to the artwork and design of UQP titles published by Tyle, however, there is little to distinguish their paperback format from titles in the market designed to have greater child appeal. On the other hand, the larger hardback format of anthologies such as Morrow’s and, before it, Chapman’s, Scott-Mitchell’s and Heylen and Jellett’s, the quality of paper stock used, the profusion of full-colour illustrations and the high recommended
retail price also indicate that these titles are being published into the market often referred to in the publishing industry – with an odd mix of affection and dismissiveness – as ‘the granny market’.

The tradition of children’s books with the word ‘treasury’ in the title is a long one and refers back to the reputation for comprehensiveness and influence of *The Golden Treasury of English Songs and Lyrics*, the defining Victorian anthology of poetry for adults first published by Francis T Palgrave in 1861. In the 1990s an unprecedented number of treasuries for children were published in the United Kingdom and subsequently distributed or sold in licensed editions to English-speaking markets such as the United States and Australia, and to non-English-speaking markets in translation. These treasuries were marketed to adults in the way encyclopaedias were marketed to a previous generation: the high price represented good value because the anthology was comprehensive. The lavish production values valorised the concept of a literary tradition, signalled nostalgia for the adult’s own childhood reading, and, along with the price tag, demonstrated the extent of the adult’s love for the child who was to be given the book. The fact that these treasuries were a relatively inexpensive way for a publishing house to repackage earlier publications was masked by design and the lavish use of colour illustrations.


With the death of Dahl and Milligan, these treasuries may have exploited a nostalgia in some adults who had grown up with their books, but more clearly functioned to shore up the capital of publishing properties who were unlikely to produce any new original works in the future.
In this context, the publication of expensive illustrated hardback poetry anthologies in Australia, like bumper books, annuals and encyclopaedias before them, is related to the assertion of authority and the needs of adults as carers and educators, rather than the needs and interests of young readers. And their short listing by the CBC Book of the Year judges is clearly intended to strengthen the importance of poetry as a genre. Occasionally this has created anomalies. The 2006 decision to short list Andy Griffiths and Terry Denton’s *The Cat on the Mat is Flat*, for example, is as perverse as the 1995 short listing of Paul Jennings’ joke book *Duck for Cover*. It would be hard to argue that this slight collection by Griffiths and Denton has greater literary merit than any of the unwarded *Just or Bum* titles that created their impressive following, so its advantage seems to be simply that it is in verse form. The authors’ popularity makes this an easy way of persuading young readers that poetry is fun.

Less contentious are the 2007 Honour Book award to Meredith Costain and Pamela Allen’s exuberant read-aloud collection of poems *Doodledum Dancing* and the 2008 short listing of Sherryl Clark’s *Sixth Grade Style Queen (not!)*. Remarkably, with this last title, Penguin has revived original paperback poetry publishing for older readers, which even Omnibus had been forced to abandon, although the publicity value of printing it in green ink should be taken into account.

The judges’ unmistakable support for poetry is a minor, but significant, departure from the long identification of the awards with fiction. Nothing demonstrates that identification more starkly, however, than the history of the Picture Book of the Year award. In 1955 the CBC introduced a second Book of the Year category, Picture Book of the Year, to celebrate the Council’s tenth anniversary. In the first 14 years of the new category – including its inaugural year – there was no Picture Book of the Year winner on 11 occasions (1955, 1957, 1959-64, 1966-68), and on 9 of those 11 occasions there was no award at all. The pattern of withholding was broken in 1969 with the award of Picture Book of the Year to Southall and Greenwood’s *Sly Old Wardrobe*, but in the following year, 1970, once again no award was made.
The 1971 Picture Book of the Year, *Waltzing Matilda*, is regarded by several critics as the first Australian example of the 32-page picture book as that genre is now understood. But there was no Picture Book of the Year award at all in 1972 and no winner in 1973, 1977, 1981 and 1985. History has not been kind to these judgments. *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge*, by Mem Fox and Julie Vivas, merely short listed in 1985, for example, is regarded by critics as superior to their collaboration on Australia’s most successful picture book, *Possum Magic*, which itself was not judged Picture Book of the Year in 1984. And Pamela Allen’s *Mr Archimedes’ Bath*, Commended in 1981, is still in print 28 years later, when more recent winners are out of print and ostensibly forgotten.

Reading this sequence of events, with its mix of forward-thinking and conservatism, is not easy. A further reason for the revising of categories by the CBC is what became known as ‘category creep’. One notorious example occurred in 1998 with the short listing of Robin Klein’s novel *The Listmaker* and Libby Gleeson’s chapter book *Queen of the Universe* together, as books for Younger Readers. Putting such books together made no sense, and 10 years earlier Gleeson’s excellent text would have topped any list of chapter books for readers aged 7 to 9. Up against full length novels by Odo Hirsch, Elaine Forrestal and Robin Klein, however, it stood no chance. This anomaly resulted from the increased pressure during the 1990s to publish and award young adult titles – a campaign led by Agnes Nieuwenhuizen, at that time director of the Australian Centre for Youth Literature at the State Library of Victoria.

Nieuwenhuizen’s emphasis on the literary sophistication of young adult fiction may have been designed to counter the decoding of ‘young adult’ as ‘problem novel for reluctant readers’ – a meaning that had developed in the United States during the 1980s. But it may also have been counterproductive, because it implies that having greater adult appeal elevates a book to the status of Literature. James Moloney points out that in 2001 Judith Clarke’s *Wolf on the Fold* won Book of the Year: Older Readers and in the same year the Queensland Premier’s Steele Rudd Award, which is specifically for an adult
short story collection. A further anomaly is the 1985 Book of the Year by James Aldridge:

_The True Story of Lilli Stubeck_ was originally written and published as an adult novel but tossed into the CBCA awards as an afterthought. It was the eventual winner, but how many children have read it since? In my opinion it is an adult novel and should not have masqueraded as anything else.

(Moloney 2002, p.96)

Sonya Hartnett’s _Thursday’s Child_ (short listed 2001) and Marcus Zusak’s _The Messenger_ (Book of the Year: Older Readers 2003) were promoted as novels that would finally see these writers break into the adult market, and yet strangely they were entered for the CBC awards. As a multiple award winning novelist himself, Moloney is not angry because he has missed out. He is speaking as a librarian, who tries to inspire boys in particular to read, and feels frustrated by a degree of cynical commercialism in some publishers and writers. In one sense a publisher or a writer can hardly be blamed for entering an inappropriate book in the hope of extra sales if it wins. But judges who choose the most ‘adult’ of entries, because the choice confers academic credibility on them, may actually be discouraging some teens from reading.

Wheatley’s definition of ‘young adult’, which she shares with Nieuwenhuizen, utterly ignores both the realities of bookselling and the rites of passage on graduating from school and then tertiary study that affect reading choices.

Whether we like it or not, _young adult_ is a term that is now being used for people aged from 9 to 30 (though in its library and publishing usage the more common range would probably be 12 to 20.)

(Wheatley 1994, p.11)
The experiment with ‘crossover publishing’, where young adult shades into adult fiction (Beckett, 2008), the displacement of titles formerly regarded as ‘older readers’ down into the younger readers category, the push for picture books for older readers that resulted in the creation of the Early Childhood category – all suggest a constituency uncertain of its credibility among the adult literary community and anxious to demonstrate that it, too, was concerned with challenging, sophisticated (‘real’) literary texts. Many writers for children have in their repertoire of anecdotes the one where someone at a party says, ‘Oh – a children’s writer?’ and after several silent beats adds, ‘So are you going to write an adult book one day?’ The question isn’t a joke. The fact that tertiary English departments rejected children’s literature studies for so long (Hunt, 1992, p.6) makes it clear that children’s books were not regarded as real Literature.

At several points in the history of the awards, the CBC has responded to the demands of its members, who are, as has been pointed out, primarily teachers and librarians, by introducing new categories and redefining existing ones. In the case of its pursuit of young adult books, the redefinition was despite the commercial realities, and as the publishing companies and their overheads grew in size, the sales of Australian young adult titles, for example, became almost exclusively dependent on the limited education market and the possibility of an award. And yet the CBC continues to privilege particular subject matter, genres, authors, illustrators and even publishers with a regularity that makes its awards increasingly, but not unfailingly, predictable.

The Judging Process

While the introduction of a short list in 1982 heightened interest in the Book of the Year awards and boosted the sales of short listed titles, it created challenges in the judging process that have become acute as the number of titles submitted for judging has increased.
Publishers are required to enter a title by 31 December in the year of its publication. It may be entered for any one of four categories: Older Readers, Younger Readers, Early Childhood or the Eve Pownall Award for Information Books, and in more than one of these categories. Entries for Picture Book of the Year are chosen by the judges from among the titles entered in the other four categories, but publishers are invited to mark on each entry form whether they want a title to be considered also for Picture Book of the Year. The judging panel reserve the right to change the category a title is entered for.

Ten copies – one for each of the eight judges and two for the coordinator – are submitted to the national office of the CBC, along with paperwork nominating the categories in which it is entered and a fee of $88 for each category. The awards handbook states that the books entered are checked for eligibility by the coordinator and titles are sent to each judge in boxes of no more than 25. The judge must return a written report on each of those titles within three weeks.

The current method of entry for the Picture Book category was introduced along with the Early Childhood award in 2001. Previously publishers paid an entry fee and submitted a title for judging as Picture Book of the Year just as they did titles in the other categories. This change was made in an attempt to eliminate the expectation that the Picture Book of the Year should be only for the youngest of readers, and to recognise the increasing number of picture books being published for older readers. An immediate result of this change was that in 2002 for the first time a picture book, *My Dog* by John Heffernan and Andrew McLean, was chosen as Book of the Year: Younger Readers – a category that had previously been for fiction.

Each Book of the Year judge reads and reports on all the books entered. A report form is filled in for each title, indicating the category entered by the publisher, the category the judge considers appropriate, a short list coding ‘No’, ‘Maybe’ or ‘Yes’ (significantly in that order) and the judge’s comments.

At a three-day meeting in March, every title is discussed, the short list and winners are voted on and the judges’ report is prepared. The list of Notable
Books is posted and the short list announced at a ceremony and released to the media. From the time of this announcement to the third Friday in August and the winners’ ceremony at the beginning of Book Week, the original intention was that the short list would be promoted by booksellers, displayed in libraries around the country and on merchandise such as posters, bookmarks, balloons and badges, discussed in classrooms by children and at special short list evenings by adults. Although teachers and librarians maintain their enthusiasm, the interest of booksellers has waned somewhat in recent years with the proliferation of categories and the increasingly frequent short listing of titles that appeal to the education market rather than the general trade. Trying to predict the demand for 30 short listed titles, some of them from small publishers with few established accounts, has too often proved to be both time-consuming and expensive.

Nevertheless, since the introduction of the short list the awards have become the major activity of the CBC and most of the organisation’s resources are directed to building interest in the final announcement. Although the system has had its detractors, in particular the academic and publisher Walter McVitty, it has been effective in both increasing the sales of children’s books and promoting discussion about them.

However, the number of books entered for the awards has been a concern from the 1960s on. In 1963 the judges report:

It should be pointed out that the number of books submitted to the judging committee has almost doubled in three years. In 1961 there were 22 entries, in 1962, 29 and in 1963, 42…The judges regret the amount of time that had to be spent reading and assessing numbers of books which, to them, seem to have no claim to literary merit.

(Judges Report 1963, CBCA archives, ACC04/227, box 10)

In 1964, there were 71 entries and the judges’ report expands on the many hours ‘reading and assessing material which is stereotyped and poorly written.’
Forty-five years later, with judges required to report on the 400 titles entered, while most of them are engaged in fulltime employment as teachers or librarians, the system is clearly in need of change. And yet the CBC resists the solution that many state literary awards have adopted: that of appointing a different panel of judges for each genre, or each award. Because there has been a separate panel for information books since 1993, this would simply extend a principle the CBC has already accepted, but the retaining of a single Book of the Year judging panel seems to derive from a belief in the possibility of a universal and objective set of standards.

After a series of judges’ reports complaining about the workload, in the Mechanics of and Rules for Judging (CBCA archives, National Library of Australia, ACC 04/277 box 9) – undated but likely to be 1968, given references it contains to the year 1967 – clause (e) raises for the first time the need to find a solution to the increasing demands.

(e) It will greatly ease the judges’ task if many obviously poor entries are eliminated early. It is appreciated that the books have to be read once, to establish that they are below standard. If a judge considers any book beneath consideration he will pass this opinion on to the Convening Judge and if the other judges are unanimous, no further action is necessary.

A revision of this clause – also undated, but probably 1969 – introduces a derogatory label more explicit than ‘beneath consideration’, which, like the withholding of awards, functions partly to reinforce the CBC’s authority.

(g) It is considered that it would greatly ease the judges’ task if the 75% or so of the entries which represent the ‘dross’ could be eliminated as quickly as possible. It is appreciated that the books have to be read once to establish that they are below standard, but it is considered that all that should be necessary if a judge believes a book is beneath consideration is to say so.
This revision represents a considerable hardening of the CBC’s position. Variations on a system of dividing the judging panel into two groups of 4, with each group reading half the books have been considered. If all four judges decided against short listing a title it would proceed no further, but if even one judge disagreed, the title would go to the other group of four judges for assessment by the full panel. The CBC’s reluctance to make any radical change to the system comes from the judges’ repeated desire to be across all books entered in a particular year, and from the implied belief that objectivity, rather than fairness, is desirable and achievable.

Because the relationship between the CBC and publishers is one of mutual need, one solution to the judges’ workload that the CBC has mooted but never advanced formally is that the entry fee be raised to a level that would oblige publishers to reduce the number of titles they submitted. Another is to urge publishers not to submit those titles which they know have little chance of being short listed or of winning. After the introduction of the short list, Alderman remarks:

True to the Australian ‘fair go’ motto, the Children’s Book Council encourages Australian publishers to enter their entire year’s production.

(Alderman 1983, p.20)

With the growth of Australian publishing that certainly changed, but the CBC blames publishers for a situation it has created and failed to anticipate. It is true, for example, that publishers enter titles from a series, when the awards handbook specifies that only ‘stand-alone’ titles are eligible (CBC 2009, p.6). But, as with other criteria, the lack of a precise definition for ‘stand-alone’ gives the CBC the room to move in ruling on eligibility, should there be a challenge, but confuses publishers and authors. In addition, because the effect that the short list has on sales is well known by authors, a publisher’s decision not to enter a book can be interpreted as preventing the author from earning increased royalties. So in order to keep the author on the list, a publisher inevitably defers the possibility of rejection to the judging process.
As mentioned in Chapter 2, the CBC has become a victim of its own success. Its role in encouraging the number of Australian books published for children and the publication of high-end literary texts is clear. But the sheer number of books published and entered has produced frustration and, while the organisation has been willing to make minor changes – too often in some cases – it baulks at the major change that would help alleviate the situation. Again, the resistance is due to a belief in universal standards of judging. A system of genre panels that would reduce the individual judge’s reading load might also emphasise the contingent nature of the judging process.

In 2007-2008, the present writer was a member of the working party established by the CBC to consider responses to the judging process and changes that might reduce the workload and give the awards greater exposure in the general community. Chaired by University of Melbourne academic and Viewpoint editor Pam Macintyre, the party included James Moloney and former judges Margaret Robson-Kett and Ernie Tucker, also a former state president and national vice-president. The assembled credentials were promising. After lengthy and stimulating discussions, the working party’s report included recommendations on the creation of genre-specific panels, the inclusion of judges with a higher profile in the general community, simpler naming of the awards and the possibility of reverting to a single Book of the Year award to make publicity easier – but none of these recommendations was adopted by the national executive. As one member of the working party said in a private conversation, ‘You would have thought we were asking them to change the Australian Constitution.’
Chapter 4  LITERARY EXCELLENCE

Children’s Books: Addressing an Image Problem

The ongoing conversation about the integrity and ‘competence’ of the judges, despite their perceived anonymity, reflects a general consciousness that those adults who work with children in our society, particularly young children – whether as librarians, educators, writers and illustrators, publishers or booksellers – are not regarded as being at the top of their profession.

Teachers, academics, booksellers, publishers, writers, illustrators and designers have been committee members of the Children’s Book Council at both state and national level and therefore in Australia, when it comes to revising the awards handbook, librarians have shared policy-making with other professions in the industry. But, as detailed in chapter 3, professions apart from teaching and librarianship have scarcely been represented on the CBC’s judging panels. And both the teaching of young children and children’s librarianship for most of the 20th century suffered an image problem, implied in the discussion of ‘category creep’ in chapter 3.

The history of librarianship as a profession in both the United States and Australia is an important factor in any reading of the way literary awards for children’s books have been used to shore up the cultural capital of those who administer them. It is a history inextricably linked with the subordination of women in the workforce. Just as military service was something for sons of the aristocracy to do while they waited on their inheritance, so at the end of the 19th century librarianship was regarded as a suitable pursuit for young women waiting on marriage.

Biskup’s implication that men were displaced in his description of librarianship as a ‘feminised profession’ (Biskup 1994, p.167) seems somewhat perverse, unless the phrase simply means that there were more women librarians than men. He himself acknowledges that by the 1920s 85 per cent of librarians were
women. But he does take issue with Cass’s assertion (1972) that, as employees, women were attractive to libraries at the end of the 19th century because they were willing to accept lower wages than men, and he argues that pay scales for men and women in the New South Wales public service were equal (Biskup 1994, p.167). However, Schmidmaier and Doherty argue that by the time of the Harvester Judgment in 1907, the male/female wage differential had become entrenched (Schmidmaier & Doherty 2005, p.2). In 1919, the basic female rate was just 54 per cent of the male and this was only increased to 75 per cent in 1943, due to labour shortages during World War 2. It was not until 1972 that equity was won.

In her survey of *Library Literature* 1921-1932, McReynolds notes no references to female librarians, but over 60 citations for male librarians, comparing their work with professions perceived as being more masculine. ‘The librarian became the “surgeon of the mind” and the library an allegory for a bank or a detective agency’ (McReynolds 1985, p.26). Advertisements were worded to attract ‘bright young men’ to promotions positions in librarianship after World War 2 (Nelson 1980, p.2033), and wage inequity for the female majority in the profession increasingly became the major factor behind its low status. Garrison identifies the sexism in the construction of librarianship as a natural occupation for women.

They could use their innate skills to make libraries more homelike and were temperamentally better suited for painstaking jobs like cataloguing. Furthermore librarianship emphasized feminine qualities of serving, self-sacrifice and high-mindedness.

(Garrison 1972-73, p.133)

But Nelson observes that ironically Garrison then goes on to attack women for conferring these qualities on their profession.

How can librarianship hope to raise its status when most of its members hold such a low status in the society at large; when in fact women were recruited into librarianship precisely because of their low status?

(Nelson 1980, p.2032)
Others advance a more positive view of the predominance of women among the rank and file, if not in positions of power. Kidd sees librarianship as a means of public service for educated middle class women at the time (2007, p.171) and Lundin takes this further. She sees women using book-related professions to further ongoing social construction.

The example of these authors, editors, educators, and librarians, who cleared the path for contemporary children’s literature and services, subverts expectations of domestic women and suggests instead a dynamic image of powerful women working to construct a maternal paradigm of literature and service. (Lundin 1996, p. 845)

In the case studies of the three male award winners Southall, Marsden and Crew, (chapters 5, 7 and 9 of this thesis), it will be suggested that this maternal paradigm may also be seen as repressive, and the contention that women judges of the CBC awards don’t fully understand books for boys echoes complaints about women controlling the Newbery Medal in the United States 60 years earlier, referred to by Jenkins (1996). Regardless of whether the nexus between women and librarianship is read positively or negatively, the potential of an awards system to increase the cultural capital of both the producers and the consumers of children’s books is clear.

Although, as mentioned earlier, Kidd acknowledges that with hindsight it is still debatable whether awards produce outstanding literature and whether they have helped to counteract or contribute to the subordinate status of children’s literature in particular (Kidd 2007, p.167), he argues that over the past 85 years the Newbery Medal has been highly successful in inspiring a whole system of literary prize-giving and in the process ‘ensuring that ALA librarians would continue to serve as tastemakers. With adult literary prizing, by contrast, critics and authors are usually the credentialed authorities’ (Kidd 2007, p.169).

Like the weighty robes and chains of office, regulations can be used to confer status on those who devise them. So the complexity in the process of giving
awards invests them with cultural capital, and once they are established so does the decision to withhold them. By making a literary award one of its key strategies for encouraging publication and raising its quality, the CBC had learnt from the success of the American Library Association and the Library Association in the UK. Unlike those models, however, the CBC also learnt it could exploit the power to withhold an award and it did so in the early years of the Picture Book award with alarming frequency, as documented in Chapter 3.


On a statistical average, the lifetime frequency of an award such as the Esther Glen Award is unremarkable, and comparable with biennial awards such as those presented at Australia’s Adelaide Festival. But long sequences in which there is no award, such as 1951 to 1958 for the Esther Glen and 1959 to 1964 for the CBC Picture Book of the Year, interrogate both the entries in those years and the judging process. To set up a new category and then announce no winner in its inaugural year simultaneously invalidates the books entered and validates the judging process – as long as the reading community endorses both the judges and their criteria.

As the CBC’s constitution in chapter 2 indicates, the Book of the Year award was designed partly to encourage local publishing, so the absence of a winner during those early years may simply demonstrate the inferior nature of the books produced by a fledgling industry. By way of contrast, the Newbery Medal has never been withheld since its introduction in 1922. And the UK’s Carnegie Medal, introduced in 1936, has only been withheld on three
occasions: in 1943, 1945 and 1966. The smaller size of the respective populations – and therefore the markets – and the shorter history of publishing in Australia, Canada and New Zealand are significant factors. But equally significant is the desire for cultural capital in a postcolonial society as conscious as Australia was of what AA Phillips in 1950 called its ‘cultural cringe’.

Unlike the Newbery and Carnegie medals, the Book of the Year was one project of a special organisation created with a broader brief to promote children’s books. And because both state and national executives have included publishers such as Anne Ingram, Eddie Coffey, Stephen Dearnley, John Cody, Margaret Hamilton, Brian Cook, Sarah Foster and the present writer, and to a lesser extent booksellers, the use of the awards to shore up cultural capital is not due only to the respective status of women and librarianship. The reluctance of the CBC to extend the eligibility of judges beyond teachers, librarians and enthusiastic amateurs is due to the complexity of its ongoing conversation with commercialism.

In chapters 2 and 3 it was argued that to some extent the CBC’s success in encouraging an Australian children’s publishing industry eventually made several of the aims in its constitution redundant. The improvement of books for children, in whatever ways that was to be defined, the dissemination of information about children’s books to educators and parents, and the creating of events such as Children’s Book Week and the mounting of book exhibitions quickly became part of the publishing process, as marketing began to overtake publicity in the major publishing houses – the difference generally being defined by budget.

Since publishers had the financial resources and increasingly the professional expertise to produce promotional material, import high profile authors and create national tours for them and for local authors, buy advertising space and time in media outlets and offer discounts for volume sales to schools and bookselling chains, the CBC had to redefine its aims. As early as 1962, in his annual report, the president, NE Peard, laments the fact that ‘The major
function of the Australian Council, despite all hopes to the contrary, seems to have become that of selecting the Book of the Year.’ (4th Annual Report, AGM 1962, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 10). Confusingly, the ‘Australian Council’ here is the group currently referred to as the ‘National Executive’.

Although long after the growth of publishers’ marketing departments in the 1980s, the CBC continued – and continues – to produce publicity material and merchandise, mount tours and events and lobby for publicity in the media, the amateur status of the organisation and its limited funding worked against it. This is clearly a factor in its reluctance to relax its control over the Book of the Year awards by broadening the criteria of eligibility for judging. So the CBC has increasingly defined itself as an educator and gatekeeper, defending against commercial interests its consensus standards of high quality in the production of the literary text and therefore excluding anyone but teachers, librarians and enthusiastic amateurs who have a recognised standing in the field.

Ironically, although it could be argued that teachers and librarians have a financial interest in creating a market for the kind of children’s books they will buy and promote, the awards handbook, the judges’ reports and the reviews journal Reading Time repeatedly attempt to define their position as objective. The construction of teachers and librarians as the only stakeholders who can be trusted to decide on the best in books for children is a version of the ‘cultural strut’ that is often a response to the ‘cultural cringe’. The observation that a postcolonial nation such as Australia is a community of ‘early adopters’ (Dale 2006) helps to explain why the CBC embraces new writers, but then expresses an almost parental disappointment when their writing or their personal appearances challenge tradition. Both the strut and the cringe derive from a sense of subordination. The healthy proliferation of new titles, set out as an aim of the CBC’s constitution, is itself no indication of quality.
Faint Praise: the Judges’ Reports

The sixth aim of the CBC’s constitution emphasises education and librarianship in specifying attention to both ‘subject matter’ and ‘format’ of the best children’s books. And the annual judges’ reports underline these concerns in an unusual attention to detail and an often pedagogical tone.

While no doubt well intentioned in its determination to practise what it preaches, at its most extreme the CBC’s pedantic attention to detail can appear almost comic. The first motion discussed at the 1967 AGM is put by the Tasmanian branch:

Motion 1. That the Tasmanian Book Council would like to draw the attention of the Children’s Book Council of Australia to the errors in grammar on the poster. As our concern is to educate children the corrections should be made. The motion refers to the lack of an apostrophe in ‘Children’s’.

(AGM 1967, Minutes, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 10)

The minute of the ensuing discussion is worth quoting in full.

It was agreed that capital letters should be used on future posters, but Victoria put the case for dropping the apostrophe in ‘Childrens Book Week’ and it was agreed that steps should be taken towards this. The move would be in line with contemporary grammatical and typographical practice, in which usages of this kind (eg Drivers Licence, Boys School, Visitors Book – which means a ‘Licence for Drivers, a School for Boys, A Book for Visitors’ not ‘A school belonging to a boy’ and so on) are not regarded as possessives and therefore do not carry an apostrophe. Mr Eyre mentioned that the Commonwealth Government Style Manual refers to this point (pp22 and 23) and that in the second printing ‘Childrens Book Week’ is in fact included as one of the examples, in order to make the distinction between ‘Childrens Book Week’ (a week about books for children) and, for example, ‘the children’s books were left very untidily in their classroom’.

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It was decided that all State Councils should be asked their views on this, with the idea that they might decide to do as Victoria has already done and eliminate the apostrophe from their titles. It was also decided that the elimination of it from the Federal title should be put on the Agenda for the next meeting and that in the meantime members would do what they could to arouse public interest possibly by writing letters to the correspondence columns of such papers as ‘The Australian’. Mrs Southwell suggested that it might be possible to introduce the subject in the journal ‘English in Australia’.

As the occasional errors in the judges’ reports throughout the CBC’s history suggest, there are risks involved in such attention to detail. Unfortunately in this case ‘Childrens Book Week’ is not ‘A Week of Books for Childrens’. At the same time, this example does demonstrate the CBC’s desire to be seen as acknowledging current practice, and it may be significant that the proponent of change quoted is a publisher, Frank Eyre. That desire is in constant conversation with its mission to maintain existing standards.

Ironically, at times more space in the judges’ reports is devoted to condemnation of an award winner than to praise. In 1970, Colin Thiele’s novel *Blue Fin* was runner-up for Book of the Year, an award at that stage called ‘Highly Commended’. After praising the book’s originality and vitality, the judges add a full paragraph on its weaknesses:

> the book is marred by faulty structure. The episodes in the first half of the book relate to but are not part of the struggle which ensues in the last part. Thiele takes too long to come to the point. Also he has a tendency to over-write in that there is, in places, an over-abundance of imagery.

(*Reading Time*, no.36, July 1970, p.12)

In awarding a Commended citation to Ivan Southall’s novel *Finn’s Folly* in that same year, the judges say:
The sheer professionalism of his writing is convincing and almost overcomes the somewhat hysterical atmosphere and contrived plot.

*(Reading Time, no.36, July 1970, p.12)*

This is an award-winning book. And in their 1972 report, the judges support their assertion that over-writing mars the Book of the Year, Hesba Brinsmead’s *Longtime Passing*, by quoting one of the offending sentences and they use specific page numbers to point out stylistic faults in another two award winners.

Clearly positioning the CBC as the administrators of a sought-after award and therefore being careful not to sound too discouraging, the judges in 1973 write just a single paragraph of general commentary as an introduction to their notes on individual winners. In reports 20 years later, the preamble extends to several pages.

Half the books entered for the awards were considered in the final stages of the judging. This is both an indication of the general standard of the entries and of the task facing the judging panel. However, despite the overall competence of much of the writing, the judges found that few of the books could be regarded as outstanding achievements. Many entries lacked originality and vitality. The experimental writing entered, although it was welcome as an interesting development in Australian children’s literature, was considered to have failed in communicating effectively with children.

*(Judges Report 1973, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 10)*

The general preamble in the report for the following year, 1974, asserts that there have been changes.

Many of the books entered for the Award this year were good in parts, but unsuccessful as a whole. There was some vigorous competent writing and sensitive illustration, but these were often marred by poor editing and a lack of awareness on the part of some publishers of what
constitutes a good and attractive book for children. In view of the growing stature of the Awards and the increasing national and international interest in Australian children’s literature, the judges were disappointed at the general level of achievement in many of the books submitted.

(Judges Report 1974, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 10)

Apart from the CBC’s attachment to the restrained praise inherent in the notion of competence, apparent on a number of occasions, this statement is significant in its historical context. The arts community had responded enthusiastically to the change of government in 1972 and the government in turn had used funding for the Australia Council as a signifier of cultural change, most controversially in the 1973 purchase of Jackson Pollock’s painting *Blue Poles*. The 1974 annual report by the national president of the CBC claims that ‘The impact of Government assistance on Children’s Literature was beginning to be noticed in this year’s entries for the Book of the Year Awards’ (President’s Report, AGM 1974, Minutes, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 11). For the first time in 1974, Australian publishers had their own stand at the international children’s book fair in Bologna, the principal marketplace for rights sales (Sheahan-Bright 2004, p.208) so in children’s publishing, as in other areas of the arts, particularly fiction, with the award of the 1973 Nobel Prize for Literature to Patrick White and in film, there was a sense that Australia was achieving international recognition.

Of more immediate concern to the CBC, however, was the awarding of the UK’s Carnegie Medal for 1971 to the novel *Josh*, by Ivan Southall. On the one hand, the first time an Australian novel had won a major international award was a cause for celebration, but the win interrogated the CBC’s own awards, since *Josh* had not even been short listed for Book of the Year. The effects of this decision will be considered in chapter 5. At another time and in a different organisation, the apparent anomaly might simply have demonstrated that there is no universal aesthetic when it comes to literary awards. But the decision must be seen in the context of the controversy generated by Southall’s *Finn’s Folly* being Commended in 1970 and *Bread and Honey* winning Book of the Year in
1971. Given the ongoing questioning of the CBC’s ability to judge picture books, the vigour of the attack on both the creators and publishers of children’s books in the 1974 judges’ report attempts to strengthen the organisation’s own authority by indicating that others need to be taught.

By 1974, Patricia Wrightson had been Commended or Highly Commended for three earlier novels, and it was announced that she had now won Book of the Year for *The Nargun and the Stars*. The judges’ report praises the win this way:

> Several authors made ambitious and original excursions into the realm of fantasy, not all of which were successfully sustained. The fantastic element in some seemed to be merely superimposed upon the natural world in an arbitrary and artificial manner. Nevertheless it was a book from this category that finally won the judges’ approval. Even so, they had some reservations about the ending and thought that the Deus ex Machina clanked rather audibly (literally) and that the author was not at all times in full control of her difficult material. However, they were impressed with the originality and scope of the work, and considered that it deserved the award.

(Judges’ Report 1974, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 10)

It is hard to envisage the judges of a literary award for adult fiction being so explicit about their reservations or using their reports to teach readers in a detailed way as the Book of the Year judges do.

In chapters 2 and 3 it was explained that most trade children’s books are sold through various channels in the education market, so this emphasis on evaluating the educational aspects of a book is not surprising. The judges’ 1969 report clearly implies that young readers may have to be ‘taught’ to enjoy the winning novels. Of Wrightson’s Highly Commended *I Own the Racecourse*, it says:

> Unfortunately the cover does not attract and the theme may deter those readers for whom it is meant. It is a book that will have to be introduced to children, but the pleasing
literary style, the humour and vitality of this entry should make it a book children will remember.

*(Reading Time no. 33, July 1969, p.7)*

The remark that ‘the theme may deter those readers for whom it is meant’ makes the pedagogical use of such a book quite clear.

In the same report, however, there is a note of weariness in the judges’ comments on the runner-up, Ivan Southall’s *Let the Balloon Go*.

The illustrations and dustjacket are not of a high standard. The format of the book indicates that it is intended for the 9–11 years, but the emotional content makes it more suited to older readers. It is another book that will have to be introduced to the reader.

*(Reading Time no.33, July 1969, p.8)*

In a 1980 article that compares the Book of the Year awards with some of their major British and American counterparts, academic and publisher Walter McVitty says that, ‘The present prize is in danger of becoming a boring irrelevance – the same safe names winning too often.’ *(Reading Time no.74, Jan 1980, p.11)* and he goes on to ask whether the process of selecting judges is rigorous enough and criticises them for their continuing obsession with design and format, pointing out that in the list of criteria for judging, ‘typography’ comes before ‘literary merit’.

McVitty is not, however, arguing for a more child-centred view of the book as entertainment. In arguing that the author should be judged on writing alone, he takes the concept ‘literature of quality’ as understood and opposes it to popularity. He says:
The cheap and nasty early edition of *Storm Boy*, for instance, has gone through a number of changes before arriving at its present elegance – but the author’s achievement is exactly the same as it was in the first place. Yet since ‘appeal to children’ is the first of the four criteria listed for the Australian judges to consider, the film tie-in paperback would now, given the chance, have to be preferred to the Ingpen luxury edition!

*(Reading Time, no.74, Jan 1980, p.14)*

The exclamation mark is revealing – the implication being that the children’s assumed preference should be discounted in favour of a quality art object produced for them with an award-winning illustrator’s embellishments.

To some extent the development of children’s choice awards from the 1980s relieved the CBC of any obligation to grapple with the issue of whether its awarded books were popular with young readers or not and aligned the Book of the Year awards even more closely with their use in schools. A marked divergence emerges between adults’ and children’s choices, for example, when it comes to humour. Writers such as Duncan Ball, Margaret Clark, Gretel Killeen and John Larkin, who feature regularly in the children’s choice awards, have never been short listed by the CBC. As mentioned earlier, Andy Griffiths has only been short listed for a minor work and none of Paul Jennings’ short story collections has been short listed, although his reputation clearly rests on them. (After ignoring Jennings for years, the judges almost perversely gave him an award for the joke book *Duck for Cover*, referred to earlier in the discussion on Griffiths. Ironically the text of Jennings’s picture book, *Grandad’s Gifts*, short listed in 1993 was drawn from *Unbearable!* (1990), one of the collections the judges had decided was not worth short listing.) When the present writer challenged one highly influential judge to defend the CBC’s repeated refusal to acknowledge Jennings’s short story collections, she replied, ‘But he doesn’t need a short listing.’ The educational function, if not the intention, of the short list is clearly implied by that response, along with the desire to position the CBC’s choices as far from the criterion of popularity with children as possible.
It follows that books short listed for the Older Readers award are rarely funny. The authors of the controversial study of mental health issues in Australian adolescent literature, analysing all the Notable texts for 1996, 1997 and 1998, for example, point out that ‘only 4% of works were judged to be “funny”’ (Bokey, Walter & Rey 2000, p.2). Placed alongside Nieuwenhuizen’s observation (2007, p.ix) that so many of the funny books in her selection of ‘500 Great Reads for Teenagers’ are Australian, and research since 1925 reporting consistently that ‘humour is children’s strongest preference for reading material’ (Munde 1997, p.219), their analysis points to the cliché assumption that seriousness of purpose and literary excellence are unlikely to be found in comedy. The CBC judges’ report for 2002 deplores the scatological humour in books entered for the Younger Readers category (Reading Time vol. 46, no. 3, Aug 2002, p.3) and the report for the year 2000 praises the appearance of ‘subtle and understated’ humour (Reading Time vol.44, no.3, Aug. 2000, p.3). Both comments indicate that the judges are considering humour from the adult’s, rather than the child’s, point of view.

A more controversial divergence between the two perspectives has focussed on the Picture Book of the Year category. In 1969, the judges warn against a growing sophistication, in which Australians are ‘losing the freshness and simplicity which one looks for in a good picture book.’ (Reading Time, no.33, July 1969, p.13). But 30 years later, by introducing the Book of the Year (Early Childhood) category, the judges effectively endorse narrative complexity and confronting subject matter – features that may be inferred as integral to their understanding of literary excellence, and that make the texts more attractive to teach.

At the same time as they reject the criterion of popularity with children, the judges’ reports become longer and more detailed in the 1990s and increasingly critical of publishers. While the 1998 report acknowledges that there are factual errors in John Nicholson’s A Home Among the Gum Trees, it is still judged the winner of the Eve Pownall Award for Information Books. And yet in 1997 the judges report at length on ‘lower standards of editing and production values’ in
the publishing industry, specifying spelling, grammar and typographical errors, the bulking up of books with graphics and running heads, and they single out the repeated confusion between ‘lay’ and ‘lie’ and ‘it’s’ and ‘its’:

We felt some authors had been very ill-served by their publishers: in a few glaring instances, faults such as these may have cost them a place on the short list.

(Reading Time, vol.41, no.3, Aug 1997, p. 4)

The inconsistency is remarkable. But the frequency with which these reports castigate the publishing industry becomes so great that what may seem at first a sympathetic attempt to gain leverage for editors, who have to contend with the budget cutbacks of ‘restructured’ multinationals, soon polarises into the easy us-and-them so familiar in Australian cultural commentary. It also positions the CBC further away from its involvement with publishing, which becomes metonymic for commercialism generally.

Independence and Sponsorship

Chapter 5 of this thesis addresses the inference that there are not only authors but also publishers who are in alignment with the CBC’s agenda and that the Book of the Year favours them, too. Hyland House publisher Anne Godden is characteristically frank about her company’s reliance on the short list. Other publishers, including some multinationals, also depend heavily on the awards, but are less open about it. Godden says:

Whilst I would never suggest that winning such prizes is the sole manner in which a publishing house should judge its success, it is a sobering fact that, without those awards, we at Hyland House could never have afforded to continue publishing the books we have published, nor to take the occasional risk that has brought some extraordinary books into the world.

(Godden 1994, p.215)
The ‘occasional risk’ includes 1989 Book of the Year, *Beyond the Labyrinth*, picked up when it was rejected by author Gillian Rubinstein’s publisher, Omnibus Books. The distressing correspondence subsequent to this rejection is preserved along with the readers’ reports in the Lu Rees archives – only one of them foreseeing the book’s eventual success, but failing to persuade that company of its viability. The tendency for authors to have a run of success in the awards, at times followed by a serial lack of success, will be discussed in several of the case studies. Godden’s comment about the importance of the awards to Hyland House, however, indicates that the Book of the Year determines the publisher’s acquisition process – to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the size of the list – and is, therefore, often likely to be a factor in the creative process for writers and illustrators. That is not to suggest automatic writing or painting-by-numbers, but in the business transaction that occurs once a contract is signed, all stakeholders know what the market wants. Rosalind Price observes in 1982 that the awards tend to ‘favour a certain kind of literary excellence that is not always accessible to a wide range of children’ (Price 1982, p.26). However as Children’s Publishing Director at Allen & Unwin, she later demonstrated that she understood better than most of her peers what the judges were after. Had she changed her mind?

Although the written record is scrupulously impartial, in the present writer’s experience, comments on which publishers seem to have the CBC judges’ interest, however unconscious, are as much part of the unrecorded discourse as comments on the judges’ favourite writers and illustrators. The statistics speak for themselves. In 1989, Penguin published 6 of the 18 titles short listed in all categories; in 2000, 8 out of 24; in 2008, 9 out of 30. This is a large multinational, so it might be argued that those proportions are not surprising. Take a smaller publishing house: in 1987, Omnibus published 5 out of 18 short listed titles; in 1988, 5 out of 20; in 2003, 5 out of 30. In 2002, Allen & Unwin published 10 out of 28 titles on the short list.

There are, furthermore, some notable trends in individual categories. In 2000, 5 out of the 6 titles short listed for Older Readers are published by Penguin. In
2002 and 2005, 4 out of the 6 on the Older Readers short list are published by Allen & Unwin. In 2007, 3 out of 3 and, in 2008, 3 out of 6 titles short listed for the Eve Pownall Award for Information Books are published by Black Dog Books. What is the process here? Does a publisher have a talent for a particular genre and, pursuing it, acquire the kind of expertise that attracts the judges’ attention? And does that, in turn, attract to the list artists who are working in that genre?

The imprimatur given by a series of awards and the role of feedback from booksellers and educators are significant factors, but because the relationship is symbiotic, and the CBC proclaims regularly its objectivity, it is not possible to identify one stakeholder who is setting the agenda. While positioning itself as an upholder of ‘standards’, however, the CBC is less assertive about its role in creating them, because that might compromise its opposition to commercial considerations. Far more threatening to its sense of independence than any close relationship with publishers was the crisis over its funding that dominated the 1990s. It is worth noting here the comment made by Hillel and Hamilton on the founding of the organisation:

> Although it was not stated in the constitution, there was an underlying philosophy that it was infra dig to be commercial, in fact the work done by the CBC was in accordance with charitable good works.

(Smith & Hamilton 1995, p.28)

And it may be useful to place alongside Scutter’s remark about the dangers inherent in reverence for the book (1996, p.7) the CBC’s renewed earnestness about literacy in the 1990s.

No doubt the position of a last bastion against commercialism constructed by the CBC was originally motivated more by the power of television, electronic games and fast food than by any opposition to publishers. But the view of publishers expressed in the judges’ reports hardened and tended to align the
CBC more strongly than ever, if not with the dispensers of charitable good works, then once again with education. The popularity of a book with children and the crass commercialism of publishers were seen as linked.

In contrast to the librarians’ associations that administer the Newbery Medal, the Carnegie Medal and their equivalents in Canada and New Zealand, the CBC’s inclusion of booksellers and publishers on its organising committees has been both an advantage and a continuing cause of concern to some members. In a list of answers to Frequently Asked Questions on the website for the Carnegie Medal, the following response is given to the question ‘What makes the Carnegie and Greenaway Medals unique?’

The Carnegie Medal and the Kate Greenaway Medal are unique in that they are awarded by librarians who work closely with books and children. The books that are nominated for the awards are nominated by library professionals and not by publishers, a democratic process which ensures that any title has an equal chance of being considered for the Awards. The judges are totally independent and make their choices purely on their own judgment of the titles' merits against the criteria. Throughout their history the Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals have provided a literary standard by which other books are measured and they are the Medals most authors and illustrators want to win.

(CILIP Carnegie Greenaway website http://www.carnegiegreenaway.org.uk)

The endorsement of the nominations process as ‘democratic’ appears less than candid. A librarian nominating a title may not have any financial interest vested in the outcome of the nomination, but such a nomination is subject to the librarian’s personal reading preferences, so the implication of objectivity here can hardly be sustained. The phrase ‘democratic process’ is clearly code for ‘free of commercial interests’ – a goal that public statements by the CBC also repeatedly aspire to.
Having booksellers and publishers on its state and national executives gave the CBC access to additional publicity and marketing resources and professional expertise, which, while limited, were an advantage to a basically voluntary organisation. The close working relationship allowed mutually beneficial opportunities for touring authors, particularly those visiting from the UK and the United States, when a publisher would fund the author’s travel and accommodation and the CBC would provide publicity, audiences and venues. And the informal exchange of information off the record between the producers and consumers of children’s books complemented the, at times, predictable positions both groups assumed on the record.

At the AGM in Sydney on 28 August 1965, it was moved that the rotation of the national executive among the state branches be extended from one year to two (motion 2, AGM 1965, Minutes, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 10). The motion was supported because it would reduce the inefficiency of frequent changing that is now an even greater burden and waste of resources 45 years later. A subsequent motion proposed to give each state branch voting powers proportional to its number of financial members – a debate inherited, like the unwieldy structure of the CBC itself, from the Australian federal system of government.

Miss Partridge (TAS) asked why it was that NSW felt the CBC must rely on booksellers and publishers to function efficiently. In Tasmania the CBC’s activities run quite smoothly without active participation by the book trade.

(motion 6, AGM 1965, Minutes, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 10)

As one of the smallest branches, Tasmania was, of course, going to find a two-year period to act as the national executive a challenge. And since none of the major children’s publishing houses was based there, it could not rely on the kind of close working relationships possible in Melbourne or Sydney for support. So the Tasmanian delegate’s question is partly a cry for help, but it
reasserts the CBC’s suspicion of the book trade’s commercialism, referred to earlier by Hillel and Hamilton.

Mr Lawson (Secretary) replied by saying it would be wrong to say that booksellers and publishers are interested in the CBC’s activities purely to foster the aims of the CBC. They had businesses to run and in NSW took an active part in the Council’s work because in an indirect way they benefited. He stressed that at no time were booksellers or publishers allowed individual display space at exhibitions or allowed to advertise in any way in connection with the CBC or say what the CBC could or could not display. However, the displays of award winning books in shop windows, the hidden contributions from publishers and booksellers by way of time, stationery and book donations was most important to NSW.

(motion 6, AGM 1965, Minutes, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 10)

Again the record shows that the need for funding caused the CBC to change its position. From the first national conference in 1992 onwards, the CBC learnt it could charge individual publishers fees for an exhibition stand. These fees have now become so hefty that some publishers choose not to exhibit at all.

Although Melbourne was equally regarded as a centre of major Australian publishing houses in the 1960s, it may simply be due to an accident of those personnel willing to be involved that the New South Wales branch rather than the Victorian branch acquired the reputation of being too dependent on, and even dominated by, publishers. This has been the main source of ongoing tension between the two state branches, epitomised by discussions of contrast between the outstanding profits made by the two national conferences held in Sydney (1992, 2006) and the loss made by the immediately ensuing conferences in Melbourne (1994, 2008).

As the work of the CBC increased in scope and the pool of voluntary labour available to carry it out diminished, however, the need for funding became acute. But children’s marketing budgets were limited and the status of
children’s publishers within the major publishing houses did not give them the kind of power to increase financial support to the CBC.

The federal government’s Commonwealth Literary Fund guaranteed funding of $500 a year for 1966-68 to go to the winner of the Book of the Year and in his annual report for 1972, the national president announced a major increase to $2500 a year.

But it came as a complete surprise to the Federal Executive. It could be thought that it might have been better if the CLF had told us of their intentions in advance. In that event we might have had a chance of persuading them to direct some of the extra money to the Picture Book of the Year Award, which still needs a sponsor.

(President’s Report, AGM 1972, Minutes, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 11)

The organisation’s limited understanding of government sponsorship, let alone the commercial world, is confirmed by the president’s failure to ask why any sponsor would want to fund an award that had been withheld on so many occasions. When the Whitlam government’s Australia Council replaced the Commonwealth Literary Fund and the new Visual Arts Board confirmed funding of $2500 for illustration in 1973, the CBC had clearly not anticipated the strings attached. The Board requested that it be allowed to supply a member of the judging panel.

In addition, the new Literature Board of the Australia Council announced that it would set up a sub-committee to advise it on children’s literature. Although this might have been welcomed by the CBC as a sign that its long campaign to have children’s books taken seriously had been successful, instead, like the local publishers’ increasingly professional approach to children’s books, it appeared to threaten the CBC’s authority. The president reported in 1973:
The appearance of a sub-committee on Children’s Literature to advise the Literature Board came as a surprise to your executive, especially when it became clear that many of the matters considered by it concern the activities of our Council. On the advice of the executive I wrote to the Literature Board on 8th August and suggested that ‘in the interests of efficiency and direct communication’ – the committee would benefit from the presence of an official Children’s Book Council member. I was somewhat concerned that matters could easily get out of hand and we could find ourselves sacrificing our independence in exchange for further Government subsidies. I would add quickly that I do not think this is the intention of the Board.

(President’s Report, AGM 1973, Minutes, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 11)

In his report a year later, the same national president, John Tyrrell, adopted a less defensive tone and said that, without government funding, the increased cost of travel and postage would make the CBC’s current level of activity impossible.

The extent of the CBC papers held in the National Library of Australia and the unfailing documentation of its affairs indicate, as outlined in the introduction, the CBC’s awareness of its own future importance to historians. Perhaps this is due to the cataloguer’s and archivist’s impulse brought to it by the large number of members who are librarians. As with many of the CBC’s minuted statements, it is at least possible that the president’s comments here, like the assurance at the end of his 1973 report, are intended primarily for outside consumption – in this case by the Australia Council.

The impact of Government assistance on Children’s Literature was beginning to be noticed in this year’s entries for the Book of the Year Awards. The full effect will be more obvious next year, but it is already clear that the monetary prizes have greatly stimulated the authors and illustrators and given fresh heart to publishers. Fears of interference by the Government have proved groundless. We could not have had two more charming and helpful
members of the Judging Panel than Miss Marion Scott and Professor AD Hope.

(President’s Report, AGM 1974, Minutes, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 11)

Although from 1966 to 1972 the Book of the Year awards were funded by the Commonwealth Literary Fund, and from 1973 by the Australia Council, the end of government funding in 1988 directly challenged the CBC’s position on commercialism. The organisation was forced to seek sponsorship from publishers: emergency funding for the 1988 awards came from Penguin, Collins Dove, Franklin Watts and Angus & Robertson. While a sponsorship offer from McDonalds was rejected for fear of being seen to endorse fast food, the CBC accepted a five-year sponsorship by Australia’s largest department store chain, Myer-Grace Bros, from 1989 to 1993. This comprised $30 000 a year for the awards and $20 000 for administration, but at the end of the five-year period it was not renewed, basically because of the CBC’s reluctance to promote the sponsorship and because increasingly the short listed books were perceived by Myer-Grace Bros as not selling in the general trade.

Sponsorship again came from booksellers and publishers and in 1996, Margaret Hamilton acted somewhat against her own position as a publisher to help the CBC preserve its stand against commercialism by setting up the Awards Foundation with former bookseller, June Smith. They committed themselves to raising one million dollars so that the Book of the Year awards could be self-funding. Of course, although schoolchildren have donated their pocket money, and parents have endured trivia nights to reach this goal, the major benefactors of the Foundation are publishers. And the centrepiece of the 60th anniversary dinner referred to in the discussion of the night’s guest speaker, Maurice Saxby, was the announcement by Hamilton and Smith that the million dollars had been raised and the future of the awards was secure. So the CBC’s independence of commercial interests projected in its judging process and in the pedagogical tone of its judges’ reports is more apparent than actual.
SIX CASE STUDIES

In order to test the degree of conflict between the CBC’s stated intentions and the outcomes of its processes detailed in the preceding four chapters, six winners of the Book of the Year award for Older Readers have been chosen as case studies. Three of them – The Ice is Coming, So Much to Tell You and Looking for Alibrandi – are by writers who won the award with their first published novel, (although Wrightson’s first novel and first Book of the Year was The Crooked Snake, rather than The Ice is Coming). This phenomenon indicates the CBC’s desire to be seen as open to new talent, risk-taking and nurturing. All but Looking for Alibrandi are by writers who, within just a few years, became multiple award-winners – sometimes in several categories, as in the case of Gillian Rubinstein and Gary Crew. After many reviewers suspected that Looking for Alibrandi would prove to be her only novel, Melina Marchetta eventually won Book of the Year again with her second novel, Saving Francesca, and was short listed for subsequent titles. So all six case studies are of novels by writers with several wins and short listings.

Because, as a result of these successes, each of the writers became a frequent speaker at CBC events and was often featured in the organisation’s official journal, Reading Time, it is clear that the case studies cannot be restricted to the six winning novels alone. The CBC adopts its winning writers as ambassadors for the objectives set out in its constitution. So the case studies become author studies, analysing the text in the context of other works by the writer and the writer’s career trajectory, along with various cultural and historical indicators of the values associated with ‘children’ and ‘literature’.

In the introduction to this thesis, reference is made to an ongoing conversation between the CBC and its constituents. The following case studies indicate that this is also a conversation the CBC has intermittently with itself. Among other issues, Ivan Southall’s Bread and Honey contests the boundaries of childhood and what an organisation such as the CBC feels is an appropriate literary treatment of the maturing child’s sexuality. In the critical responses to Patricia
Wrightson’s project, represented here by *The Ice is Coming*, the CBC confronts one of its most passionately held and most problematic aims: to use books to build bridges of cultural understanding – particularly between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians. This aim is later tested in the award given to *Looking for Alibrandi*, and the CBC’s attempt to challenge the reputation it has for being Anglo-centric. In focusing on John Marsden’s *So Much to Tell You*, the study takes the first Book of the Year award winner in which the narrator is a child. This text is a useful site for testing the child-centredness of the awards, and reveals that the author John Marsden sees adults engaged in a war against children. The literary text as a means of teaching is tested here and also in Gary Crew’s *Strange Objects*. Do these texts empower children, or the adults who choose winning books and teach them? The clearly intellectual appeal of Crew’s fiction gives the CBC an opportunity to address the relegation of children’s literature and its enthusiasts referred to in chapter 4 of this thesis, too. And in the public outcry over the ‘bad language’ of Gillian Rubinstein’s *Beyond the Labyrinth*, the thesis again tests the CBC’s concept of the child, and illustrates its responses to calls for censorship. Finally, the Rubinstein case study points to the effect such a conversation between the CBC and its constituents may have on the writer, who is caught in the middle.

Although individually the case studies therefore suggest a range of ways in which the texts and their authors are aligned with or contest the CBC’s stated aims, they also demonstrate many of its unacknowledged assumptions. And the subsequent careers of all six writers show the price – of occasionally Faustian proportions – that can be exacted for the official endorsement of a major literary award so early on.
CHAPTER 5  IVAN SOUTHALL, THE CHILD OUT OF BOUNDS

CASE STUDY: BREAD AND HONEY

Although the historical account in the first four chapters of this study sets out some of the contradictions inherent in the CBC’s claim to represent both a broad constituency and universal critical standards, and in the narrow definition of its infrastructure, case studies of particular awards made in a period of rapid growth for the organisation, from the 1970s to the 1990s, reveal more detailed answers to the question of whether an unstated agenda makes its awards predictable.

The Book of the Year award for 1971 went to Ivan Southall’s *Bread and Honey* and tested the CBC’s definition of children with the newly emerging concept of books specifically for adolescents. Although it was a controversial award, the controversy was entirely in alignment with the CBC’s stated agenda. In their report the judges said:

> the book may not meet with wide approval amongst those who feel that children’s books should present simplified portraits and unequivocal values and attitudes. But for the thoughtful, questioning child there is much to digest and reflect upon.

*Reading Time*, no.40, July 1971, p.5

The inference here that the less thoughtful, less questioning child is not under consideration is strange coming from an organisation dedicated to literacy – unless its real preoccupation is in fact with ‘Literature’. The acknowledgment that the choice might not be popular was in fact an assertion of the CBC’s values, rather than a defence of them. But what values did the 1971 award imply?

Although, unlike the terms of the Miles Franklin Award, the Book of the Year rules do not stipulate that the winner deal with Australian subject matter, most
of the winners in the history of the award do, and like most of them Southall’s novels are set in small towns or suburbs away from the urban centres that two-thirds of Australians live in. So it is immediately clear that the text draws us towards a nostalgic engagement with an Australia of the past, which is more myth than actuality for most of its readers.

As *Bread and Honey* opens, the action is immediately located further away from any urban centre than the actual distance, indicated by the infrequency of public transport:

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Eight miles to the railway station and the train gone, clackety-clacking up to town. Two hours late for school by the time the next bus came around.
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(*Bread and Honey*, p.1)

It is Anzac Day and Michael Cameron is annoyed because Grandma has slept in and they will miss the parade. Grandma is constructed as living in the past, but even she is not awake to its annual replaying here. Given the emphasis on Australian history in Book of the Year winners from *Shackleton’s Argonauts* (1948), *Verity of Sydney Town* (1951) and *The Australia Book* (1952) onwards, a winning novel that centres on the commemoration of a single Anzac Day is therefore adventurous in its time frame, but not at all surprising in its subject matter.

In the course of the novel, Michael finds himself caught between the pragmatic outlook on life of his scientist father and the romantic and nostalgic beliefs of his grandmother. And on a day that commemorates both the horrors and the heroism of a past war, he fights a literal battle with the local bullies and an emotional battle with his own developing maturity.

As with Southall’s novels that immediately preceded and followed it, *Bread and Honey* was questioned by some critics at the time for the relevance of its subject matter to young readers. Such questioning misses two of the most important historical contexts for understanding the themes, not just of this
novel, but of many other texts produced in the 1960s: Australia’s involvement in the war in Vietnam and the development of second wave feminism.

Although the reintroduction of conscription by the National Service Act in 1964 was initially prompted by Indonesia’s ‘Confrontation’ with the newly created state of Malaysia, war became a reality for young Australians when the first Australian troops were committed to South Vietnam on 29 April 1965. A period of two years’ National Service, as it was euphemistically termed, was compulsory for Australian males from the age of 20. But conscription was by means of a ballot, based on the individual’s birthday, and the part played by luck in the prospect of being sent to war was encapsulated in the American title of Australian John Couper’s 1970 young adult novel, *Lottery in Lives*, first published here as *The Thundering Good Today*.

Ways of sabotaging the medical, or of deferring if you were called up, were common discussion topics among high school boys at the time. And just as the United States government had used images of Elvis Presley in uniform for political purposes ten years earlier, so the Australian government made much of the conscription of pop star Normie Rowe in 1968 and his service in Vietnam.

Conscription was not just a catalyst for reassessing Australian attitudes to war, but for questioning the stereotypes of masculinity and courage that predominated in Australian cultural mythology – particularly as expressed in the tradition of the Anzacs and other ‘diggers’. But towards the end of the 60s attitudes changed. Just as recession was eventually to make the Australian expression ‘dole bludger’ obsolete, so the view that ‘conscientious objector’ was synonymous with ‘draft dodger’ was to disappear during the course of the war in Vietnam.

The world 13-year-old Michael Cameron looks out at on Anzac Day is a bleak one. He’d like to be able to roll around naked on the grass – partly to celebrate being alive and partly to provoke his staid adult neighbours. Instead, through the window he sees the heavy grey light as:
a prehistoric light, with cavemen dragging home their girlfriends by the hair of their heads and sabre-tooth tigers licking their chops and kids like Michael not having to wear clothes.

(Bread and Honey, p.3)

It’s a primitive image of an older generation carting home the spoils of war, while a younger generation is unaware of the multiple threats to its innocence – blissfully so, and, from an adult perspective, perhaps irresponsibly. Many students of the 60s will read this playful image in the context of the popular Hanna-Barbera cartoon series “The Flintstones” (1960-66), which satirised Stone Age masculinity and had the father Fred Flintstone outwitted by the family cat, a sabre-toothed tiger, over the credits at the end of every episode and by his wife Wilma throughout.

Although Michael has happily attended the Anzac Day march in the past, in missing it this year he is confronted by a demonstration of what war is really all about: violence and bullying, with individuals banding together for strength and acting as a group against those who are weaker. Michael is at his most vulnerable when Bully Boy MacBaren (the surname indicates both institutional power – ‘baron’ – and the hollowness of his victory – ‘barren’) and his henchman Flackie catch him swimming without his clothes on. Nakedness is an expression of innocence at the beginning of the novel, to be celebrated, flaunted – maybe provocatively – but the bullies make it something to be embarrassed by, sniggered at and exploited. Michael is about to have his boyish innocence taken from him.

The conscription of young men who had little or no choice about going to war was a major factor in the growth of the anti-war movement during the late 60s. Its importance can be gauged by one of the first acts of the new Labor government in 1972. That government was elected on 2 December and three days later it abolished conscription and announced the withdrawal of all remaining Australian troops from the war in Vietnam. So when Michael Cameron asks his grandmother in the final line of Bread and Honey, ‘Is this
because people remember, Grandma, or to pretend that they don’t forget?’ his question about the significance of Anzac Day is to be read in the tradition of other anti-war texts in Australian literature, such as Sumner Locke Elliott’s *Rusty Bugles* (1948) and Alan Seymour’s *The One Day of the Year* (1960). But more pointedly, it is to be read in the knowledge that, when the novel was written and published, young Australian boys like Michael still faced the real possibility of being sent to an increasingly unpopular war not long after they left school.

The second context for reading *Bread and Honey* is the development of second wave feminism during the 60s – and the two are connected. Although Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is generally regarded as the rallying cry in a renewed battle by women for gender equity in the United States and other western countries, the 1970 publication of *The Female Eunuch* strengthened the feminist movement in Australia because its author, Germaine Greer, spoke with an Australian voice. Her wit and combative intelligence, as well as her controversial expatriate views on Australia, made her a powerful focus of the national conversation on equal pay and equal rights for women.

One of the ways in which war and feminism coincide is implied in McVitty’s observation (1981, p.243) that relationships are mostly constructed as battles in Southall’s work. In *Bread and Honey*, Michael battles against the bullies, against tradition, against small town inhibitions and, to some extent, against the expectations of the world generally and the changes involved in adolescence.

For many feminists the war in Vietnam epitomised the hegemonic masculinity that they were fighting against and although the rhetoric of their struggle for equal rights was interpreted by some men as countersexist, it became increasingly clear that the liberation of women could result in the liberation of men too. Given the predominance of women among CBC members and judges, it is inevitable that the challenging of masculinities in Book of the Year winners be read in the context of feminism. If, however, the hippies rather than the women’s movement provided one of the most popular slogans of the time, ‘Make Love Not War’, the object of both groups’ disaffection was shared.
Perhaps predictably, critical responses to *Bread and Honey* are more resolved on the subject of Anzac Day and the theme of the individual who is bullied by the group, than they are on the female characters: particularly Michael’s nine-year-old friend, Margaret. The narrative anticipates the role played later on by Margaret in its early reference to another girl, Mrs Farlow’s daughter, Jillian. Just as sleeping in on Anzac Day and missing the march interrogate the commemoration of war right from the first page of the novel, so Michael’s desire to go out and roll naked in the rain interrogates suburban or small town proprieties and stereotypes of masculinity.

> Who wanted showers of soap and steam? Boy, he’d love to run out there and roll in the rain!  
> Over and over, rolling in the rain…  
> But he didn’t dare. She’d see as she had seen before. Mrs Farlow next door would say, as she had said six months ago, ‘Disgusting.’ Then probably she would add, whether it was true or not: ‘and in front of Jillian! He’s without shame.’

(*Bread and Honey*, p.4)

Michael’s desire is not civilised, and it may be unmanly – clearly outside the Anzac tradition, as it has been constructed. But Michael doesn’t act on this impulse. He did six months ago, however he is inhibited here by what he anticipates Mrs Farlow will say. So, although she has given him good reason to hesitate, he has taken on her values and is in fact censoring his own behaviour. And that is a choice the individual makes with maturity.

When Michael thinks of the stifling hand of Mrs Farlow, and at times Grandma, he imagines losing himself in the world of nature.

> The temptation was awful. He’d love to slide over the window-sill and run all the way to the sea and swim for miles, out past the sand bars, out into the channel where the big ships steamed, the cargo ships, the liners, the grey ships with guns.  
> Once upon a time, Dad said, ten million men marched to war to have their heads blown off.

(*Bread and Honey*, p.8)
The progression of thought from the repressiveness of women and suburbia, to the grey world outside, to war enacts one trope in the mythology of Anzac: that young Australians couldn’t wait to get away from the dullness of provincial life, constructed as childhood, to some imagined adventure on the other side of the world, constructed as adulthood, which would end up killing them.

Here the sea represents freedom from social restriction – but swimming out into it endlessly is also an image of suicide. It is odd that critics have not remarked on the connection between the scenes at the beach and the fact that this is where Michael’s mother died, since his throwing off of clothes and plunging into the sea expresses both a desire to return to childhood innocence – and unconsciously maybe beyond that to the womb, to the merging of the self with that of his mother.

One of the reasons Michael wanted to go to the march was that it would allow him to ‘think of Mum right out there in the open on Anzac Day for everyone to see. He could even look like he was going to cry and no one minded’ (Bread and Honey, p.28). It is a measure of the deadening power of masculine stereotypes that a boy would welcome the solemn occasion as a licence for grief at the death of his mother and for tears.

When he goes to the cliff where his mother fell to her death (p.30) Michael remembers her feeling ‘funny’ and urging him to run back and find his father. But when they got back, the broken safety rail was hanging by a single nut and bolt and his mother was gone. So the cliff is now a source of guilt. Michael feels responsible for the death that has occurred there. And, given that it is Anzac Day, the emphasis on the cliff recalls images of the cliffs at Anzac Cove that are seared into the Australian consciousness.

Although Margaret’s constant imaginative games irritate Michael and her sudden awareness of the sexual potential of their being alone together on the beach, however teasing and playful, alarms him, he suddenly feels concerned for her welfare. This is due not just to his recent experience of feeling alone
when he misses the parade, but also to an unconscious connection of Margaret with his mother, as she ventures into the treacherous area at the foot of the cliffs, where his mother died.

It was like one of Grandma’s stories of a goddess walking into the sea to vanish beneath the waves... That blooming little kid, that crackpot. She’d got him so churned up he couldn’t think straight, could think only of bodies floating in the water with long stringy hair waving back and forth like seaweed, could think only of people crying and an awful emptiness in the world.

(Bread and Honey, p.73)

Implicit in this image is the death of his mother and, in the plural ‘bodies’, the death of Anzacs at Gallipoli. Or perhaps ‘bodies’ refers to his mother and himself. This image, at once ghastly and beautiful, recalls the description of drowned soldiers in Slessor’s poem ‘Beach Burial’.

At night they sway and wander in the waters far under
But morning rolls them in the foam.

(Haskell, D & Dutton, G (eds.) 1994, pp.143-144)

Those lines, read by generations of Australian school children, are also present subtextually years later in reading one of the most memorable scenes from Peter Weir’s 1981 film ‘Gallipoli’, where naked soldiers are filmed underwater, swimming in the beauty of slow motion, until the blood flowers from their bodies and it is clear that they are being shot at by the enemy above the surface and that death is the only escape possible from the horror of war.

While these scenes involving Michael’s responses to Grandma, his mother and Margaret are dense with possibilities, critics of Bread and Honey seem uncomfortable with and unclear about them. Commenting on the public discourse at the time about the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’, Pausacker says:

Where most writers concentrated on stretching the limits for
their girl characters, Southall took a different turn, zeroing in on those boys in his survival stories who were caught in the struggle between fear and courage.

(Pausacker 1992, p.664)

Just as he explores the vulnerability of adults, Southall interrogates the stereotypes of courage, strength and stoicism in boys, and general awareness of the feminist project at the time made a sympathetic reading possible. So his focus is the sensitive boy.

The challenge to reading *Bread and Honey* in the context of 60s feminism, however, is that in the long run the women and girls here are minor characters and catalysts. It’s a boy’s story and the often beautiful imagery of the natural world, of sensuality and the expression of the unconscious, denotes a freedom not facilitated by the female, but despite it. The free spirit that is reasserted as the object of desire is that of the sensual child – although gendered male, finally asexual.

So, rather than feminism, it is the novel’s retreat from adolescence and reassertion of childhood innocence that aligns it most clearly with the CBC’s agenda. From one point of view, the judges made a bold choice in awarding Book of the Year to *Bread and Honey*. It is topical, iconoclastic, multilayered. And yet the battle lines drawn right at the beginning of the novel construct childhood – however apparently stifled and dull – as a place it might be safer never to leave.

The questioning of war and its commemoration was clearly not the main source of the controversy surrounding *Bread and Honey*. This was due partly to the change in public attitudes towards the war in Vietnam, and partly to Southall’s own record as a serviceman – known through his autobiographical writing and the public speaking earlier in his career. If he is attacking those who go to war, then, and those who support them, he is doing so from a position within.

The scenes that challenged the CBC’s values were those on the beach, where an innocent meeting of a thirteen-year-old boy and a nine-year-old girl moment-
arily has the potential to become sexual. Pownall doubts that young readers would be interested in this subject. While acknowledging that Southall controls the narrative more firmly than he has controlled it in other novels, she says:

But all these plus signs don’t resolve the doubts: just whom did Mr Southall have in mind as readers for *Bread and Honey*? The Anzac Day debate would interest some of the High School group, but what will they make of a 13-year-old who takes up with a nine-year-old girl who wears a “magic” ring and plays at being a cat?

*(Reading Time, no.39, March 1971, p.48)*

Although Michael’s flicker of sexual awareness hardly justifies one of the implications here of the phrase ‘takes up with’, Pownall has apparently never heard Australian schoolboys toss around the term ‘cradle-snatcher’ as an insult. If she had, she would understand that this potential plotline is not without interest to young readers.

More importantly, Pownall is one of a number of critics who make assumptions about what children would or would not like, that read as if they are displaced personal judgments, based on their own recollected childhood preferences. Furthermore, these judgments appear to be based on the belief that there is an invariably predictable series of stages in child development, derived from the teaching of Piaget in tertiary education courses at the time.

Southall himself indirectly questions this prescriptive approach to a child’s readiness to read.

*Immature* is the word I read on a school report in 1968 referring to one of my daughters then nine years of age. What does God have in mind for a girl to be at nine years of age?

*(Southall 1974, p.3)*
When it seems as if Michael will drown, the memory of his mother and Grandma help to save him, but the presence of nine-year-old Margaret is the principal agent of rescue. Although Michael blames her for exploiting the opportunity to give him mouth to mouth – ‘You only wanted to kiss me. I know what girls are like. I know all about them.’ (p.78) – he acknowledges that he was the one who wanted the kissing. ‘It was disturbing because he knew he was the one who wanted to cuddle up and do the kissing to find out what it would be like. She was terrific, but so little, so young. It wasn’t right.’

This scene immediately invites a rereading of Michael’s earlier nakedness and rolling in the grass. That expression of his sensuality challenged small town proprieties, but now appears to have been a less innocent expression of his sexuality. At this point the realisation frightens Michael himself. He has taken on the disapproval of adults – his adult self is being asserted in several ways.

To understand why critical responses to the novel focused on what is, after all, a relatively brief scene, it is useful to consider the place of Bread and Honey in the author’s publishing history.

Southall is the only Australian writer to have won the Carnegie Medal (1971) and still one of only two to have won the CBC Book of the Year Award for Older Readers four times (1966, 1968, 1971, 1976). And yet, as Pausacker observes (1992, p.660), two novels late in his career, Blackbird (1988) and The Mysterious World of Marcus Leadbeater (1990) were ignored in Australia until Agnes Nieuwenhuizen brought their favourable American reviews to the attention of Heinemann and they were published here in 1992 and 1991 respectively.

Even one of Southall’s most caustic critics, Walter McVitty, called him in 1981 ‘Australia’s best known and most controversial author of children’s books’ (1981, p.235). And yet Angus and Robertson, who had published his children’s books from Meet Simon Black in 1950 to Rachel in 1986 were not interested in the Australian rights to either Blackbird or Marcus Leadbeater. The delay in publication is surprising, although the change of publisher less so. Southall was
so prolific from the 50s to the 70s that a single originating publisher could not have marketed his total output and consequently he had several. Publishers at the time also openly deplored the practice of ‘poaching’ a successful writer from a competing publishing house, but it went on nevertheless. And goes on; indeed the term has almost fallen out of use.

Clearly the prestigious US publisher Farrar, Straus and Giroux regarded the novels as publishable, and the reviews were good. So the rejection by Angus and Robertson in Australia appears to be the anticlimactic end of a relationship with an author who was no longer worth the trouble. In an interview with Southall in 1991, Nieuwenhuizen records the toll that the years of controversy over his fiction have taken:

While recognising that his more recent work has been uneven, Southall admits to feeling ‘brushed aside’ and ‘wounded’. He observes drily that in the late 1970s he was ‘told to leave the country’. He has continued to write, but has withdrawn completely from public life and rarely gives interviews.

(Nieuwenhuizen 1992, p.654)

Pausacker sees some similarity between the outcome of Southall’s volatile relationship with the Australia constructed by his critics, and Patrick White’s.

Both refused to adapt to the role of eminence grise, making increasingly rare though impressive public appearances and always continuing to stir up controversy.

(Pausacker 1992, p.660)

Unlike some later writers who were to win Book of the Year with their first published novel, Southall had served a long apprenticeship as a published writer and had reinvented his already successful children’s fiction by the time he won his first Book of the Year Award.
Although McVitty regards each book as a ‘reworking of the same basic material’ (1981, p.242), which in any case might be said of other obsessive writers such as White himself, the changes represented by *Hills End* in 1962 and *Josh* in 1971 demonstrate Southall’s adventurous dissatisfaction with his own success and his determination to challenge himself as a writer. He began to publish short stories in 1933, moved on to fiction, biographies and information books for adults and in 1950 began to publish the popular series of children’s novels about his RAAF superhero Simon Black, which have been compared with W E Johns’ classic *Biggles* series – unfairly in Matthews’ view (Matthews 1990, p.39) because the formula is less narrowly prescribed.

But after the publication between 1950 and 1961 of nine Simon Black novels, with *Hills End* Southall began to explore the theme of children surviving against what are usually referred to by his critics as ‘the elements’ – since in a sequence of novels he was to pit his young characters against water, fire, the air and earth – as well as the fearful and incompetent adults that were to become another distinctive trope in his fiction. He recalls the wet Sunday afternoon when he began to reinvent his material:

My brother and his wife had added their children to ours rushing about the house. By half-past five I was wearing thin and out of a head throbbing with noise said to my brother, ‘What would happen to these kids if we were not here to pick up the bits, say, for a year or a month – or even a week? What would happen if they were left?’

‘They’d die,’ he said.

(Southall 1975, pp.92-93)

But Southall thought with equal certainty that they’d live, and he set out to test that belief.

Two of the novels he wrote about the survival of a group of children won Book of the Year: *Ash Road* in 1966 and *To the Wild Sky* in 1968, although when the pilot dies of a heart attack and 11-year-old Perry has to somehow fly and land the plane in the second of these, the limitations inherent in a realist fictional
treatment of children surviving despite or without adults are starkly evident.
Disposing of the adult characters in order to create dramatic possibilities for the
children is such a longstanding device in fiction that it almost seems a require-
ment of the children’s novel. In one of the best-known examples, a century
earlier in 1857 Ballantyne has three English boys shipwrecked on a Pacific
island and surviving. Although a novel for adults, Golding’s Lord of the Flies
in 1954 interrogates The Coral Island’s contention that the children would
survive through ingenuity and courage, Ballantyne exploits existing narrative
sterotypes of the Pacific – and his readers’ severely limited ability to test them
– in order to resolve the situation he sets up. In Hills End and Ash Road,
Southall pits his young characters against flood and bushfire – events familiar
to enough Australian readers from both fiction and their everyday lives to make
the drama compelling. If To the Wild Sky must depend on only fictional
precedents as a test of credibility, critical responses indicate that by the time
Southall gets to Finn’s Folly in 1969, even this is not possible – at least for
adult readers.

To some extent the ideas in Southall’s novels had begun to take over. As
Matthews remarks, ‘Southall is always difficult to remove from his work’
(1990, p.39). But that often seamless integration of his life and fiction is deter-
mined by Southall himself, who on a number of occasions explains the
connections.

One never knows what one is capable of until one has to do it.
I would never have believed that I could plot an operation
against a German warship in my mind and change the sea and
the setting to suit me and then attack that warship and sink it.
I would never have believed that the little kid who couldn’t
climb a tree for fear of falling out could do a thing like that.

If you had told me before my youngest daughter Melissa
was born that I’d be able to cope with a profoundly retarded

Down’s Syndrome child, I wouldn’t have believed that of
myself.

(Nieuwenhuizen 1991, p.657)
The personally charged desire to extend the capabilities of children becomes, then, the predominant theme in not just the fiction, but in the critical discourse too.

Almost 40 years later, it is tempting to read *Finn’s Folly* as metafiction: Southall playing a dangerous game of brinkmanship with himself as he pushes the novelist’s ‘what if’ beyond expected limits and gives his young characters challenges that are increasingly extreme. But critical expectations at the time created a response that was not merely less sympathetic: it was overtly hostile. Those expectations were – from Australian critics – of Australian children’s books in particular and – from others – of children’s fiction generally.

Publisher Margaret Hamilton highlights a decline in Australian children’s book publishing in the 1970s and 80s by contrasting it with the rapid growth during the 50s and 60s (Hamilton 1986, p.56). She claims that the expansion in the 50s is due to the postwar defining of Australia’s cultural identity away from its historical ties to the United Kingdom, to the new wave of European immigration and to the ‘baby boom’, which produced an increased demand for children’s books.

Trying to identify the reasons that children’s fantasy began to flourish belatedly in the 1980s, academic and publisher Walter McVitty says:

> Perhaps in the 1960s and 1970s we were not ready for it. Its recent flowering seems to me to be a sign that we may have matured, and are perhaps a little less self-conscious and prosaic people.

(McVitty 1986, p.51)

Hamilton therefore points to the prolific growth of Australian publishing for children in the period after World War 2, and McVitty sees the books published as predominantly realist – a view that echoes Patrick White’s well known condemnation of the Australian novel as the ‘dreary, dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism.’ (White 1958, p.17).
How literally the realist construction of Australian life was read – by both children and adults – is a question that recurs frequently in this thesis. Southall and Marsden assume that the Romantic pastoral or suburban imagery in traditional children’s literature is swallowed whole, and their moralistic rejection of it so extreme it appears angry and at times almost violent.

Some books…appear to be on the side of the young when in fact they are not. Children are attracted to the works of such writers as Enid Blyton, because her protagonists show enterprise, boldness, independence: they make decisions and take responsibility for their own lives, unlike in the real world, where most children are never allowed to win an argument with an adult, or to walk home from school without adult supervision. Such books irritate adults, but the books are dishonest anyway: they give children distorted glimpses of life as it could almost be, without ever alluding to the fact that it’s nothing like this at all…Blyton’s books are fantasies masquerading as realities.

(Marsden 1994, p.105)

Ostensibly defending children’s rights to the truth and to independent thought here, Marsden’s view of their naivety as readers is surprisingly disempowering. He assumes that the context of reading is not a factor in their response to narrative. Although chapters 5, 7 and 8 of this thesis show that some adult members of the general public and spokespersons for the CBC do appear to read the Romantic idyll of childhood and Australia’s past literally, Crew (chapter 9) is far more astute in constructing realism as a kind of game. Predominantly city-dwelling Australians regard their bush mythology as playfully as postwar British readers regarded Blyton, or television viewers in wintry London now watch ‘Home and Away’.

The implied equation some adult commentators make between maturing and leaving realism behind is noteworthy because McVitty, Pownall and Niall, for example, become increasingly irritated by Southall’s attempts to do so. Like Stephens (1992), Scutter (1996) explains the connection between the sustaining
of a conservative ideology determined by adults and what she defines as the Peter Pan trope in Australia’s traditionally realist fiction. But the significant break that Southall’s major novels make with that tradition is that they do not affirm eternal childhood; because his adult characters are either physically or emotionally absent, the child characters are obliged to grow up and leave childhood behind quite abruptly. The apparent disruption to Southall’s close relationship with his adult Australian readers – as represented by his publishers and the CBC – indicates how fundamentally his work challenged their nostalgia for the construction of childhood innocence.

This challenge did not suddenly appear with the publication of Bread and Honey, so how do we read the fact that Southall has won the CBC Book of the Year four times? The rules for the Carnegie Medal state that ‘books by previous Carnegie medal winners are eligible’. However, they emphasise that the assessment for that award is made against all other titles published in the year under consideration, not against all other books written by an individual author. The point is to reassure new authors that they are not up against some ‘star system’. Similarly, the CBC judges’ reports make generalisations about the quality of each year’s entries – again, clearly to guard against any impression that the organisation has favourites. The clustering of wins by authors such as Ivan Southall, Patricia Wrightson, Gary Crew and James Moloney is nevertheless immediately noticeable and has long been part of the unrecorded discourse surrounding the awards.

It is difficult to believe that a well known writer’s existing body of work is not taken into account in the judging process. Accompanying the announcement of the 1971 Book of the Year, Reading Time publishes a three-page retrospective drawn from 14 reviews of various books by Southall, with the opening line, ‘Reading Time has followed very closely the work of Mr Southall.’ (Reading Time, no.40, 1971, pp.9-11). The following year, when Hesba Brinsmead’s Longtime Passing is awarded Book of the Year, Reading Time publishes excerpts from 8 reviews of her books in Australian and UK journals (Reading Time, no.44, 1972, pp.10-12). So the CBC is constructing a hall of fame of not just individual titles, but award-winning authors. In 1980, however, McVitty
argues that Australia might want to follow the British model, to prevent the same author winning all the time (McVitty 1980, p.11).

The history of multiple wins in awards for children’s fiction is as follows:

*Carnegie Medal* (UK)
- 4 authors have 2 wins each

*Newbery Medal* (USA)
- 5 authors have 2 wins each

*CLA Book of the Year for Children* (Canada)
- 11 authors have 2 wins each
- 1 author has 3 wins
- 1 author has 4 wins

*Esther Glen Award* (NZ)
- 2 authors have 2 wins each
- 1 author has 3 wins
- 1 author has 6 wins

*CBC Book of the Year* (AUST)
- 7 authors have 2 wins each
- 1 author has 3 wins
- 2 authors have 4 wins

The Australian tally here has been kept low by citing only winners in the fiction category for Older Readers. Writers such as Gary Crew and Gillian Rubinstein have won 2 awards in that category, but several additional awards in the Younger Readers and Picture Book of the Year categories, as well as Honour Book or Highly Commended citations. So if they had been included, the number of multiple wins would have been considerably higher.

It is immediately obvious that the so-called metropolitan English-speaking cultures of the UK and the United States have fewer multiple winners of their top children’s book awards. Does that mean that they have a greater number of outstanding writers competing? Conversely, does it mean that the ‘provincial’ cultures of Canada, New Zealand and Australia have so few writers of outstanding ability that the potential winners are more predictable? Or, counter-intuitively, do the provincial cultures define their elites more narrowly? If so,
does the need to attract publicity for the award play a part? Are the metropolitan cultures unexpectedly more egalitarian in spreading round the available prizes?

Whatever the reason, the CBC had invested, if not money, a great deal of its cultural capital in Southall’s fiction. In the 1960s barely an issue of its journal Reading Time appears without a reference to Southall in a review, an article, an interview or a notice of events. Unmistakably he dominates the public discourse about children’s books sponsored by the CBC at that time to an extent that very few writers, such as Gary Crew, have done since.

So the hostile reception to Finn’s Folly in 1969 reads partly as coming from a sense of betrayal. There is a grudging tone about the judges’ report for the 1970 Book of the Year, in which Finn’s Folly is Commended.

The sheer professionalism of his writing is convincing and almost overcomes the somewhat hysterical atmosphere and contrived plot.

(Reading Time, no.36, July 1970, p.12)

Without doubt it is a difficult novel and not one of Southall’s best. But it is possible to approach it as a novel of ideas fused with horror. The plot piles one disastrous event on top of another and the boy Max, whose parents may have been killed in a road accident, tries to rescue a girl, Alison, trapped upside down in the cab of a semitrailer beside her dead father, and there is a romantic attraction between them.

Eve Pownall, later to be co-editor of Reading Time and, as noted in chapter 3, to have one of the Book of the Year awards named after her, was the CBC’s regular reviewer of Southall’s fiction at the time, so her views carry some of the organisation’s authority. In a review titled on the contents page with an unintentional but grimly amusing typographical error ‘Wither Southall?’ (but correctly rendered above the review itself ‘Whither Southall?’), Pownall praises
the authenticity of the novel’s setting and even acknowledges that sexual attraction in the context of the death of the parents is not implausible. But it is the boy’s ability to analyse the situation he and the young girl are in that she objects to.

From here the story goes on to another plane. Under- and overtones that surely belong to an older age group become more and more insistent and queries mount in the reader’s mind…

This brings into the open a question which hovered uneasily over other Southall work: is the author really writing for children? Even if the mid-teens are to be cajoled into accepting unresolved endings (and one doubts they ever find them satisfying) are they ready for analysis of emotional coldness, phoney adult behaviour, or non-decision making in ‘oldies’? If the young aren’t completely puzzled, one feels they couldn’t care less. Problems which touch their own plane of life, yes, but then they surely look for guidelines for solving these problems. To leave a fifteen year old boy responsible for a family of four, one of them mentally retarded, and not a friend in sight (apart from a brief statement that ex-servicemen’s families are usually looked after) would haunt the most stout-hearted social worker

(Reading Time, no. 33, July 1969, pp.35-36)

What unsettles Pownall is a shift in power away from the adult characters. The most extreme contemporary response, however, is from the British poet and academic David Holbrook, who says of Finn’s Folly that it is ‘so repulsive I find it difficult to write about it coolly’. He wonders whether the novel’s crudeness violates the Children and Young Persons (Harmful Publications) Act and, likening it to child rape, concludes:

Permissiveness now seems to extend to tolerance of the corruption of the infant mind.

(Holbrook 1970, pp.7-8)

Holbrook’s use of the phrase ‘infant mind’ begins to identify the source of the critics’ anger. Clearly he is unable to find an appropriate category for this
novel, because the term ‘infant’ bears no relation to the implied reader of Southall’s work. Rather than admit his own inadequacy as a reader, however, he attacks the book.

Even the normally restrained Australian critic Brenda Niall takes a sarcastic swipe at Southall:

> A William Golding Prize for Cultural Pessimism would have been more appropriate for Southall at this stage of his career than the Australian Children’s Book of the Year award, which he won in 1968 for *To the Wild Sky*.
> It is a relief to know that Southall’s next catastrophe novel, *Finn’s Folly* (1969) did not win any prizes.

(Niall 1987, p.242)

The remark is even more surprising since Niall is writing with considerable hindsight here and the benefit of greater critical sophistication than most of those who wrote at the time of publication.

When she turns to *Bread and Honey*, she is hardly more sympathetic. Commenting on Michael’s perspective that Anzac Day is like the end of the world, she says:

> Michael is beside himself, his usual position. If the reader takes him seriously, the novel will be painful from beginning to end. The only alternative reaction is boredom.

(Niall 1987, p.280)

Is it? Might an alternative reaction be to observe Michael’s distress and confusion and try to work out what the source of the problem is? That is, after all, what Michael himself is trying to do.

McVitty’s neat pathologising is no greater help and in Niall’s use of the sarcastic joke ‘beside himself’ she seems to be influenced by his view that Michael is clinically schizophrenic. McVitty claims that ‘Michael’s derange-
ment is made clear by every word on the very first page of his book’ (McVitty 1981, p.255). He catalogues Southall’s use of verbs as evidence that Michael is out of his mind and:

"displays his persecution fears while “wailing”, “bellowing” and “panicking”. He then enthusiastically succumbs to a compulsive urge to roll naked in the grass…The act has been not merely an expression of nonconformism but, in his own mind at least, one with exhibitionist overtones – he is left like a heavy breathing telephone caller, with nobody on the other end of the line."

(McVitty 1981, p.255)

The inappropriately sexual connotation in ‘heavy breathing’, like Holbrook’s outburst at Finn’s Folly, leaves the reader now wondering what the real source of this critical energy is.

Perhaps if McVitty had been writing ten years later he would have found the term to describe Michael: ‘drama queen’. Michael is a teenager, he has just woken up, he realises that he is about to miss an important occasion, he looks for a reason to blame someone else and hits on Grandma. Naturally the prose is jumpy and laden with verbs. That hardly makes him psychotic. The judges’ report on Bread and Honey says that ‘Mr Southall’s understatement lends poignancy to Michael’s loneliness and sense of loss, especially after he has taken a stand against Bully Boy’s mate.’(Reading Time July 1971, p.5) McVitty and Niall seem to have been reading a different book.

Southall must have felt both vindicated and dismayed, if not embittered, when his next novel, Josh, was awarded the 1971 Carnegie Medal and not even mentioned in the Book of the Year Award. Although Pownall’s review of Josh is generally positive, curiously it lacks energy, as if she is simply tired of having to deal with Southall, and ask the same question:

"Comes the inevitable question with a new Southall: is it a book for or about children? Frankly, I don’t think Mr Southall worries, and probably neither will the judges of"
this year’s Book Award, who will almost certainly have crops on their final short list.

(Reading Time, no.44, 1972, p.51)

Her prediction was wrong and again there is a sense of displacement in her assumption that Southall no longer cares. The indifference appears to be her own.

As if to compensate for some personal embarrassment, if not that of the organisation as a whole, the editor – publisher Anne Bower Ingram – prefaces the Book of the Year issue of Reading Time with an announcement of Southall’s Carnegie win and her congratulations. Then the lead article is one of Southall’s least interesting: an account of his world travels titled ‘Author on the Run’, in which he is clearly looking for a theme. Gracious enough not to comment on the immediate situation, he perhaps allows himself an oblique reference to it when he observes that since American readers are enthusiastic about Australian books, the ‘Time has come to stop apologising for our literature and our accents.’(Southall 1972, p.5).

Then the editor includes the winners of a Book Week reviewing competition for young reviewers. Whether coincidentally or not, the winning review and the one in equal third place are both on the subject of Josh. The winner, Gilbert Elliott, age 12, writes:

After reading previous books by Ivan Southall I have always felt that he is very cruel to the characters concerned, but after reading his latest novel, Josh, I have been able to relax, satisfied with the turn of events...Ivan Southall gives a very sensitive portrayal of the characters involved and shows Josh as a sensitive and confused person in conflict with the pretensions of built up family tradition. ...I feel that this book is to be ranked, along with other books by Ivan Southall, as one of the best children’s books written

(Reading Time, no.44, 1972, p.14)

Ruth Morrison, age 12 and equal third, writes:
Josh’s character is, I think, overdrawn, but if he was not so deep thinking this book would not have been nearly so successful. This is not a book for all children, as some need faster and more adventurous stories. A few readers from sixth class on who enjoy a sensitive story would find this book absorbing.

(Reading Time, no.44, 1972, p.15)

Reading Time’s editor is making every effort to show that she, if not also the CBC, does recognise Southall’s importance, although the judges’ decision seems to imply otherwise.

Even Niall concedes that ‘Josh is easier reading than Bread and Honey and it repays the trouble of finding one’s way through the hyperactive prose’ (Niall 1987, p.280), although her judgment about the relative ease of reading is debatable. McVitty, however, makes no comparable concession when he concludes that ‘Bread and Honey and Josh are the apotheosis of misanthropy.’ (McVitty 1981, p.262).

Given the disparity between the British and Australian verdicts on Josh, it is tempting to ask who the judges were in both cases. The Australian panel (Reading Time no.44, 1972, p.10) includes some of the most highly respected members of the CBC: Juliana Bayfield, librarian, State Library of South Australia and eventually president of IBBY Australia; Hazel Hume, Blacktown public librarian; Lu Rees MBE, president of the ACT branch of the CBC and later AM and Dromkeen Medal winner. It may or may not be significant that Walter McVitty was one of the judges: the CBC does not preserve the reports of individual judges or record their comments.

How could these judges fail to award Josh even a commendation? Journalist Kevon Kemp, writing on the anomaly for the National Times, identifies a new censoriousness in the CBC, which, despite the retention of a few rebellious stalwarts, he says is now:
more or less overcome by a ‘grey cardigan’ syndrome (as one trade leader described it) culminating this last month or two in something of a parochial anti-climax. This was the occasion of the 1972 “Book of the Year” award, when Ivan Southall’s “Josh”, already presented with the Carnegie Award – of world prestige – for children’s books, against an international entry of over 2,000 titles, did not win a place in the Australian awards, with fewer than 40 entries.

(Kemp 1972, p.20)

Two years later in 1974, the national president seems to imply one possibility in reporting on the fear of some members that the new Australia Council sub-committee for Children’s Literature will try to influence the judging of the Book of the Year awards:

If there is any danger in our judging set-up it is more likely to come from our own judges than from the Government nominees. There is a dangerous tendency amongst some judges to be somewhat iconoclastic. This attitude, though maintaining justifiable high standards, could well lead to the total failure of any Australian to write an acceptable book for years to come.

(President’s Report, AGM 1974, CBCA archives, ACC 04/227, box 11)

The tantalising suggestion here seems to be that the longstanding Australian ‘tall poppy syndrome’ has worked against the recognition of Josh. Or, to put it in the kind of language still used with children at the time, Southall has got ‘too big for his boots’.

A more soundly based conclusion is that advanced by Matthews (1990). He considers the question Pownall returns to repeatedly, when she asks:

So is Mr Southall… truly writing for children? For a good deal of the time, the answer must be: Yes, he is, and with outstanding ability. Then comes the moment when he is likely to lose sight of his audience, or replace it with another, himself perhaps.

(Reading Time, no.33, 1969, p.35)
Matthews argues that this is an identifying moment when Southall is clearly writing for a young adult audience that has not yet been defined. It’s important to remember that the novel generally credited with establishing that young adult audience, Cormier’s *The Chocolate War*, was not published until 1974. Matthews argues that Southall’s audience in the late 60s and early 70s is:

quite distinctively, for us two decades later, the adolescent audience, but at the time it was so new to reviewers and to general critical attention as to be barely recognisable.

(Matthews 1990, p.40)

The December 1970 issue of *Reading Time* carries a full-page advertisement, restrained by today’s standards in both copy and imagery, for the John Couper novel referred to at the beginning of this chapter. It was the first specifically marketed to this audience in Australia, which at the time the publisher Bodley Head called ‘New Adults’.

Bodley Head is proud to announce publication of a highly topical novel for New Adults about the young men who face conscription in Australia today. THE THUNDERING GOOD TODAY ($2.50 0370012186) The author, J.M. Couper, is the poet and a lecturer at Macquarie University.

(Reading Time, no.38, 1970, p.26)

A copywriter would now be more likely to elide or omit altogether the writer’s academic credentials, but their inclusion here points to the publisher’s ambition for this new audience.

Matthews quotes a letter sent to Southall by Julia MacRae after *Josh* was published. At the time an editor at Hamish Hamilton, MacRae was to become one of the most influential children’s publishers in the UK, although an expatriate Australian and writing here with some authority.
What this book should/should not be...William Mayne had the same trouble. There is still a hard core of resistance in Australia to change, and one of the changes being resisted is the new style of children’s book. The critics of this honest new writing will have to become more realistic, and accept that what you are doing is necessary, valid, relevant and all too rare. You are speaking to today’s reader.

(Matthews 1990, p.45)

Acknowledging the baggage that she brings as an adult and an academic to her interview with Southall, Nieuwenhuizen says that, contrary to the view of critics such as Pownall and Niall that teens would not like his books, she herself has had successful teaching experiences with *Ash Road, Bread and Honey* and *Josh* and that her daughter remembers having been enthusiastic about them when she was at school.

When I read out some of the criticism to my daughter, who is now 27, she said, with considerable indignation: ‘But I loved those books and we used to talk about them for ages.’

(Nieuwenhuizen July 1991, p.15)

Juxtaposed with the critics’ complaints that Southall has left realism and credibility behind, it is useful to read one 14-year-old reader’s response to *Finn’s Folly*, the novel that, as suggested earlier, provoked the most extreme hostility of adult readers, and the one that clearly caused some of them to lose interest in his fiction. It was published in the children’s reviews section of *Reading Time*, ‘Another Point of View’.

*Finn’s Folly* is overflowing with the deep emotion and feelings of each character involved, as he or she learns to cope with what lies ahead...I enjoyed *Finn’s Folly* immensely, because it is such a frank, realistic children’s book, uniquely dramatic. It is suited to a youth which today is taking an increased interest in the outside world. Every day one hears of road accidents, but in this account there are emotions and a strong feeling of the reader being
involved, unlike the impersonal effect one has when reading of an accident in the newspaper.
(Ann Munroe, 14 years, Fort Street Girls’ High School)

(Reading Time, no.36, July 1970, p.22)

Of course it may be argued that this is the opinion of just one girl from a selective high school. But Southall himself has said repeatedly that he is not interested in writing for the majority.

The children’s writer does not write for all children any more than the writer for adults writes for all adults. You reach those and please those who tune in on your wavelength…It is an absurdity of much criticism that one adult person can declare…that a book will not appeal to children – in the plural

(Southall 1973, p.3)

However, this 14-year-old’s use of the phrase ‘frank, realistic children’s book’ is significant, despite the notorious slipperiness of the word ‘realistic’. She is conscious that she is endorsing a new kind of book that does not fit expectations of ‘children’s literature’. And Southall’s comment returns this discussion to its starting point: the Book of the Year judges’ advice that their choice of Bread and Honey might not meet with wide approval. Although there are several additional points at which the CBC’s values and those embedded in Southall’s fiction coincide, it was the interrogation of childhood that caused them to diverge most sharply. Complaining to Michael Cameron’s father at the beginning of the novel, Mrs Farlow expresses it, albeit unwittingly.

‘He’s not a baby now. There’s something wrong with that boy.’

(Bread and Honey, p.5)

The ‘something wrong’ – the problem for both the young character and the adult writer – is the process of growing up.
Along with its attachment to the Romantic construction of childhood as innocent, the CBC is from the beginning drawn to the idea that innocence can persist among some adults, too, and needs protection – in this case not the innocence of occasional childlike savants, but that of a whole community of adults: Indigenous Australians. To read such Indigenous writers as Lucashenko and Heiss now is to wonder how such a patronising assumption could have been held so widely only a few decades ago.

Chapter 2 argued that one reading of the first Book Week slogan, ‘United Through Books’, is determined by the predominance of Indigenous subject matter from the beginning of the Book of the Year awards, although it was not until the 1980s that this was focalised by Indigenous protagonists in texts produced by Indigenous writers and illustrators. Indigenous Australian subject matter attracted children’s writers and illustrators for several reasons.

From a non-Indigenous writer’s or illustrator’s point of view, difference offered greater opportunities for drama. Since the publication of Australia’s first children’s book, *A Mother’s Offering to Her Children* in 1841 (Wighton ed., 1979), the potential of Indigenous subject matter for horror, mystery, adventure, romance and spirituality has been exploited and, as Indigenous narrative began to be heard more frequently from the 1980s on, difference has also offered the beginnings of an Indigenous satirical perspective on non-Indigenous Australian society.

Since most publishers were based in the UK and had set up Australian offices mainly to protect their interests in Australian sales, rather than to originate lists of Australian books (Sheahan-Bright 2004, p.121), an emphasis on the exotic nature of Indigenous subject matter continued to convey culturally, if no longer politically, the British imperial perspective on Australia to both the home market and international market, and, therefore, exported it back to the lucrative
Australian market itself. So to some extent it reflected the British view of what was most distinctive and interesting about Australian society and, by implication, what ought to be of greatest interest to Australian readers themselves.

Throughout the history of publishing for children, the predominant alignment of books with education rather than entertainment resulted in books being used to inform, whether they were ostensibly educational texts or not, and as Bradford demonstrates in *Reading Race* (2001), the information being published for young readers perpetuated the racist subordination and oppression of Indigenous Australians. The rapid development of the CBC as a national organisation coincides with the expansion of Australian educational publishing in the 1950s, although Sheahan-Bright points out that this did not result in the expansion of mainstream trade publishing (Sheahan-Bright 2004, p.11).

As noted in chapter 2, the rhetoric of new beginnings – not just through political realignment, but through education at the end of World War 2 – is inscribed in the setting up of the CBC and its educational agenda has become increasingly apparent over the 65-year history of the awards. Although as Stephens (1992) argues, the inculcation of ideology is the main function of all children’s literature, the CBC also had students other than children in mind. Its educational agenda has led to criticism of the Book of the Year’s ‘worthiness’ and, ironically, the diminishing of its power in the marketplace. No writer’s career parallels this narrative arc more clearly than Patricia Wrightson’s.

Like H F Brinsmead, Margaret Balderson, Ruth Manley, John Marsden, Melina Marchetta, Phillip Gwynne and Michael Gerard Bauer after her, Wrightson won Book of the Year with her first published novel. Since that first award, for *The Crooked Snake* in 1956, Wrightson has won Book of the Year three times – *The Nargun and the Stars* 1974, *The Ice is Coming* 1978 and *A Little Fear* 1984. She has also been Highly Commended twice, Commended twice and short listed once in the Older Readers category. In addition, as noted earlier in the discussion on Maurice Saxby, she remains the only Australian novelist to have
won the Hans Christian Andersen Medal, awarded by IBBY, which is popularly referred to as the ‘Nobel prize for children’s literature’.

Wrightson’s project is clearly aligned with both the aims stated by the CBC in its constitution and the unstated agenda implied in its practice. All her fiction is set in Australia and explores Australian history – in this case through Indigenous mythology – and most of it is set away from the big cities. It is clearly literary, ambitious and ‘serious’. It attempts to create social unity through educating its readers about cultural difference. Wrightson’s role as an educator became explicit when she worked as assistant editor 1964-1970 and then editor of the NSW Department of Education’s School Magazine between 1970 and 1975. Looking back on what was, at that time, her 40-year career as a writer, Wrightson acknowledges her own intention to educate.

If, as I think it is true to say has happened, white people have become more aware of, respectful and admiring of the richness of folklore that lies in the accessible middle area of Aboriginal folklore, I think an achievement has occurred. That is what I wanted in the first place. That is what I worked for. (Hillel 1994, p.59)

The modest reluctance with which she finally arrives at the personal pronoun ‘I’ here and declares ownership of the project, as much as any of the above reasons, has helped to construct Wrightson as the embodiment of a more popular kind of Australian mythology – that of diffidence – as well as the values nurtured by the CBC. Critics refer to her as the ‘doyen’ (sic) or ‘grande dame’ of Australian children’s writers (Hillel 1994, p.58; Dunkle 1995, p.16) and Dunkle records her own nervous apprehension when going to meet Wrightson: ‘how do you interview an icon?’ (Dunkle 1995, p.16). Even her less supportive critics refer to her ‘iconic status’ (Bradford 2001, p.127).

Susan Cooper, herself one of the most highly regarded of fantasy writers for young people, recalls that one work of Masefield and one by Tolkien affected her more powerfully than any others when she was a child, but that only two
books have ‘instantly sandbagged’ her in the same way since she became an adult: Garner’s *The Owl Service* and Wrightson’s *The Nargun and the Stars*.

> For twelve years I’ve shared the bafflement of her publisher – who is also my own – over the low American sales not only of *The Nargun and the Stars* but of the haunting trio of fantasies that followed it.

> (Cooper 1986, p.572)

Unlike Cohen (Cohen 1979: 44), who argues that by the time the trilogy was published Wrightson’s project had long run out of narrative energy, Cooper explicitly cites storytelling as one of Wrightson’s strengths.

> Above all, Patricia Wrightson is a marvellous storyteller. The most remarkable quality of this remarkable book is its wire-tight suspense.

> (Cooper 1986, p.574)

For Saxby, Wrightson is ‘the finest writer for children Australia has yet produced’ (1988, p.180) and the years 1973 – 1984 those of her greatest achievements: *The Nargun and the Stars*, *The Song of Wirrun* and *A Little Fear*. He acknowledges that she is a personal friend and that, as noted earlier, he was a member of the international jury that awarded her the Hans Christian Andersen Medal. But given his involvement in the creation of the CBC and its constitution, his terms as president and judge and his honour as its first life member, the acclaim for Wrightson’s body of work does represent a return on the considerable professional investment Saxby has made in the CBC’s values throughout its history.

Always Wrightson’s strongest advocate, he says, ‘The Wirrun trilogy must take its place among the best of the literary high fantasies of the twentieth century’ (1988, p.184). While most critics agree on the ambitious scale of Wrightson’s
project, its intellect, the poetic quality of her language and her evocation of the natural environment, there is a distinct change in the ‘80s as Australia approaches its bicentenary and – by no means a coincidence – Indigenous writers and illustrators are published more frequently.

Attebery’s observation that the trilogy is out of print 30 years after it was received with ‘glowing reviews’ (Attebery 2005, p.327) both indicates that readers’ interests may have moved on and interrogates the CBC’s endorsement of Wrightson’s work – particularly when the first volume of the trilogy, *The Ice is Coming*, was Book of the Year in 1978 and the third volume, *Behind the Wind*, as runner-up was Highly Commended in 1982. He quotes Lees’s assessment that Wrightson’s ‘current status within Australian children’s literature is an uneasy one: she is revered but not read’ (Attebery 2005, p.336).

Wrightson says that she resisted the idea of closure after the publication of the trilogy.

> When it was finished I found myself hunting for another theme as large and demanding: and that was a warning. Large scale stories in particular should be written under compulsion and not as the result of a search for an excuse; and certainly not in imitation of one that has brought a warm response. I thought it was time to get my feet back on earth – and I just hope that everything I have done since then has not been a withdrawal symptom.

(Wrightson 1993, p.8)

Most of her publications since this statement in 1993 have been short chapter books in Penguin’s Aussie Bites list and bear little if any relationship to the themes of her major novels. Pleasant but light postscripts, they seem rather to have come from the author of *The Crooked Snake*. So, for whatever reason, Wrightson too understood that it was time to move on.
At the outset of this case study, I should declare an interest. I have published three of Wrightson’s books: her novels, Balyet and Shadows of Time, and her collection of source material, The Wrightson List. This collection as a whole and a prefatory note that I wrote for it are the subjects of the least sympathetic criticism her work has attracted – by Bradford in her 2001 study of Aboriginality in Australian children’s literature, Reading Race.

One of my own responses to reading this groundbreaking and meticulously researched study was to realise that, to some extent, my early interest in Wrightson’s commitment to Indigenous subject matter had diminished. Bradford advances subtle and complex arguments to demonstrate that children’s texts fondly remembered by generations of Australian readers for their sympathetic treatment of Indigenous Australians in fact perpetuated racism. However, it is odd and frustrating that, as Attebery points out, ‘In order to make her case against Wrightson Bradford focuses on everything except Wrightson’s major work’ (Attebery 2005, p.331).

The development of Indigenous themes in Wrightson’s four Book of the Year winners supports her own view of her career as a kind of apprenticeship. She speaks of consciously putting herself through ‘a course of training, requiring that in each book I should break new and (for me) difficult ground’ (Townsend 1971, p.212). To some extent, this conflicts with her later claim that the evolution of her work surprised her. Like any proud mother, she perhaps mistakenly credits her son Peter with unique insight when she recalls his response to her next novel:

after he’d read The Nargun and the Stars, which was my first serious fantasy, he said, ‘You’ve been working towards this for a very long time, haven’t you?…from the very beginning.’ And I was astonished, because I wasn’t aware of that.

(Hillel 1994, p.58)
The continuity of themes from one Book of the Year to the next across a 30-year period endorses Murray’s claim that ‘Wrightson has been most consistent of all Australian children’s writers in her use of Aboriginal characters and themes.’ (Murray 1996, p.252). Reading the high fantasy of the Wirrun trilogy, written in the 1970s, makes it difficult to go back and read *The Crooked Snake*, published in 1955, as anything but an apprentice’s work, despite its Book of the Year award. Although to Baby Boomers it sounds like the perhaps more naïve novels they grew up with, and will therefore appear child-centred, Stephens (1992, 1996) and Scutter (1996) argue that narratives which keep adults and children separate and allow the child characters a temporary space to play are in fact adult-centred, since the social structures determined by adults have been reasserted by the conclusion. Pennell (2003, p.6) remarks that in novels such as *The Crooked Snake* and Joan Phipson’s *Good Luck to the Rider*, Book of the Year 1953, we see the traditional demarcation, with ‘children and adults patrolling the borders of separate territories’.

That separation is signalled at the beginning of *The Crooked Snake*, when a group of primary school children enjoy the business of forming a secret society for the holidays, but realise that it might need to have a purpose beyond the creation of its own rules and initiation procedures. When a gang of older boys with guns confront them in the bush and start to make trouble for the farmers, they’ve found their cause. Avid photographers, they will compile a photographic survey of the natural environment and protect the flora and fauna from both the older boys and the threat of timber cutters in the state forest.

With the six children’s breathless enthusiasm for adventure, their fondness for expressions such as ‘Golly!’, ‘Good-oh’ and ‘Gosh!’, and the repeated listing of food they will take along with them, there are echoes here of Blyton and Ransome. Wrightson acknowledges the model, but rejects the suggestion that she was consciously imitating its Englishness.

Arthur Ransome was the idea I had in mind, but not for Englishness. My intention was to produce something that
would do for my children what Arthur Ransome did for them, but would be entirely Australian.

(Hillel 1994, p.58)

As part of the initiation into the Society of the Crooked Snake, the children decide that they need a disguise.

Saturday was clear and sunny with a sharp August wind. Four bikes were wheeled out onto the road as the Society of the Crooked Snake prepared to set out for its first initiation ceremony.

‘We’ve got apples and biscuits for afternoon tea,’ said Jenny to John as they waited for Pete who had run back to get his bicycle pump.

‘Good-oh,’ replied John. ‘We’ve got lemon juice and sugar and mugs. There’s water out there, so we’ll have lemon squash. Did you manage the masks all right?’

‘Yes, I cut up an old pair of black stockings into four. They look pretty good – on Pete anyway. But I still think the candidates’ll know who we are.’

‘I s’pose they will – but they won’t be sure.’

‘Have to stay masked in front of outsiders,’ said Roy firmly. ‘We can’t help it if they guess who we are.’

(The Crooked Snake, p.9)

This passage early in the novel exemplifies one of the challenges in reading Wrightson now. The sunny naivety in the detailing of food recalls the English novelists who were her models. It is possible to read the descriptions of food historically in both their fictional and Australian contexts of the 1950s as celebrating the end of wartime and post-war rationing, just as the prevalence of food and drink can be read in contemporary fabric design. But the tone of the language here primarily conveys the importance of eating as a childhood enthusiasm and ritual. Long after Blyton’s plots have been forgotten, readers remember her ham sandwiches, apples, chocolate and lashings of ginger beer.
Similarly, stretching a stocking over your head to distort your facial features was a cliché of popular crime narratives, and presumably dark coloured stockings (which were an ordinary part of many girls’ school uniforms at the time) would be thought to disguise the features even further. However, it is tempting to read this putting on of black faces metonymically. Even the phrase ‘black face’ recalls the racist imagery of 19th century minstrel shows and it is worth noting the blackface poster for the ‘Black and White Minstrel Show’ at Sydney’s Tivoli Theatre as late as 1963 (Powerhouse Museum collection http://www.dhub.org/object/348030&img=243564). If we read the children’s disguises more deeply, we get a secret society with black faces dedicated to preserving the natural environment and wanting to remain unrecognised by outsiders.

And, reading the opening chapter of *The Crooked Snake* retrospectively, it is not difficult to see how Wrightson may appear to be just another of the non-Indigenous writers she herself dismisses as ‘white Australian ladies with gauzy minds’ (Wrightson 1998, p.xii). Even in this first novel, however, some meta-fictional coding is apparent in the theme of a group of non-Indigenous children who enjoy the process of forming a society, but search for a cause that might legitimise their game.

The uneasiness both here and in the adoption of the black masks is created by the mix of informed and less well informed readings. The children’s preoccupation with formulating the rules of the game at one level implies a young reader, in its comic and satisfying recognition of patterns in childhood play. At another level, a reader – more likely adult than child – who comes to a reading of *The Crooked Snake* informed by a reading of the Indigenous themes in Wrightson’s later novels, and the responses of critics such as Bradford, may well feel uncomfortable with these scenes. The notion that the children are playing at being black and are assuming the role of custodians of the land becomes almost irresistible.

This image of role-playing recalls A D Hope ridiculing the Jindyworobak writers of the 30s and 40s as the ‘boy scout school of Australian poetry’. To
Hope they were playing at being primitive: ‘and the poet who tries to write as a second-hand abo is no more likely to produce sincere work than the poet who writes like a second-hand Englishman.’ (Hope 1941, p.29). Hope himself had been thought of as a Eurocentric poet, merely playing at being metropolitan, and while his controversial poem ‘Australia’(Hope 1972, p.13) has the double perspective of European love and hate for the land and its non-Indigenous people, the final positive change in tone towards the end of that poem – ‘Yet there are some like me turn gladly home’ – comes as a late and minor concession. So it can be inferred that the poet is still struggling with the possibility of loving the place. In that context, his use of the term ‘abo’ here, so difficult to read now without judgment, is intended to assert an Australianness and a jocular familiarity with Indigenous Australians, rather than dismissiveness. It is also the word choice of an academic aware of Australia’s anti-intellectual mythology.

In his retrospective anthology *The Jindyworobaks*, published in 1979, Elliott argues that these poets whom Hope dismissed as lacking sincerity responded to the breakdown of European society in World War 2 by looking to Indigenous Australian cultures for source material. It is ironic that, while clearly taking the Jindyworobaks seriously as a cultural phenomenon, Elliot doesn’t mention the writer who has been arguably the most talented and influential inheritor of their aims. But this says more about the ignorance of children’s literature outside the field than it does about Wrightson’s significance. Wrightson has been linked to the Jindyworobak movement (Bradford 2001, Attebery 2005), but recent critical opinion is more moderate in its judgment of her appropriation of Indigenous material than Bradford’s view that she constructs herself as pseudo-Aboriginal.

Le Lievre (2004, p.113), in a persuasive reading of the primary importance of landscape in Wrightson’s fiction, quotes Muecke’s phrase ‘affirmative appropriation’ (Muecke 1992, p.184) to differentiate Wrightson’s use of Indigenous subject matter from that of other artists who regard themselves as preserving the cultural artefacts of a dying race. She sees Wrightson as
attempting to create a living ‘fusion’ of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous: a new entity.

Attebery argues that historically both the United States and Australia share the colonising impulse to ‘acquire whatever is of value in Indigenous culture while consigning the bearers of that culture to invisibility or extinction’ (Attebery 2005, p.328). While this can be demonstrated in government social policy, it is unfair to the writers and artists to elide the distance between them and politicians. There is a sense in which the artists thought they were preserving Indigenous culture on behalf of its owners and custodians, who had been so disempowered by government policy – it seems to me more from guilt than alarm at the possible disappearance of that culture than out of a desire to eradicate it. When Wrightson has been so careful not to speak for Indigenous people, but wants other non-Indigenous Australians to learn about their cultures for themselves as she has done, it is hard to see the charge (Bradford 2001, p.130) that she assumes the maternalistic right to speak for Aboriginal people as justified.

Hillel, for example, asks her to respond to Indigenous leader Jackie Huggins’s view that the best books by non-Indigenous writers are by those who have contact or close friendship with Indigenous people – an innocuous enough question. But Wrightson’s reply restates a position she has articulated many times throughout her career.

I don’t think that I would respond to her. It is the business of Aboriginal people to be involved with debate of that kind. I have kept out of the discussion deliberately. I have done everything that I can to keep my work in a safe area.

(Hillel 1994, p.59)

Before examining the three Book of the Year winners in which Wrightson develops the interest in Indigenous subject matter that is only retrospectively implicit in her first novel, it may be useful to compare her position with that of
Henrietta Drake-Brockman in her edition of Langloh Parker’s *Australian Legendary Tales*, which was awarded Book of the Year in 1954, just two years before *The Crooked Snake*.

Drake-Brockman’s selection is based on the 1896 edition of *Australian Legendary Tales*, which, in its various avatars, Bradford points out, ‘has been the most influential of all collections of Aboriginal stories produced for children’ (Bradford 2001, p.110). Drake-Brockman’s assumption that so called ‘folk’ narratives from other cultures are suitable for children derives from the European Romantic tradition referred to at the beginning of this chapter, and in her introduction she repeats the specious analogy between children and Indigenous adults, when she says that ‘The legends possess a poetic quality, child-like in its simplicity despite their adult wisdom, that should endear them not only to children but to the young at heart’ (Drake-Brockman 1953, p. v).

Drake-Brockman seems only half aware that in quoting the anthropologist A P Elkin, she interrogates the assumption on which the anthology itself is based.

> A child-race is so called because it has not attained to the stature of our civilization; its grown men and women, however, are adults; they do not think as children but as social personalities who are responsible for the development and maintenance of the social, economic and religious life of their community. Therefore, we should not expect the understanding of that life to be a matter for the kindergarten; it is a subject worthy of our best efforts.

(Drake-Brockman 1953, p.vi)

Elkin’s own assumption that education of the young may not elicit ‘our best efforts’ is deeply troubling, but will at this point be observed only as evidence of the relegation of children’s culture that the founders of the CBC felt they were up against.
Although Drake-Brockman claims to share the benevolence of Langloh Parker’s wish to pass on these legends, in an effort to correct the European impression that there were no legends in this land, she closes with the words of a charm, sung over a baby by the Euahlayi people. It is quoted as a sort of exhortation to a new generation, ‘at a moment of national growth’ (Drake-Brockman 1953, p.ix) and particularly to children. It is as if she is singing this charm to warn young readers and to protect the vulnerable culture that has been abused in the past. But she seems unconscious of the self-reflexive nature of the lyric:

Kind be.
Do not steal,
Do not touch which to another belongs;
Leave all such alone.
Kind be.

It is surprising that in an otherwise insightful commentary on *Australian Legendary Tales*, Bradford focuses on Langloh Parker’s original collection and not on Drake-Brockman’s later framing of her work, since the 1954 Book of the Year award gave it renewed authority. Drake-Brockman is only intermittently conscious of her own ambivalence and it is not clear whether it was a factor in the CBC judges’ decision.

Drake-Brockman’s use of the euphemism ‘dark’ contrasts with the preference for ‘black’ from the 1960s on and with Langloh Parker’s own usage. In the introduction Drake-Brockman says she is ‘happy to have the opportunity to help in handing on Mrs Langloh Parker’s admirable collection, once again, on behalf of the original dark authors’ (Drake-Brockman 1953, p.viii) and later refers to becoming ‘better acquainted with dark Australians at Moola Boola’ (p.194). Two subsequent quotes from Langloh Parker unintentionally highlight the difference.

‘I was intimate with the disposition of the blacks, and was on friendly terms with them, before I began a regular attempt to inquire into their folk-lore’

…
‘In hearing the old blacks tell their legends you notice a great difference between them as raconteurs’

(Drake-Brockman 1953, p.195)

Among Drake-Brockman’s appendices are various anthropological accounts of Indigenous life. It is difficult now to read these accounts, which were selected for students ten years after the Holocaust in Europe, without recalling Nazi descriptions of Jews. Under the heading ‘Appearance’ Drake-Brockman begins:

For those who are personally unacquainted with our dark fellow-countrymen, a description by John Mathew may be of interest: “The colour of the skin is shaded from a dusky copper to a brownish-black…The head is well poised, commonly having a backward lean, and is supported on a neck short and comparatively thick. In general appearance the average Australian is symmetrically proportioned…His hands are small and bony, the feet by no means large, seeing that they are always bare and used in so much and in such varied ways. The aboriginal is very strong for his weight, exceedingly agile, and has an erect, free and graceful carriage…”

(Drake-Brockman 1953, p.196)

Although the description does move from the detached ‘the skin’ and ‘The head’ to the somewhat warmer personal pronoun in ‘His hands’, the generalisation is still barely human. If the referent were changed to ‘the European’ or ‘the white man’ the impossibility of endorsing such a description in educational notes for students at the time, let alone 50 years later, is starkly clear.

In this context, then, it appears that Bradford does not sufficiently acknowledge the degree of ambivalence that Wrightson expresses in her own relationship with Indigenous subject matter. The significance of the stone axe that the children find in her 1960 novel The Rocks of Honey is revealed in a chapter that is kept totally separate from the main narrative, but is its pivotal centre. It is the
story of Warrimai the Club-thrower, the Bandjalung man who made the axe. When the Aboriginal boy Eustace Murray decides to return the stone axe to its rightful place in the final chapter, he does so, not because he knows the story of the axe retold in chapter 7, but because he has personal experience of the axe’s power.

Eustace had the axe, and three accidents, each a little worse than the last, were quite enough.

(The Rocks of Honey, p.168)

The decision to restore the source of power to its rightful place in the bush is juxtaposed with the aspiration to cultural fusion, embedded in the boy’s homophonic surname, Murray (Murri) that indicates his mixed heritage.

Another perspective on Wrightson’s cautiousness is to compare this gesture with the exploitation of fear in the 1960 Book of the Year, Kylie Tennant’s All the Proud Tribesmen. Tennant’s narrator is Kerri, a young islander who was given into Miss Alice Buchanan’s care as a baby. His opening statement conveys the maternalism of the novel. ‘It was Miss Buchanan who saved us all in those last days on Firecrest Island.’

The volatility of the environment, with the constant threat from the volcano, violent weather and crocodiles, is an image of power that can destroy both outsider and the Indigenous people alike. Although Miss Buchanan is portrayed as a benevolent matriarch, she has never really adapted to a different reality. Her house (p.10), for example, is built of iron and fibro. No one in the village would ever use such materials, because houses always blow away in hurricanes, and Kerri witnessed Miss Buchanan’s anger when the school blew down. So her house is both a positive image of her maternal strength, and an image of doggedness, because it is inappropriate. After 30 years on the island this woman still hasn’t learnt.
Kerri recalls the way Miss Buchanan organised the village when the earthquake struck – she ‘saved’ them and needed him to help. To the extent that Kerri is the narrator and has therefore obviously survived the destruction of his community, the novel imagines continuity. But at the same time its narrative of disasters exploits the fear that the end is always imminent.

Miss Buchanan is both literal teacher and metaphorical pastor, when she has the church bell rung to call the people together. Rather awkwardly and pompously, she constructs herself as Christianity in action by echoing the words of Jesus, ‘In my father’s house there are many mansions’.

‘Anyone may come to my house tonight,’ she said. ‘We are all safe, and tomorrow there will be help coming.’

(*All the Proud Tribesmen*, p.41)

Later, at the service of worship, Miss Buchanan gets the villagers to sing a hymn of thanks because Old Faithful has spared them. ‘”We will sing,” she said, “Hymn One Hundred, in Language.”’ (p.58). She never calls the volcano by the people’s term, ‘Old Faithful’; it is always ‘That thing’ – a phrase that again positions her outside the culture. In suggesting that the people sing in their own language, rather than the language of their colonisers, she demonstrates benevolence. The ambiguity of her position, however, is indicated by the fact that ‘Language’ is also an old fashioned English euphemism for profanity.

Considering Wrightson’s fiction in the context of *All the Proud Tribesmen*, two indicators of her caution are immediately clear: the separateness of the Indigenous material, which in *The Rocks of Honey* amounts to a kind of quarantine, and the younger age and vulnerability of her protagonists. In contrast to Tennant’s bold matriarch, the main characters in all Wrightson’s novels are far from heroic. She herself says, ‘I don’t see many natural leaders or
role models among them. Most of them [are] hangers-on, the “also-there”.’ (Wrightson 1993, p.5).

Of course, while the difference in their ages may not be great, these two women are writing at different stages of their careers and this may partly account for that contrast. Tennant was at the age of 48 in 1960 already a celebrated writer for adults; Wrightson at 39 had not advanced far beyond the beginning of her writing career. But Wrightson continues to express fear about her project right up to the time she publishes the trilogy.

*The Rocks of Honey* is adventure rather than fantasy, but in retrospect it is a preface to the fantasy novels. Better written than *The Crooked Snake*, surprisingly it was not even commended among the novels listed for 1961 Book of the Year. Whether this suggests that the judges were cautious about the CBC’s appearing to have an agenda can only be speculation, however, since their individual reports and voting papers are routinely destroyed. But like the silence on Southall’s *Josh* immediately after his win for *Bread and Honey*, the judges’ decision is intriguing.

In any case the novel is significant as a statement of Wrightson’s cautious approach to the power of the subject matter that increasingly informs her writing. While Bradford makes no reference to *The Rocks of Honey*, Murray identifies Wrightson’s willingness to take a risk in this novel.

In 1960 she attempted a more difficult task than her colleagues in writing *The Rocks of Honey*, dealing with characters not distanced by unfamiliarity or time. Instead, she wrote of a credible, contemporary, Europeanized, part-Aboriginal child among white children at a local primary school on the north coast of NSW, and between 1973 and 1989 produced a series of fantasy novels that was to take her through many of the positions occupied in this century by writers who draw upon indigenous material.

(Murray 1996, p.252)
While its setting in the mythological past and the discreteness of ‘The Stone Axe’ narrative in chapter 7 do inscribe its Otherness, the character of Eustace is one of the three children in the main narrative that is set in the present and familiar context of Wrightson’s home on the New South Wales north coast. The main narrative is not ostensibly about Aboriginality, except insofar as its subject is the loneliness of the outsider.

Significantly in a novel written by a woman, the outsider here is the girl, Winnie Bates, who feels left out and steals the axe that the two boys, Barney and Eustace, are proud of having found. She assumes that possession of the axe confers power, but the novel moves towards the conclusion that since the axe is not hers and she does not understand its provenance – and it does not belong to the boys either – such power may be too strong for a young person to handle. Murray’s reading of the conservative trajectory in the plot positions The Rocks of Honey as a prelude to Wrightson’s major work.

Wrightson confronts the difficult issue of racial discrimination within an existential meditation upon the theme of individual isolation, concluding that the discrimination can be overcome by a general acknowledgment of the Aboriginal past and an acceptance of its loss. Wrightson suggests that eventually the land will shape people of European descent, just as it once shaped Aboriginal people.

(Murray 1998, p.59)

With The Nargun and the Stars, which was Book of the Year in 1974, this emphasis on the enduring power of the land becomes the dominant theme of Wrightson’s fantasy. Simon’s loss of both parents in the single moment of a car accident, when they are killed as he plays football, leaves him as isolated as each of the children in The Rocks of Honey, until he finds a home of sorts with Charlie and Edie. But although Wrightson constructs these two surrogate parents as childlike and still capable of seeing the metaphysical as the young do, and therefore able to form a community with Simon, it is the land that appears to offer some solution to his sense of displacement. Unless he can
accept the greater power of the land and adapt to it, however, the separation and displacement he has experienced will continue.

When the ancient spirit of the land, the Nargun, is lured into the mountain at the end of the novel, its potential for destruction appears to have been contained and Bradford reads this conclusion as ‘consolatory’ insofar as Wrightson uses it to affirm the ascendancy of non-Indigenous power over the land. But the clear inference here and in the novels that follow is that this is a delusion. The power of the land may be dormant, but it is waiting.

Bradford points out that when Simon scratches his own name on the rock that is later revealed as the Nargun, he ‘knows it to have been a mistake’ (Bradford 2001, p.51). But she does not read this scene along with the conclusion to The Rocks of Honey as inscribing a fear of getting Indigenous culture wrong. And since Simon’s vandalism is an act of writing, the meaning could hardly be more explicit. It is possible to interpret Wrightson’s fear as an inflated sense of her own importance and superior cultural power. But it is difficult to reconcile such a reading with the scrupulous caution and interrogation of her role that have been consistent throughout her career.

Writing several years after the publication of Reading Race, Le Lievre refocuses attention on the importance of the environment in Wrightson’s fiction (2004, p.109). Murray points out (1996, p.254) that Wrightson inherits the European Romantic project of reconnecting the individual consciousness with nature and typically her novels open with one character and an evocation of the physical setting – frequently the landscape, though in A Little Fear we are introduced to Mrs Tucker in the tidy confines of Sunset House retirement home.

Although the opening scenes of The Crooked Snake and The Rocks of Honey do not indicate the importance that the natural environment will assume in these novels overall, they invoke the vernacular concept of atmosphere: ‘something in the air’ that is affecting the characters. In The Crooked Snake the children are restless and excited about the approaching vacation and the adults understand
and tolerate their mood: ‘Even the strictest teacher would turn a deaf ear to talkers this afternoon’ (p.1). And in *The Rocks of Honey*, as Barney looks back on the year when he first encountered neighbours, he remembers ‘There was just an oddness and a keenness about the whole of that spring.’ (p.7).

In an insightful reading of the Wirrun trilogy, Le Lievre begins with the maps on the endpapers of each volume and argues that the land is the main character in these novels. If that is so, then Wrightson understands here the kind of relationship to the environment expressed by Indigenous writers such as Uncle Bob Randall, when they address non-Indigenous readers:

> Everything here is my family. It’s all bush as far as you can see, but to me it is my home, my ngura. The trees are our family, all the animals that live with us are our family. Growing up with the oldies – our parents, grandparents – they always said we are connected to everything. Being alive connects you to every other living thing that’s around you. You’re never lost and you’re never, ever alone – you’re one with everything else there is. The purpose of life is to be part of all that there is. My people have always been part of the earth.

(Randall 2008, pp.13-17)

Wrightson begins and ends with country. Le Lievre notes that the island on the endpaper maps *looks* like Australia, but it has none of the familiar labels.

> The sociopolitical landscape and value system imposed on the physical landscape by the white urban Australian culture is erased, leaving the landscape free to be redefined from another perspective.

(Le Lievre 2004, p.111)

Although Bradford focuses on the cultural appropriation signalled by Wrightson’s use of an Indigenous character here as the main protagonist for the first time in her fiction, Le Lievre argues that the ‘new accounting with the
natural scene’ identified by Murray to some extent diminishes the inequity of power between the non-Indigenous and Indigenous characters, since they are both confronted by the superior power of the land. She highlights the shift in naming on these maps as the trilogy progresses. If they erase the colonisers, they also depart from the naming given by the traditional custodians:

The map in *The Ice is Coming* renames the landscape after these other inhabitants, giving them equal status with white urban Australians. The continent is revealed as a site within which two worldviews exist simultaneously. In this map neither is especially privileged over the other.

The maps in *The Dark Bright Water* and *Behind the Wind*, however, do away with the imposed names altogether. In these maps places are named after the people who belong there – whether that means human beings or earth-spirits – or by their shape.

(Le Lievre 2004, pp.111-112)

Le Lievre works through Wirrun’s quest for power, his remaking of the water spirit the Yunggamurra into the human Murra, and the ultimate failure of that incarnation as transgressing the law, and reads the trilogy as an interrogation of cultural fusion.

In his review of *Reading Race*, Evans lumps Wrightson in with Langloh Parker as typifying the disingenuousness of an anthropological perspective.

The clumsy appropriations of Aboriginal culture, like much New Age discourse on Aboriginality, tend to cocoon themselves from critique in a warm glow of good intentions.

In the guise of speaking out on its behalf, they sanctify Aboriginality – an approach which is just as misleading as demonising it. Any non-Aboriginal writer, producing discourses which include the stories of Aboriginal people, runs the serious risk of falling into this trap of unconscious usurpation – of declaiming awkwardly for Aboriginal
people, who are thereby assumed to be incapable of speaking for themselves.

(Evans 2002, p.216)

His use of the phrase ‘clumsy appropriations’ suggests that Evans has accepted Bradford’s demonising of Wrightson, rather than going back to the fiction itself, because whatever charges might be sustained against these novels, clumsiness is not one of them.

Le Lievre argues persuasively that although the trilogy involves a construction of Indigenous characters by a non-Indigenous writer, the focus on Wirrun as the main protagonist after the land itself inverts colonial power structures by marginalising non-Indigenous Australians. Here Wrightson may be falling into the trap of idealising and sanctifying Aboriginality that is referred to by Evans. This is also the source of some uneasiness expressed by Murray when he locates Wrightson in the European Romantic tradition. Murray praises her fiction for creating a new relationship between non-Indigenous Australians and the land, but he is troubled by ‘the value that she places on the primitive’ (Murray 1996, p.254), although he stops short of invoking Rousseau.

Since Judeo-Christian constructions of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are predominant among the binary opposites in European thought, it is not surprising that Smith (1993) seems to read the trilogy as a battle against evil. And The Ice is Coming in particular plays with different cultural readings of natural phenomena. Because the popular consciousness focuses on ‘global warming’ in climate change and the retreat of the earth’s ice cover more than thirty years after this novel was judged Book of the Year, it is difficult to read the theme of ice advancing across Australia as it was read on first publication. The novel immediately redraws the landscape by referring not to Uluru, but to another monolith at the centre of the continent – prominent and yet barely known by non-Indigenous readers, if at all – Mount Conner. And instead of the searing heat associated with that region in the popular imagination, there is the
unseasonal cold weather being reported in the media as the novel opens, suggesting that the ancient ice spirits of Mount Conner are on the move.

As with the wordplay on ‘Murray’ referred to earlier, the scepticism of non-Indigenous readers is anticipated by the expression ‘con’ (to deceive or trick) hiding here in the European place name. And since the ice spirits are tricksters, again Wrightson’s vision is embedded in a word. Is this cultural appropriation or fusion? At any rate the level of detail is a defence against Evans’s charge of clumsiness. Familiar place names are mentioned as unexpected frosts occur, but to the implied reader – who, as in all Wrightson’s fiction, is clearly non-Indigenous – the cold weather is metaphorical. It is a spiritual and emotional coldness that is taking over the land. And the hot orange dustjacket on the first edition makes the title ‘The Ice is Coming’ appear doubly unexpected and alarming.

Readings of fire as both nurturing and destroying are therefore present, although the note of alarm tends to emphasise its destructive potential. Christian apocalypse is conventionally imagines as fiery, but here that convention is inverted, while the certainty of apocalypse is maintained. This inversion recalls Frost’s poem, ‘Fire and Ice’:

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I’ve tasted of desire
I hold with those who favour fire.
But if it had to perish twice
I think I know enough of hate
To know that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

(Latham ed., 1969, p.220)

Although the opposition of fire and ice in the trilogy appears to invite a reductive reading, the text resists it. It is odd that, given Saxby’s acknowledgment of his professional and personal affinity with Wrightson, he
sees other themes in her later fiction ‘subsumed by the weightier question of good and evil in nature’ (Saxby 1988, p.184). Wrightson is quite explicit. In an article subtitled ‘Patricia Wrightson Addresses Her Critics’, she says of *The Ice is Coming*:

>You must suppose that the theme of this story is not the one that used to be known to *School Magazine* staff as *goodnevil* (a generalisation too broad to stir me much) but the land itself; or even land itself. Its silent enormity. Its primeval quiescence, committed to neither good nor evil.

(Wrightson 1979, p.6)

While her choice of ‘enormity’ rather than ‘enormousness’ may be conscious and significant, from *The Rocks of Honey* onwards there are confrontations of the powerful by the disempowered in her fiction, but the theme is never a battle between good and evil; rather, it is about ecological imbalance. Through the actions of either human characters or spirit characters who behave like them, the ecology of living things is disturbed – taking ‘ecology’ in its broadest sense to include humans. And the quest is to see balance restored.

After building up expectations that balance will be restored once the ultimate power, the Eldest Nargun, is found, *The Ice is Coming* challenges the implied reader’s cultural values. From a non-Indigenous and materialist perspective, the revelation that the Nargun has worn away to the size of a pebble is an anticlimax. By interrogating the assumption that size equates with power, however, this novel positions young people differently from *The Rocks of Honey*. One reading of that novel is that the stone axe must be returned to its rightful place, not simply because balance will be restored, but because otherwise it will unleash powers that young people may not be capable of handling. Here in *The Ice is Coming*, however, the emphasis is on the power of the apparently small and marginalised.

This places the responsibility for restoring balance on the young protagonist, Wirrun, and on his small and mischievous spirit accomplice, the Mimi. Smith indicates the subversive nature of the text with quote marks when she says that
“Good” then rests with Wirrun himself and his helpers’ (Smith 1993, p.476). The resisting of a simple reading is even clearer in the second book of the trilogy, *The Dark Bright Water*, where she argues, the confrontation is ‘much more diffuse’ (Smith 1993, p.477). After awarding Book of the Year to *The Ice is Coming* in 1978, the judges’ failure to list *The Dark Bright Water* in the 1979 awards again focuses attention on the judging criteria.

Under the heading ‘General Comments’ in the judges’ report for 1979 there is the following statement:

> The judges wish to record their admiration for Patricia Wrightson’s novel *The Dark Bright Water* (Hutchinson). However, they do not consider this to be a children’s book as both theme and treatment demand a mature readership.

*(Reading Time no.72, 1979, p.5)*

Because award juries generally do not feel obliged to explain their decisions in detail, apart from offering a few sentences in praise of the winning title, the brevity here is not surprising, although the issuing of any statement at all may be. And it points to uneasy memories of the response to the judges’ silence over Southall’s *Josh*. Almost from the introduction of the Book of the Year, however, the CBC uses the judges’ report to teach. The citing of stylistic faults in previous winners, let alone titles that did not win, has already been noted in chapter 4. So with no further clarification, this statement reads as a justification of the judges’ own authority, rather than any shortcomings of the novel, motivated by the apprehension that their constituency will condemn them. The apprehension is exacerbated by the investment that the CBC has made in Wrightson’s career: awarding Book of the Year to her first novel, and acknowledging her subsequent work regularly.

Obviously prize-winning authors can write bad or unpopular books and the individual volumes of a trilogy need not be equally successful. But those are the two expectations at play here: Wrightson’s work has either won or been
commended repeatedly; and this novel is a sequel to the immediately preceding Book of the Year. Perhaps the judges’ apprehensiveness is increased by the Highly Commended award in that same year, 1979, to Bill Scott’s *Boori*, another novel by a non-Indigenous writer that to some extent avoids the cross-cultural issues in Wrightson’s fiction by locating its action within the safety of the mythical past.

When reviewers are not being paid it is difficult for a journal editor to control submission dates, so it may be coincidental that *Reading Time*’s review of *The Dark Bright Water* appears in the same issue as the judges’ report. But it inevitably reads as a postscript or an amplification of their judgment.

This fourth book of Patricia Wrightson’s using the recreation of Aboriginal myth and magic is somewhat of a disappointment. The magnificent word Pictures are still there but the story line is slow and at times almost turgid. Perhaps the pace is deliberate to reflect the age and mysterious nature of the continent, but unless the reader is reasonably sophisticated he is unlikely to appreciate what amounts to sustained lyric.

The movement forward is so diffuse that it is almost lost.

(Cohen 1979, p.44)

It is beyond the purpose of this case study to unpack the complex plot of this novel, which involves Wirrun facilitating the incarnation of the siren spirit Yunggamurra as the human Murra and then losing her to the spirit world again. But it is important to ask in what ways the novel demands a ‘mature readership’.

For Cohen, it is slowness of the plot and what he regards as the excessively lyrical nature of the language. A decade later the CBC was using Cohen’s reservation as an official label to protect itself. Due to public criticism of the frank sexual language of Donna Sharp’s *Blue Days*, short listed for Book of the Year in 1987, the CBC began in that year to append to the Older Readers short
list a consumer advisory: ‘Some of these books are for mature readers’. This amounted to a concession that the CBC had failed to keep the Older Readers category from developing into ‘Young Adults’, with all the potential for offensive language and subject matter that this phrase had come to imply. The film industry discovered long ago, when the ‘Restricted’ rating essentially destroyed ‘General Exhibition’, that such advisories simply hasten category creep as the audience moves up a notch, and in this case a book so labelled suddenly attracts the attention of the ‘immature reader’ – whatever that means.

In *The Dark Bright Water*, there is no offensive language; it may have been the references to teenagers consuming alcohol (p.42 ff) or, more likely, the increasingly sexual subtext of its imagery that demanded mature readers, for example:

There was a deep cleft in the rocks, black with shadow, a place where the cool of night might linger. He aimed for that, dropping his hand to the power and feeling its throb.

(*The Dark Bright Water*, p.66)

He woke to a sky that glowed like a black pearl and to a chorus of singing. They were women’s voices, free and wild, unlike the sweetness of his haunting. He felt the throbbing of the power and the stiffness of the men lying awake and listening with him.

(*The Dark Bright Water*, p.72)

The Mimi accuses Wirrun of luring her with ‘an evil love-singing’ (p.82). Wirrun is so unaware of the sexual nature of his haunting that he can only repeat her words, ‘A love singing!’ with a stammer (p.83), before he walks away.

Once he has had time to consider the source of his haunting, Wirrun identifies it not as some sexual partner, but as the land itself.
Maybe a man could fight a love-singing if he knew the
singer – but how could he fight the love-singing of a
mountain?

(p.86)

The human character, then, is powerless as the love object of the land – a
collection that makes all human striving based on differences in race, gender,
age and size quite irrelevant. It is an equalising perspective that has occurred in
Australian literature for young readers before, when the kangaroo tells Dot that
from her point of view, blacks and whites are just as bad as one another,
because they all kill kangaroos. The only marginal difference is that at least
blacks kill them for food rather than pleasure – the implication being that the
real Australians are the indigenous plants and animals of the land (Pedley 1965,
p.50).

In the third volume of the trilogy, Behind the Wind, Wrightson transcends the
intensely physical journey that entails separation in The Dark Bright Water and
imagines the reuniting of Wirrun and Murra as spirits. The Highly Commended
to Behind the Wind in the 1982 Book of the Year awards suggests that this is a
return to safer ground for the CBC. Creating a spiritual relationship between
individual non-Indigenous Australians and the land they inhabit is the aim
Wrightson envisages for her project, just as the Jindyworobaks do for theirs.
But Grossman and Cuthbert argue that making the land their own has always
been the motive behind European colonisation and that spiritual ownership is
inseparable from material ownership.

New Age texts often articulate non-Aboriginal spiritual
connections to country in a fashion that purports
to acknowledge Aboriginal claims to country, while
simultaneously universalizing those claims, asserting
that Aboriginal peoples by no means enjoy an exclusive
spiritual connection to the land.

(Grossman & Cuthbert 1998, p.775)
Their focus on ‘New Age’ texts by writers such as Arden (1994) and Tacey (1995) may help to explain Evans’s puzzling connection of Wrightson with ‘New Age’ appropriation (Evans 2002, p.216).

Contrary to Evans’s charge of carelessness cited earlier, the theme of caution throughout both Wrightson’s fiction and her commentary on it indicate that she understands the point Grossman and Cuthbert are making, and their argument is useful because it helps to define exactly what she is not doing. Her novels demonstrate repeatedly that ownership of the land is bound to fail. As early as The Rocks of Honey they subvert the European ideal of ownership: it is the land that in fact possesses her characters.

The sheer scope and ambition appear to lure Wrightson away from this understanding momentarily. Her enjoyment of the scale that the trilogy offered has already been noted, but in her speech on accepting Book of the Year for The Nargun and the Stars, she again states a sense of responsibility in writing.

What I am trying to do with Australian fairies is chancy and not simple: not to record them, for those I have used have already been recorded; not to retell stories, for this is a business for Aboriginal writers; but to see them as truly as I can and then to weave them into modern Australian story for its greater strength and theirs. This isn’t a job for officiousness or complacency. To me it seems a responsibility and better not done at all than done wrongly.

(Wrightson 1974, p.6)

Her acknowledgment that she did in fact get the properties of the Nargun ‘wrong’ has been written about elsewhere (Ryan 1986, Wrightson 1998), although the concept of ‘wrong’ appears to contradict her assurance that she is not trying to record or retell. But the phrase that should have sounded a warning to the writer herself here is ‘and theirs’. While generally careful to identify her readers as non-Indigenous, in this instance Wrightson aligns herself with the European ladies she dismisses for their ‘gauzy minds’, referred to earlier, in proclaiming her benevolence.
Riding the wind around the continent, as Wrightson puts it, renaming the land as the flight proceeds, the trilogy attempts to create not just a new Australia for its non-Indigenous inhabitants, but a kind of pan-Indigenous community as well. In this, Wrightson seems to have been inspired by her reading of Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), a study that influenced Saxby early in his academic career. Its Jungian insistence on universals in human behaviour is a recurring preoccupation of organisations such as IBBY and the CBC, as noted in chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis. And this sentimental attachment to universals struggled with the assertion and celebration of difference in western cultures from the 1960s on.

The very idea that the CBC started with, of creating a single winning Book of the Year, was an elitist concept that appeared increasingly out of touch with changing community attitudes. Kidd (2009, p.201) refers to the proliferation of literary prizes between the 60s and 80s being caused by a ‘shift away from more formalist ideals about literary merit and toward liberal pluralist faith in the necessity of diversity in literary “representation”.’ So in this sense, too, the trajectory of Wrightson’s project and the CBC’s authority as it continued to advocate universal values are parallel – a point noted at the beginning of this case study.

Although more sympathetic than Cohen, Gough and Murray agree that *The Song of Wirrun* ultimately fails, but Gough makes the clearest case and argues that it signals the failure of Wrightson’s project as a whole, because the cultural synthesis it pursues can only exist as an idea.

The cost of Wirrun’s victory is the death of his mortal body, turned to stone. As spirit, Wirrun continues to live, and now he can have Murra fully as an equal. This is an odd victory…we human readers can be glad that he and Murra have found eternal happiness. But in doing so they have gone far from us…This spirit victory is the ultimate failure of the trilogy.

(Gough 1990, p.141)
Murray says one of the reasons for this failure is that Wrightson’s search for authenticity in her Indigenous sources was based on a false premise. Whenever she refers to her reliance on collectors such as Harney, Hassell and Robinson, she points out that they were not anthropologists, but ‘folk’: ‘simple people who accept with understanding another simple people’ (Wrightson 1979, p.10). Wrightson says that she wants to get as close as possible to the original stories – while absolving herself of the responsibility for collection – but, as Murray points out, it is naïve to imagine that her collectors have not been shaped by their own historical context and then reshaped in turn by Wrightson herself. In claiming a ‘writer’s freedom’ to use these sources as the story demands, in the end she makes authenticity impossible.

Contrary to Saxby’s judgment that the trilogy is her finest achievement, Gough endorses Emrys Evans’s view that in retrospect Wrightson will be valued not as an epic poet, but as a ‘miniaturist’, for novels such as *The Nargun and the Stars* and *A Little Fear* (Gough 1990, p.144).

Although, controversially, the CBC judges continued to make awards to books on Indigenous themes by non-Indigenous writers and illustrators, such awards have become less frequent. Grossman and Cuthbert recount a memorable answer given by Murri speaker Walbira Gindin, when she is challenged by a non-Indigenous festival-goer for being so political and negative.

‘You may think our culture is pretty, but you can’t have our culture without our politics – and our politics ain’t always pretty.’


The CBC in the past invested even more of its cultural capital in Wrightson’s project than it did in Southall’s, and if it seemed at times to withdraw, the withdrawal reflects that of the writer herself. Wrightson remarks that a novel must be allowed to have its time and, as Murray says, what seemed useful and
admirable in 1960 has later proved untenable, as the society has changed (Murray 1996, p.258). Since the role of the CBC in the making and then the demise of Southall’s reputation can be demonstrated, it must be asked whether, supported by Saxby, the CBC encouraged Wrightson to pursue her project long after many of her readers had moved on.

To some extent the answer will be determined by whether the reader regards the fate of Indigenous Australians or of the land as her primary concern. If Southall’s ruptured relationship with the CBC was the result of his challenging their agenda, Wrightson’s apparently trouble-free relationship with the CBC may be the result of her not having done so and of the CBC’s clinging to outdated ideology. But history may show that ultimately both she and the organisation have paid a considerable price.
CHAPTER 7  JOHN MARSDEN, TEACHER AND TEXT

CASE STUDY: SO MUCH TO TELL YOU

While the short lists continued to feature Wrightson’s name for several years, the judges’ choice of John Marsden’s *So Much to Tell You* as Book of the Year for Older Readers in 1988 made a startling break with tradition. And it is useful to read that decision in the context of that year’s Book Week slogan.

The CBC’s choice of a slogan for Book Week 18 months ahead of time is one of the last items dealt with at its annual general meeting in October. It comes at the end of two or three days packed with reports, motions, points of information and points of order. Slogans that are being put forward by each state branch are written up on a board until the scrutineer runs out of space, but in addition delegates are allowed to make spontaneous individual proposals. Then by both elimination and voting, the meeting arrives at a decision. The voting is accompanied by epiphanies and groans, and running gags, such as the annual suggestion by one delegate of ‘Lead Me to Your Reader’, which reveals more of the CBC’s ideology than that delegate may realise. A carnival atmosphere surrounds the process, as if this were the last period in a classroom on Friday afternoon.

This is one of the moments when the connection between the Book of the Year awards and classroom practice is most explicit. The final choice will be used on posters, bookmarks, the website, in displays and bookshops, and it will be the focus of units of work in classrooms and libraries across the country. Since most of the delegates at the meeting are either teachers or librarians, there is an understanding that they must work with the choice and endure the consequences if it doesn’t turn out to have creative potential. So they choose with its versatility as a teaching tool in mind.

Over the 65-year history of Book Week, there have been relatively few occasions for which the slogan could be aligned with an event in the wider
community and therefore benefit from ‘piggyback’ marketing and publicity. But in 1986 the approaching bicentenary year 1988 offered one such opportunity and the CBC chose the slogan ‘A Page of History’. Although the judges have never acknowledged that they feel any unspoken expectation to choose a Book of the Year that is appropriate to the slogan, this may be an unconscious factor in the judging process. But since the timing of such national anniversaries, internationally designated years or sporting events such as the Olympic Games, is known well in advance by writers, illustrators and publishers as well as the CBC, any choice of a Book of the Year that reflects the Book Week slogan can hardly be regarded as coincidental.

The 1988 winner in the Younger Readers category was My Place, by Nadia Wheatley and Donna Rawlins, an illustrated retrospective of the changes in Australian society since colonisation, republished in a revised edition in 2008 by Walker Books as a contemporary Australian classic. The story is told by the imagined occupants of one particular inner-city house over the past 200 years, the narrative voice changing with each decade, so that the structure of the book offers not just one ‘page of history’, but twenty double-spreads, which can be read from either end – going back from 1988 to 1788 or ironically going forward from the last spread depicting 1788, and by implication the thousands of years before that date. The stark contrast between the two Indigenous voices that frame the story prompts the reader to ask what the bicentenary is celebrating. So at the time My Place won Book of the Year, it was a political choice that resonated with both the occasion and the Book Week slogan.

The Picture Book of the Year award in 1988 went to Bob Graham’s Crusher is Coming. Although not ostensibly a bicentenary choice in the same way, Graham’s story of a big tough footballer who, despite his nickname, likes to play with babies, could be said to interrogate the masculine mythology that has dominated discussions of non-Indigenous culture in Australia for most of the period covered by My Place. But ‘interrogation’ overstates a questioning so lighthearted and indulgent in this book that it is almost celebratory. The only frightening aspect to Crusher is his reputation implied in the title. He is the proverbial gentle giant.
Since *Crusher is Coming* is a picture book for readers in their early years of school, of course, the conservative and comic nature of its critique is to be expected, although it does fall far short of the more explicitly political counter-sexist publishing for this age group in the 70s. But in the context of both these books, the awarding of Book of the Year (Older Readers) to John Marsden’s *So Much to Tell You* was a deeply confronting choice, interrogating adult readers with the question: what have we done to our children? How did the Sunny South produce such a dysfunctional family and such a troubled narrator?

The only previous winner with the potential to broach such questions is Lee Harding’s *Displaced Person*, Book of the Year in 1980. While even the name of Harding’s narrator Graeme Drury echoes the grey and dreary nature of the society he is alienated from, the Greyworld, the metaphorical nature of that narrative is kept at a safe distance by its setting in the unspecified future. *So Much to Tell You*, on the other hand, offers no such protection.

There are three basic reasons that this novel, although by an unknown writer, was a predictable choice for Book of the Year: it is in the predominant realist tradition, its complex narrative engages with issues that can be discussed in the classroom, and its metafictional aspects and poetic tropes are useful for the teaching of reading and the writing process. However, as Stephens (1992, 1996) points out, here power in the realist novel has shifted to the young first person narrator.

Purporting to be the journal of a 14-year-old girl who has not spoken for over a year, the novel draws young adult readers into a conspiratorial sharing of the secrets behind its narrator’s silence; but for adult readers the narrative is both conspiracy and accusation. Its boarding school setting seems at first quaintly old fashioned, but contemporary references to, for example, American TV shows, Tequila drinking, pornography, *Go Ask Alice* and ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark’ make it unmistakably a novel about Australia in the 80s.
Although the narrative does not specify the gender of the narrator until the third page, when she says she ‘even beat the boys’ at sport (So Much to Tell You, p.7), the cover illustrations on various editions over the past 20 years have featured a girl, thereby destroying the deliberate initial ambiguity of the text and demonstrating the increased emphasis by publishers on the peritext, for better or worse. Forced to keep this journal by her English teacher, the narrator is a shadowy presence, who ekes out painfully the details of her story and doesn’t even reveal her name, Marina, until the last page. She is a victim and yet she is in control.

The boarding school’s semi-rural setting locates the novel, like most previous Book of the Year award winners, away from the city – which is associated with the narrator’s mother. She has remarried and created a new identity for herself with cosmetic surgery and a life of international travel and is increasingly the main object of the narrator’s anger, rather than the one she starts out hating: her father. He is in jail because he threw acid in a violent argument with his wife and by accident totally disfigured the young narrator’s face.

When she starts to tell her story, she is lonely, often suicidal, and hates both her parents and her new stepfather. By the end of the story, she has allowed young people and adults alike to befriend her, she has learned to give and receive help and gifts, she has expressed compassion for her father, decided to meet him and spoken for the first time since she elected to become mute. The gradual revelation of the plot positions the reader variously as a detective, piecing together the fragments of some crime, a therapist coaxing from the subject her fragile secrets, and at times a voyeur, horrified by the story that is being told but always wanting more.

Marsden’s dedication is designed to confer authenticity on the narrative even before it begins:

To John Mazur,
the ‘Lindell’ of this book;
and to ‘Lisa’.
Mr Lindell is the English teacher who works patiently with the narrator and the other students, challenging them to use literature to ask questions of their own lives and setting them the task of recording the process in a journal. When the narrator is invited home to visit his family, she experiences the kind of happiness and love she has never had at home herself. Asked whether he has based any of the characters in a later novel on individuals he has known, Marsden responds as most writers would:

none of the characters is a direct copy of anyone in real life. They’re all amalgams of at least two or three people with a lot of imagination thrown in.

(Nieuwenhuizen 1991, p.153)

The apparent acknowledgment that one character in So Much to Tell You is taken directly from his experience is, therefore, unusual.

He is a Canadian who was an English teacher in Canberra. He was a brilliant teacher – one of the best I’ve ever seen. He seemed to be able to elicit incredibly mature and profound work and responses from kids. I never realised that young people were capable of that kind of thinking and work. He also helped me to grow as a person and taught me a lot, so the book is a tribute to him. I’m still heavily influenced by him in the way I teach.

(Nieuwenhuizen 1991, p.145)

Although the rather coy second dedication ‘to “Lisa”’ may emphasise the fictional nature of the text, it may also be designed to protect an individual young girl who inspired this minor character. Lisa Morris is a beautiful, strong and capable student in the novel – different from the narrator in every respect, until she breaks down in the unexplained violent sobbing that indicates otherwise. It’s her perspective that Marsden explores five years after the publication of So Much to Tell You, in the sequel, Take My Word for It (1992).
Because the diary and its variations have since become narrative clichés, it is surprising to note that *So Much to Tell You* is the first winner of the Older Readers category to be written in this mode. And the 1985 Book of the Year *The True Story of Lilli Stubeck* is the only previous winner to have been written in the first person. The novel therefore exemplifies Nikolajeva’s observation (1997, p.85) that ‘contemporary children’s literature is generally developing from plot-oriented texts toward character-oriented texts’. The most significant consequence (Pennell 2003) is that in the 1980s these changes in the narrative structure of Australian fiction reconfigure the power relationships between child and adult characters. Focalising the narrative through the child’s subjectivity and the increasing use of vernacular dialogue that is less tidied up than in the fiction of writers such as Southall and Wrightson, together construct experience from the child’s point of view. And the sudden shifts and contradictions of the unreliable narrator in that construction convey a radically different kind of adolescence through constantly deferred meaning. Hardly surprising that this fiction was so unsettling for many adult readers.

The narrator of *So Much to Tell You* makes a statement and immediately corrects it in the opening entry of her journal:

February 6

I don’t know what I’m doing here.
Well, I do really. It’s because I was getting nowhere at the hospital. I have been sent here to learn to talk again. Sent here because my mother can’t stand my silent presence at home. Sent here because of my face, I suppose. I don’t know.

(*So Much to Tell You*, p.5)

The narrative here affects the appearance of artlessness or informality. This is a story in process and what will be revealed in that process is truth. The repetition of ‘Sent’ suggests that the narrator will return to the starting point of a statement repeatedly and revise it. The elegiac tone in the repetition also hints
at a more formal ambition in the narrative, if not the narrator – to raise the status of her story above mere reportage, from teenage obsession and whingeing to suburban tragedy.

Its claim to realism locates the novel firmly in the predominant traditions of Australian fiction for both children and adults at the time, and is made more emphatic by the implication that we are hearing about the real lives of young people from young people themselves, rather than mediated by adults.

The extremely damaged and distressed narrator of *So Much to Tell You* is presumably the authority on what has happened in her life and she is monitoring everything she says, and yet she becomes unreliable. As she goes over her situation and her actions in the narrative, it becomes clear that her views of both may change. And this is in fact what happens. At the beginning of the novel, she hates her father and she resents the staff at the school.

> Am I supposed to be grateful that they’ve taken me, the nut-case, the psycho with the deformed face?

*(So Much to Tell You, p.13)*

On Sundays she sees students with their families and wants to tell them that they are in danger:

> I wanted to call out warnings to them, to sit at the top of a lighthouse in the middle of the lawn and scream desperate warnings: ‘DON’T TRUST THEM! LOOK OUT! THEY HATE YOU! THEY HATE EVERYONE! THEY HATE EACH OTHER!’ Yet I knew that for a few of them that wasn’t necessarily true; they lived in a strange foreign world of love that I envied but could not understand – and would never enter.

*(So Much to Tell You, p.25)*
Even the English teacher Mr Lindell is seen briefly as a threat.

This journal is starting to scare me already. When Mr Lindell gave them out in class I felt the fear and promised myself that I would not write in it, that it would stay a cold and empty book, with no secrets. Now here I am on the first page saying more than I wanted to, more than I should. What if he reads them? He said he wouldn’t; that we were free to write almost anything and that he would glance through them once in a while to make sure we were using them, not just filling them with swear words. If he doesn’t keep his promise I am lost.

*(So Much to Tell You, p.6)*

In this entry, the reader is positioned as a voyeur – like a parent invading a child’s privacy to get any information on the child that may prove useful. The narrator says that she will be lost if the words are read – and here we are reading them. So at this point the reader is a destroyer, whose prying has the power to annihilate the object of attention.

The name of the school is Warrington – first revealed in an irritatingly cheery letter that her mother sends her to see whether the treatment is working (p.21). It suggests ‘Warring town’ and ‘warring tone’ and echoes both the conflict between her parents that has resulted in the current situation, and the tone of resentment and antagonism that permeates the story their damaged child tells.

The sense that children and adults are engaged in battle becomes a major theme in Marsden’s later work, such as *Secret Men’s Business* and in the *Tomorrow* series, where it becomes a literal war. But as this first novel progresses, the distance between the narrator and her father diminishes and almost disappears. In the beginning she wants to exclude her father from the narrative, but by the third page he has found his way in and she regards him as an invader. Not long after, she imagines him imprisoned as she is, so he becomes her doppelganger. By extension, then, she is therefore also invading or violating herself by telling
this story. The novel therefore marks a departure from the traditional physical confrontation with the natural environment in Australian children’s fiction. This is a confrontation of the individual with her own mind.

In a blistering account of the novel, Scutter denounces its claim to represent contemporary reality, arguing that Marsden’s eliding of the distinction between reality and realism is dangerous in a book for young adults (Scutter 1999, p.115). She may be underestimating the ability of young readers to discern the conventions of realist fiction, but the inference at the beginning of the novel that this narrator is typical of her peers is initially disturbing. Hume argues in *Fantasy and Mimesis* (1984) that realism is a voracious mode and that as it consumed mainstream subject matter in 20th century fiction, increasingly it placed marginal subject matter at the centre of the narrative and made it appear typical.

Here the inference that all teenage girls are damaged, isolated, silenced, seething with resentment of adults and suicidal is alarming. But as the narrator’s story unfolds, alternative possibilities for focalisation do appear – if briefly. Despite rejection, her fellow student Cathy makes repeated attempts to reach out to the narrator, and is finally embraced as a friend. The staff at the school, Mrs Lindell and Cathy’s parents demonstrate that not all adults are against young people. And the narrator is finally reconciled with her father and does eventually speak. So although on a first reading the novel overwhelmingly depicts a heartless new world that destroys the conventional certainties of childhood, the optimistic trajectory of the plot demonstrates that this initial perception was created by the narrator’s limitations.

Scutter’s reservations are more soundly based in the novel’s engagement with the contemporary issues of gender roles and parents’ rights. The complex layering of its themes makes this text ideal for classroom discussion, but that discussion may lead to some disturbing conclusions.

*So Much to Tell You* participates in the ongoing public discourse about gender relations that resulted in a backlash against feminism in Australia and the
United States during the 1980s and the growth of the men’s movement, epitomised by the controversy around Robert Bly’s *Iron John*, published in 1990. James outlines the historical shift in child custody cases from the concept of ‘father-right’ – a phrase that persisted from the 19th century until the 1960s – to ‘maternal preference’ in the mid-20th century and then to a form of ‘child-right’. He points out that although the Family Law Act (1975) was an attempt to remove the issue of gender bias from custody findings, men ‘appeared to have more difficulty than women in accepting the authority of the court and in several cases men took violent and even murderous action against the mother, the children or judges of the court’ (James 2005, p.3). And he concludes that ‘The most significant male reaction to the 1975 reforms was the increase in domestic violence’ (p.21). As a measure of this development he cites the increase from 100 government-funded women’s refuges in 1979 to 265 in 1990.

When the narrator of *So Much to Tell You* first recalls the custody hearing, she is in town and finds herself outside the Family Court building.

That was where it all started. Oh, it didn’t all start there of course but, it was the place that brought it all to a head and it was the judge’s ruling in that big gleaming building that sent my father so totally off his brain.

(*So Much to Tell You*, p.87)

The reader is left to fill in the gaps. It is not clear whether her parents separated because her father was potentially violent, or because her mother had begun a relationship with JJ, the man who is now the narrator’s stepfather. At any rate her father is upset by the loss of custody and she feels sympathy for him.

Although the narrator makes no distinction, there are two court hearings: one is for custody and one is for the criminal charge of assault. When she returns to the subject of her father going to prison, the narrator is so shocked to read in the paper about paedophiles being raped by other prisoners that she goes to the bathroom and vomits.
I can’t stand to think of him in there on his own, getting punished so badly and feeling so desperate. Nobody understood him, least of all my mother. He just went mad because he’d worked so hard to get everything and then she was going to take it all off him and walk away with it, just like that, really cool. He couldn’t have stood for that. He would have snapped. He was too proud; that’s what she’d never managed to figure out about him. He would never have wanted to hurt me, not the way he did. I mean, there were a few times when he belted me and stuff, but only when he was really angry and half the time I’d provoked it by being rude or lazy or something. I know he wasn’t the perfect father exactly – I wish he’d been able to hug me more and be warm and funny and happy like other kids’ fathers – but I do sort of miss him, in a way. Maybe I could go off to the judge and ask them to let him out. If it was me asking they’d have to consider it.

*(So Much to Tell You, pp.95-96)*

The new information here is that the battle between the narrator’s parents was about property rather than custody. Is this simply the narrator’s low self-esteem talking? Perhaps it would simply not occur to her that she could be worth arguing over. Or maybe her mother’s new relationship is behind it – the international travel, the cosmetic surgery, the remarriage all evidence of an assumption of material wealth that is at odds with the facts on what was called in the 1980s the ‘feminisation of poverty’. As the narrative progresses and she expresses greater compassion for her father, the distance between the narrator and the implied author diminishes.

The most significant aspect of this passage is the way it slides over the fact that her father did in fact want to hurt her mother. Out of a desperate need to be loved, the narrator conspires against her own mother – as she also blames herself – and comes close to absolving her father of all responsibility. Later still she returns to the theme of her father’s hard work.

I don’t know what’s best really. I mean, he worked so hard to make money so we could have things – skiing and clothes and nice houses and cars – but on the other hand I never got to see much of him, and he didn’t get any time to enjoy all the things that he was buying. My mother did,
though – she had a great time. So I don’t know what’s best. I’d hate to be poor, but look where we’ve ended up after all his hard work – a family that’s exploded, a father in prison, a mother who’s married a creep and who cares only for herself, and a silent daughter with a face like raw mincemeat. I remember a poster that I saw on a railway station once – some religious group had put it up – and it said: ‘No man is a success who is a failure in his own home.’ So where does that leave my successful father?

(So Much to Tell You, pp.138-139)

This is the second time the narrator emphasises the sacrificing of family for material possessions. Marsden acknowledges that the novel deals with the domestic violence surrounding the Family Court (Nieuwenhuizen 1991, p.144), but it is odd that he does not mention the rampant materialism of the time. This is epitomised by the 1987 film ‘Wall Street’, in which Michael Douglas wins the Best Actor Academy Award for his performance as Gordon Gekko, the stockbroker whose motto is ‘Greed is good’.

The distance between the narrator and the implied author diminishes to the point where she seems like a mouthpiece for a male author who is pleading for justice on behalf of all fathers. Although So Much to Tell You eventually reveals that the young narrator is, as noted earlier in this chapter, the accidental victim of her father’s violence, to some extent this is a distraction from the inescapable fact that he was throwing acid at her mother. He missed his aim (p.95). This may exonerate him from a deliberate act of violence against his child, and therefore allow the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation. His bad aim suggests both his extreme emotional state and the fact that he is not very good at stereotype macho behaviour (which, in hunting, sport and war, includes the ability to throw). But there is still at the centre of the novel an appalling act of violence against one woman, who may be symbolic of all women as wives and mothers in their perceived alliance with the Family Court against men. And while Scutter’s strident sarcasm compromises any even-handedness there might have been in her own reading of the novel, she is
finally justified in challenging the conclusions that young readers may draw from the identification of the narrator and her father.

Marsden himself, though, argues repeatedly from his teaching experience that students demonstrate high levels of sophistication in their reading of complex literary texts, so the contentious treatment of gender relations in the novel should not itself preclude it from the syllabus. And it is at least possible that a mainly female panel of judges, aware of the perception of gender bias in such awards as the Newbery and the Book of the Year, might overlook what appears to be a male author’s own bias, in order to demonstrate their own belief in impartiality. (Witness the strong advocacy of books for boys by female librarians and teachers in the 1990s.)

If there is disagreement about the political values of So Much to Tell You, however, the metafictional aspects of the narrative are clearly in alignment with the CBC’s agenda. This is above all a book about writing and reading. The fictional occasion that produces the text is a writing exercise given to students. And the strategy of shifting the perspective constantly in a search for the truth, the revisions and contradictions referred to earlier, and the eking out of plot details enact the ‘process writing’ that was a feature of the English syllabus in the 1980s.

Ironically Marsden is sceptical about the practice and defaults to a romantic concept of writing.

There seems to be a movement to bring writing into the realm of the … sciences and to make it something that you can break down into its constituent parts, and then by teaching people how to do each of those constituent parts you’ll turn them into great writers. I don’t think creative things work like that.

The recipe now is that first you write your rough copy, then you ‘conference’, then you do more drafts and then you publish. Lots of pieces that I write don’t follow that pattern at all. And the idea that all the best writing comes from one’s own experience is often true, but not always. To overstress to kids that writing should be about their own experience is to risk firstly making them too egoistical and
egotistical, and secondly to cut them off from one of the great pleasures of writing which is to create totally unrealistic worlds for yourself that you can wander through and have fun in.

(Nieuwenhuizen 1999, pp.150-151)

Oddly at variance with the carefully constructed realism of So Much to Tell You, the comments in the second paragraph here are perhaps those of a writer protecting himself from the familiar Australian charge that the realist writer is more reporter or gossip than artist. And for all his reservations about process writing, the novel’s appeal as a teaching model is clear.

But it is as a celebration of reading and of literature teaching that So Much to Tell You is most closely aligned with the CBC’s values. The literary references range widely. The narrator’s name, Marina, recalls the daughter of Shakespeare’s Pericles, who was given into foster care because her father did not think she would survive the voyage, then sold into prostitution. But she used her ability with words to protect herself by persuading men that to take her virginity would be a crime.

Then there are references to Donne, Alcott, Bagnold, Blyton. The narrator’s favourite book is Blyton’s The Children of Cherry Tree Farm.

I’m not sure why. I like the way all the children in it eat jam and cream and go for rambles (never walks, always rambles) and feed chooks and get tucked in at nights and get treats. And I like Tammy the Wild Man. One thing I don’t like though is the way trains in those books always go clickey-clack, clickey-clack. They never go schroneggy schromk plut.

(So Much to Tell You, pp.31-32)

The narrative uses these references to emphasise the fictional nature of all literary language, and by implication the authenticity of its own construction. But they are not part of some intertextual game that will appeal only to elite readers. As mentioned earlier in this discussion, there are references to popular
culture, film, television, comic strips as well. For Stephens (1992, 1996) the most significant effect of postmodernism on children’s literature is its challenging of the concept of the literary text, through its focalising and interrogation of the narrator in the construction of subjectivity.

On her idyllic holiday at the Preshills’ farm the narrator of *So Much to Tell You* is outdoors, busy, observing a family who get on well together, and she is happy.

I know what I’m most scared of – I’ve always known that. Scared that he’ll hate me. Scared that he’ll never forgive me for all the terrible and wrong things I’ve done these past fifteen months. I want him to hold me and forgive me and tell me it’ll be all right, like I was six years old again. That’s what I want. Maybe we could buy a farm like this one and live here happily every after, away from the eyes and the voices of the people.

Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow.

(*So Much to Tell You*, pp.135-136)

Here the narrative deftly collapses Macbeth’s famous soliloquy from Act V scene 5, which has been borrowed by writers as different as Furphy and Faulkner, and ‘Tomorrow’, the best-known song from ‘Annie’, one of the most popular Broadway musicals of the 80s. As Mr Lindell urges the students to think about their reading and the references appear more frequently, the narrator begins to venture beyond her solipsism. So literature here is constructed unapologetically as therapy.

For all its confronting subject matter and its departure from the conventional third person narrative of other award winners, the novel finally shares the CBC’s romantic attachment to the notion of universals in both childhood and storytelling. Asked about the function of story in young people’s lives, Marsden says:

I’m a Jungian and I like the idea of myths and legends as a way of transmitting all kinds of unconscious messages and
elements of society. It’s important to give kids an alternative to the junk.

(Nieuwenhuizen 1999, p.160)

This is undoubtedly the motivation for his second publication, The Journey (1988). Finding the voice to tell your own story is again Marsden’s theme, although here there are seven stories to be told, but the narrative is removed from the recognisable realism of the school story. Instead, there is an isolated valley where the protagonist is nurtured in childhood, a mother and father who are so generalised that they appear to be archetypes, a town called Random, where they do their trading, and a circus of sideshow freaks which represents the world that the maturing protagonist journeys out into.

Fourteen-year-old Argus knows that he must leave home to see the world, but before he goes his father lets him read from a book so precious that it has been kept under glass.

Argus learned from the book that there were seven stories and the journey would not be over until he had discovered and could tell all seven of them. The seven stories that he found would be uniquely his, yet they would also be the stories of all people – the same for everyone, recognisable by everyone. The harder he searched the more difficult the stories would be. The book warned him that nothing was simple: everything was complex, whether it be a leaf, a human, an idea, or word. Even the statement that nothing was simple was too simple, and was probably not wholly true. For the book also warned him that there were no absolutes: such extreme terms as good and evil, true and false, alive and dead might be convenient words, but they should be seen as indications, not definitions.

(The Journey, p.11)

Given the Jungian assumptions that underpin the founding of the Children’s Book Council, this passage is a ringing endorsement of literary excellence as both a consensus and universal concept, and a subject worthy of study. It therefore aligns the text with Marsden’s profession as an English teacher and with the CBC’s aims, although the questioning of absolutes and the concept of
meaning as contingent challenge that alignment and prefigure the teaching profession’s fascination with postmodernism in the 1990s and with the work of Gary Crew.

*The Journey* is Marsden’s portrait of the artist as a young man, so it is significant that one of the first people Argus encounters in the world outside his valley is a painter.

‘It must be hard,’ he said shyly, ‘to paint something that keeps changing all the time.’ The man looked at him with apparent surprise, then resumed his work.

‘I mean,’ said Argus, ‘which moment are you painting? This one? Or the last one? Or one from this morning?’

‘Yes,’ said the man. ‘It’s always difficult to take something that’s moving and full of life and turn it into something that is still. Not even death can do that.’

(*The Journey*, p.22)

The stiff formality of the Socratic dialogue here is so different from anything published previously for young adults in Australia that it is tempting to think the novel was ahead of its time and might have been read more sympathetically by adults if it had been published after Coelho’s *The Alchemist* (1988), Gaarder’s *Sophie’s World* (1991) and Redfield’s *The Celestine Prophecy* (1993) became international bestsellers and created a market for philosophical fables. Even the protagonist’s name, Argus, challenges the realist conventions that had dominated Australian literature. It invites a reading of the novel as a contemporary myth about the need for young men – if not young people – to leave home, journey far from the comfort of childhood to a world where they will acquire many-eyed new ways of seeing, otherwise known as maturity.

Marsden explains that the marked differences among his early novels are due to his own character and his early work history. The *School Library Journal* cites ‘at least thirty-two different jobs’ (http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com). A writer’s varied work history is often used by Australian marketing copywriters
to authenticate the experiential realism of a literary text or, in the case of comedy, its anarchic energy – sometimes both, as in the jacket copy for Elizabeth Jolley’s or Robin Klein’s books. This strategy is used to position the writer, regardless of gender, as a ‘good bloke’ rather than an intellectual. In making an explicit analogy between changing jobs and genres himself, however, Marsden demonstrates his preoccupation with the teaching and learning process.

The main reason I’ve kept changing jobs is that as soon as I feel I get on top of a job, then it’s lost all interest. So, for example, working in a meatworks, for about three or four weeks was great. But once I had the routines figured out it all became unthinking, then it was no longer any challenge…with books, although no one can ever master a genre, I like to try one genre and see how well I can do in that and then move on to another one and have a go

(Nelmes 1989, p.4)

It is not just The Journey’s literariness, but its refusal to create a winning formula by emulating So Much to Tell You that is clearly intended to, as Marsden says, ‘give kids an alternative to the junk’ and aligns it even more firmly with the CBC’s agenda. So when he is asked why it was not even short listed for the 1989 awards, the year in which Gillian Rubinstein began to make an impact, with Beyond the Labyrinth winning Book of the Year and Answers to Brut an Honour Book, there is a note of weariness and of resentment in his response.

I think there’s an inability of adults in Australia to come to terms with the sexuality of young people…and I think there’s also an anti-intellectual feeling in Australia, that any book which is at all cerebral will be disdained as being too difficult or too old for children.

(Nelmes 1989, p.5)
Given that in the preceding year, Marsden’s first novel had won the award he is commenting on, his inability to see the irony in his response indicates the emotional investment he had in the possibility of a second short listing.

But more important to his subsequent relationship with the Book of the Year awards is his misreading of the CBC’s agenda. Whereas the CBC has repeatedly used indicators of popularity such as sales figures and children’s choice awards to define the point of difference in its own awards, here Marsden implies that, in Australia, awards such as Book of the Year are given for books that are accessible and popular rather than challenging, and that therefore *The Journey* missed out. The criterion of popularity is again implied when he says that young readers’ responses have been:

Fantastic. Very supportive, and a lot of kids saying they liked it more than *So Much to Tell You*.

(Nelmes 1989, p.5)

Marsden’s response is somewhat disingenuous, because while he might like to think that this preference is due to its distinctive narrative style, as an English teacher he would be well aware that one of *The Journey*’s main attractions for young readers is its frank portrayal of sex. This is explored in three stages.

The first occurs early in the novel, when Argus shelters from the rain in a barn, and as there appear to be no humans around, decides to sleep there, although he knows from experience that the storytellers are wrong: hay does not make a comfortable bed.

The occupant of the stall, a restless-looking, beautifully contoured young stallion, tossed his head and glared at the boy.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Argus grinning to himself, ‘I won’t be bending over in front of you.’

(*The Journey*, p.27)
The physical description here epitomises one ideal of masculinity that Argus might journey towards, but the momentarily homoerotic note challenges Australian cultural conventions. It is both licensed and made faintly ridiculous by the fact that the mirror and object of his gaze is a horse, so the moment must be earthed in a kind of locker-room innuendo familiar to Australian males.

But the masturbation scene that follows amplifies this complex range of masculine emotions, from the sensuous and even lyrical, through the comic to the frankly almost brutal. As Argus towels himself dry he is pleased as he looks down at his naked body and notices that the physical change he has hoped for has happened, but when sexual arousal takes over the narrative, he is at first unable to control it and resorts to joking, then is described ambivalently as both in control and in helpless pursuit of it.

He had never been taught about sex in his life, but his years on the farm left him in no doubt or confusion about what was happening to him. ‘Not up to your standards, maybe,’ he said to the horse, who had now lost interest in him, ‘but good enough for me.’… he was grabbing at himself and the unbearably stiff thing that had temporarily become the centre and focus of his life, and which was now convulsively shooting jets of thin liquid across the hay.’

(The Journey, p.28)

Later on his journey, he joins a circus troupe for a time, and a middle-aged woman he passes in the street offers him the best afternoon of his life, but he shrinks from the offer. However, his feeling of alienation from his own body is ameliorated by the troupe’s fat woman, who assures him that ‘everyone’s a freak’ (p.56).

The second exploration of sex in the novel is facilitated by Argus’s first experience of the beach. Here for the first time he celebrates his body, almost without guilt.

Suddenly there it was – the wonderful ocean frothing at the edge of a wonderful beach. Argus felt mad delight. He did
not know what to look at first: the infinity of beach curving away to his left and right, or the infinity of flecked blue stretching out in front. He had never known before how something so empty could contain so much. He laughed and laughed. Making wild chortling noises, shedding his clothes and inhibitions, he ran down towards the edge of the water some distance away.

When he had thrown off his last piece of clothing he turned and ran backwards, pissing as he ran, wetting the sand in a pattern of huge zig-zags. A series of untidy somersaults the brought him to the ocean itself, and he stood with his feet in the water, watching the exhausted waves froth round his ankles. ‘Fantastic!’ he laughed excitedly. ‘Fantastic! Fantastic!’

…He looked around anxiously to make sure that he still had the beach to himself.

(The Journey, p.61)

If the indoor scenes in the stable are reminiscent of Lawrence, then this is Whitman, singing the body electric, although in that closing sentence, Marsden is suddenly once again a schoolteacher. It also echoes the scenes on the beach that disturbed some adult readers of Bread and Honey – just one of several points of connection between Marsden and Southall.

The freedom Argus revels in here is followed up by another day on the beach and his first idyllic sexual encounter with a girl from the troupe called Temora. When they part and both decide to leave the circus and move on, Temora says their lovemaking was a perfect moment she will always remember, and – more ominously, from the implied author as teacher and amateur psychologist – that she will compare all future sexual experiences with this one (p.104).

In the third stage of the novel’s exploration of sex, Argus helps a woman called Adious to deliver her baby. The woman’s husband has ostensibly gone to fetch the midwife, but in fact he never returns. After a few months, Adious and Argus sleep together and eventually she suggests that he stay with her and the baby.
The two young people never tired of each other’s company. Through the long winter Argus and Adious delighted in exploring each other, physically and spiritually. Yet Argus knew that there were dark depths of Adious that would never be plumbed, not by him, not by anyone, not even by Adious herself.

*(The Journey, p.127)*

At the beginning of his journey, Argus is 14 years old. But after this initial information it is never clear how much time has passed or how old he is. Phrases such as ‘a few weeks’ and ‘a few months’ move the plot along, but the age that sticks in the reader’s mind is 14. If a year has passed, Argus is still under the Australian legal age of consent. Although Adious is older when he first meets her, the novel elides any age difference in the reference to them here as ‘two young people’ – a phrase that constructs their sexual relationship as innocent and experimental.

When Argus eventually returns to the valley, his parents appear to have aged considerably, he tells his seven stories and he is confronted by the question of whether he should take over the running of the farm. Marsden’s readers are left to infer that more time has passed than they had realised, and at the end of the novel Argus announces that his parents are about to become grandparents, he and Adious will make the farm their home and the narrative closes with the following sentence:

> He turned, and with a new sense of life in his step, went inside to fetch a bottle of wine.

*(The Journey, p.186)*

Like having sex and getting a driver’s licence, the right to drink alcohol is part of the rites of passage to adulthood in Australian culture and the reader might almost imagine a mischievous grin as Marsden keys in this closing line.

Fifteen years earlier, in Southall’s troubled relationship with the CBC, some adult commentary constructed the writer as a naughty boy who pushed and
pushed, and he seems to have read the silence over Josh as punishment for his transgressions. Here in The Journey, although Marsden starts out with meta-fictional tropes that share the alignment of his first novel with the CBC’s values, when he begins to explore the theme of male sexuality with such frankness it reads like conscious provocation. In response to growing criticism that the short list had effectively increased the number of losers in the Book of the Year, the judges’ reports began to highlight notable titles by both established and emerging writers who had just missed out on being short listed. But the 1989 judges’ report makes no reference at all to The Journey. Inevitably, the total silence about a novel from the previous year’s winner appears as an answer to that provocation.

In several interviews (for example Nieuwenhuizen 1989, 1994; Nelmes 1989) Marsden acknowledges that The Journey developed from the four years he spent as English co-ordinator at Timbertop, the campus of Geelong Grammar School made famous by the British Royal Family’s decision to send Prince Charles to study there as a teenager in 1966. Nieuwenhuizen observes that they ‘shared the same flat – though, admittedly, twenty years apart.’ (1994, p.100). Marsden describes the Timbertop program that inspired Argus’s journey this way:

The kids go to the bush for a year, and they are away from their parents for most of that time and it’s a journey of discovery for them, and a journey of maturity. It’s quite basic living. There’s no TV or anything...It’s that kind of toughness and challenge that I think we’re starting to lose. It’s becoming a soft society.

(Nelmes 1989, p.5)

It is significant that Marsden himself studied at the King’s School in Sydney, variously famous and infamous for its military school uniform, because he constructs the journey to maturity for boys as a battle. He says that although we should all journey out into the world ‘one of the things that’s stopping us is the fear of being attacked, which seems to be the dominant passion in our society’ (Nieuwenhuizen 1989, p.22). Traditionally in Australian literature, the battle
young protagonists engage in is a struggle for survival against a hostile natural environment. In Southall it is also a battle against social convention.

For Marsden it becomes primarily a battle against adults. Clearly smarting from the response adults have made to *The Journey*, in a 1989 interview with Agnes Nieuwenhuizen, he says that ‘there are a lot of people out there – advertisers, various propaganda merchants and even teachers – who, in their own interest, are trying to obscure people’s vision’ (Nieuwenhuizen 1989, p.22). Therefore his sole responsibility as a writer for children is to tell the truth (Nelmes 1989, p.6). By 1994, this view has hardened into a perception that adults are deliberately lying to children because they resent and even hate them.

Drawing a distinction between innocence and ignorance, he argues that when adults cling to the concept of childhood innocence, what they really want to preserve and promote is ignorance. He tells four stories featuring childhood perspectives which adults construct as ‘mistakes’.

These stories have a number of things in common. One is that adults can be relied on to laugh at all of them. And underpinning their laughter is always this awareness: ‘We’re smarter than they are! We know and they don’t!’ So we’re laughing at their mistakes. We’re laughing at their ignorance. We’re laughing with the pleasure that comes from our greater status and power; the comfort that this gives us…The more contempt adults have for children the louder they laugh. The very tone adults use when addressing children is always patronising: ‘You are ignorant but I may let you have another jewel from my storehouse of knowledge’.

(Nieuwenhuizen 1994, p.103)

It’s difficult to understand why Marsden’s views here are so extreme. Why not read adults’ laughter at children’s ‘mistakes’ as a fond nostalgia for their own simpler selves now beyond their reach? It may be that his friendship with the editor who commissioned this piece has encouraged him to push earlier more restrained comments he has made to her towards polemic. And there may be underlying personal memories of painful childhood experiences, too. Whatever
the reason, Marsden constructs himself as engaged in a battle with adults and he
is on the side of – he is one of – the children.

In an implied reference to the CBC, he cites *Pollyanna* and *A Little Bush Maid*
as the kind of books adults want to impose on children and he mimics a fairy
tale witch:

> My children – and by extension all children – are still
> living in childhood’s pure world. I must keep them in it. To
> let them out is to let myself out. *I will use my power to lock
> them in and hide the key.* And I will oppose any adult who
> tries to give children the key.

(Nieuwenhuizen 1994, p.103)

With *The Journey*, then, Marsden sees himself as having tried to give children
the key, and having been blocked by the silence of a powerful group of adults
who had effectively shunned him.

In *Secret Men’s Business* (1998) he tries again, but this time in an information
book for boys on the subject of growing up. Subtitled ‘Manhood: the Big Gig’
this non-fictional account of the journey is more restrained in tone, but
organised in point form like the rules of engagement. There are 12 ways to
become a man, beginning ‘1. You Need to Defeat Your Father; 2. Leave
School, Leave Home’. The opening chapter establishes the structure of the
argument used throughout the book. Hook the reader, map out the worst-case
scenario in detail, then briefly make a general concession that this is not the
whole story and the reader may have had a more positive experience. This is
the kind of balance familiar in the novels from *So Much to Tell You* on.

This is how the implied reader’s father and mother are constructed:

> One of the reasons it’s difficult to become a man is that
> you are encouraged in so many ways to remain immature.
> Schools, and some parents, want to keep you as a child.
> They feel you will be easier to control if you are still a
> child, that you will be more ‘biddable’ (more likely to do
> what you’re told). They might not want to acknowledge the
fact that you are now sexually potent. Your father may have been the only sexually potent male in the house up until now, and he could feel threatened.

One of the ways this might show is by his teasing you about girls, or about your first dates…it shows that he’s got mixed feelings about your maturing.

He may even flirt with your girlfriend or show too much curiosity about your activities with girls. This is not appropriate, nor is it helpful. You will need to show more dignity and maturity than him in this situation, and maybe arrange your life so you have more privacy…

Your mother could be nervous that there is now another sexually potent male in the house, and she may try to keep you as her ‘little boy’ for a while longer, so she can keep mothering you. In this situation she wants to deny your growth.

(Secret Men’s Business, pp.2-3)

Later in the book, there is a list of 6 lies that adults tell to young people, beginning ‘1. By going to school you’ll make something of yourself (and get a job); 2. Adults can be trusted’ and a further list of 4 titled ‘More Lies’ that adults tell each other about young people so they can continue denying them power.

While the generalisations in this book may be offered as polemic, the implied reader is rarely invited to argue and may not be well enough informed to question such statements as ‘In a culture which treats parents as gods it’s very hard for teenagers of destructive, negligent or immoral parents’ (p.69). After the iconoclasm of the 60s, and both scholarly and popular feminist interrogation of the roles of men and fathers from the 70s on, it is hard to justify the claim that Australian culture treats parents as gods.

The way the narrative structure works in Secret Men’s Business, by privileging evidence of the dysfunctional, is epitomised in the comments about addiction.

There are quite a few young addicts, sure, but there are quite a few old ones too. The oldest person to die from heroin addiction in Victoria in 1997 was a 70-year-old man in Wangaratta.
There are an awful lot of middle-aged and old alcoholics.

(Secret Men’s Business, p.76)

With the disingenuous ‘sure’ and the generational contrast between ‘quite a few…quite a few…’ and ‘an awful lot’, the implied author here is positioning himself as one of the kids, who are engaged in a constant battle with adults.

As a public figure Marsden becomes so identified in the 90s with the growing issue of literacy for boys, and with the sexual frankness of books such as The Journey and Secret Men’s Business, it is easy to forget that most of his first person narrators are girls. A thorough analysis of the relationship between his use of female narrators, his 2008 reimagining of ‘Hamlet’ as a novel, with its powerful portrait of Gertrude, and the implication that the female-dominated groups of professional gatekeepers are smothering young readers is beyond the scope of this thesis, but gender is undoubtedly a factor in his growing disaffection.

After Marsden’s disappointment about adult responses to The Journey, in 1992 Letters from the Inside was short listed for Book of the Year, although it lost to a conservative winner, Eleanor Nilsson’s The House Guest, and two Honour Books with challenging subject matter but a greater degree of closure, Simon French’s Change the Locks and Kate Walker’s Peter. This novel returns to the realism, the mystery plot structure and the subject matter of domestic violence in So Much to Tell You. Marsden again explores the imprisonment of teenage girls, but whereas it is self-imposed and metaphorical in So Much to Tell You, here it is also literal. The title, Letters from the Inside, can be read both ways. Two Year 10 girls exchange letters: Mandy lives in the suburbs and Tracey is in a juvenile detention centre, and as each of them probes past the lies and silences in their search for the truth of both the other’s condition and her own, the narrative explores the possibility that the freedom to live with your family in the suburbs may in fact be the more damaging prison. In the ending of the novel, which Nimon and Foster describe as ‘one of the bleakest in Australian adolescent fiction’ (Nimon & Foster 1997, p.174), the reader is left like Tracey
wondering why Mandy has repeatedly failed to answer her letters, and can only assume that she has finally become a victim of the domestic violence she has alluded to, and that she is dead.

The domestic conflict in these early novels is not just between parents. Since Mandy is a victim of her brother’s violence, the abusive behaviour of fathers is clearly being passed on to sons, so the battle is between male and female and it erupts in physical violence with teenage girls caught in the middle. In the *Tomorrow* series of seven novels, beginning with *Tomorrow, When the War Began* (1994) Marsden’s subject is a literal war. The narrator, a teenage girl named Ellie, is camping with seven friends in a wilderness popularly known as Hell, when they gradually become aware that Australia has been invaded. Their parents are prisoners of war and cannot save them, so the young people must rely on their own resources for survival.

As the series progresses over five years, critics become increasingly disenchanted with it. While praising Marsden’s creation of complex situations that test his young characters’ ability to survive and incidentally spare him ‘the pejorative stigma that is often attached to series fiction’, Steinberger is tired of it by the time the sixth book, *The Night is for Hunting* (1998) is published.

Like an old Saturday afternoon matinee serial, the *Tomorrow* series (more accurately, serial) is beginning to fade. It is becoming tired and repetitive and is struggling to maintain the tremendous excitement and suspense of its opening episodes: it has become all too predictable.

(Steinberger 1998, p.18)

Reviewing the second book of the *Tomorrow* spin-off series, *The Ellie Chronicles*, Franzway says:

The *Tomorrow* series started off as an excellent idea…Yet somewhere along the line the series lost it. ‘Too unbelievable’ is a phrase often put forward as a reason for
not getting round to reading Marsden’s next tome of teen-age terrorism…This is often the problem with young adult fiction: its consumers have a tendency to outgrow the genre very quickly.

(Franzway 2006, p.30)

Both responses derive partly from the limited possibilities for action and tone imposed by Marsden’s choice of a war as subject matter, even allowing for the variety of situations the characters find themselves in and the changes created within them. Another source of disenchantment is the disparity between narrative time and publication time. Despite the use of back story to extend the time span involved, it stretches credibility.

But the most significant challenge in the initial publication of the series was whether a young reader who started the first book at, say, the age of 12 was still going to be interested when the last book was published five years later. It’s a long time for a young reader to wait for a conclusion. By way of contrast, Mary Grant Bruce before, and JK Rowling after, Marsden aimed to retain their young readers on first publication over respectively 32 years and 11 years, by having their characters grow older with them. Once all the books were available in each series, of course, this challenge no longer existed.

‘For his own sake Marsden must close the series soon. For if he doesn’t, he will be mainly remembered as a writer of series fiction – a reputation that would undervalue the themes and craft of his writing in general’ (Steinberger 1998, p.18). The continued inclusion of titles such as So Much to Tell You and Letters from the Inside on school reading lists since then, along with Tomorrow, When the War Began, demonstrates that Steinberger’s anxiety was essentially ill-founded. Furthermore the growth of commercial fiction in Australia and critical literacy in schools has resulted in series being less frequently stigmatised than they used to be.
If Marsden’s adult critics stayed the course through a sense of obligation, however, Australia’s state children’s choice awards tell a different story:

1995 *Tomorrow, When the War Began* winner KOALA (NSW), YABBA (Vic), WAYRBA (WA)
1996 *Tomorrow, When the War Began* co-winner with *So Much to Tell You* COOL (ACT)
1998 *Tomorrow, When the War Began* winner BILBY (Qld)
  *The Third Day, the Frost* winner WAYRBA (WA)
  *The Dead of the Night* winner COOL (ACT)
1999 *The Third Day, the Frost* winner COOL (ACT)
  *Burning for Revenge* winner WAYRBA (WA)
2000 *Tomorrow, When the War Began* winner CYBER (Tas)
  *The Night is for Hunting* winner WAYRBA (WA), COOL (ACT)
2001 *Tomorrow, When the War Began* winner CYBER (Tas)
2002 *Tomorrow, When the War Began* winner CYBER (Tas)

Leaving aside the absence of South Australia’s CROW (later KANGA) awards, which have had a discontinuous history due to the usual difficulty of finding volunteers to do the considerable administration work involved in a statewide vote, and the Northern Territory’s KROC awards, which began in 2004, several observations can be made from this list of awards.

First, *Tomorrow, When the War Began* has won 8 awards and the final book in the series, *The Other Side of Dawn*, none. This suggests a decline in interest for reasons that may include boredom or over-familiarity with the series, and the emergence of new writers such as Andy Griffiths. On the other hand, consecutive wins for *Tomorrow, When the War Began* in the first three years of Tasmania’s CYBER awards argues against that. And the joint win for *Tomorrow, When the War Began* and *So Much to Tell You* in the ACT’s 1996 COOL awards suggests that young readers may not have shared the contrasting opinions of Marsden’s early work and the *Tomorrow* series apparently held by the adult judges of the Book of the Year.

Noting that not one of the seven books in the series was even short listed for Book of the Year, Nimon and Foster remark:
The author was, to all accounts, annoyed…but he must be pleased with their popular success.

(Nimon & Foster 1997, p.175)

When *The Rabbits*, illustrated by Shaun Tan, won Picture Book of the Year in 1999 Marsden used his acceptance speech to express his views on literary awards judged by adults. As Australia was spending unprecedented millions on preparing its athletes for the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Marsden opened with a sporting analogy, pointing out that computers now decided to a thousandth of a second who had come first and who had come second, when to the naked eye of the spectators there appeared to have been a tie.

While competition can of course be a good way to make things happen, it’s sad to see it become farcical.

This is a familiar opening gambit, challenging the notion of competition in order to express the winner’s modesty. But by the end of the speech, the audience is in no doubt about the real subject of Marsden’s challenge.

Reviewing artistic work, in the manner in which most of it is reviewed in contemporary Australia, seems inappropriate and sometimes downright ugly.

Every new piece of creative work, unless produced for propaganda or deliberately manipulative reasons, should be a cause for celebration.

Rather than a competition to find the ‘best’ books each year, I would prefer some other way of recognising works of literature that have engaged us powerfully. Perhaps in the case of children’s books, and books for teenagers, a Hall of Fame, where books that have connected with a considerable number of people are ‘elected’ to membership. In this way, more people (perhaps thousands) could be involved in the selection process. Publicity would still be easy to attract, as the announcement of the results, and the subsequent ‘induction’ of the books, could be made a big event every year.

There would still be an element of competition, a sense of ‘winners’, but perhaps much less a sense of
‘losers’, especially as books that were not elected in one year could continue to be eligible in following years.

Of course, I’m delighted that a particular group of adults, meeting to share their responses to books published in 1998, liked *The Rabbits*.

*(Reading Time, vol.43, no.4, 1999, p.4)*

By excluding creative work that is produced for propaganda or manipulation, Marsden confronts criticism that has been levelled at his work repeatedly by adults – particularly in the case of the *Tomorrow* series, which may be read as reviving xenophobia in Australian literature, and *The Rabbits* itself with its complex political meanings. In doing so he defends his work as non-manipulative.

This is a novelist who is a master of coded silence. Even in the mock deferential tone of his closing acknowledgment that he may just have bitten the hand that feeds him, Marsden emphasises the arbitrariness of the decision by avoiding the term ‘judges’, which the CBC uses frequently. He constructs the laborious judging process as no more significant than a chat among book club members, and deftly endorses children’s choice awards while restating his challenge to the Book of the Year, without naming either.

Whether winning Book of the Year with his first novel led to expectations that were unlikely to be fulfilled or not is a matter for conjecture. Similarly, how a writer who denounced commercialism could be persuaded to write sequels and series is puzzling, although his pedagogical interest in the writing process helps explain the appeal of writing a sequel to *So Much to Tell You* and adapting it for performance in the theatre, or of trying to sustain a series over seven novels and five years, and then reviving it after four years in another sequence of three novels. The ever-present challenge of trying to make a living from writing in Australia, of course, should not be underestimated either.

But the intriguing question is how a rift could have occurred between Marsden and the CBC, given its celebration of such early novels as *So Much to Tell You* and *Letters from the Inside*, and the fact that as the author of Australia’s best
known and best selling series for teens, he has fulfilled its aims with unprecedented international success. The answers lie in the complex meanings of warfare in both his work and the public discourse interacting with it. Constructed as a battle between male and female, in the fiction the female is the victim of the male and either finds her inner strength or loses her life altogether in the struggle against him. But in the discourse surrounding the male, and in this case both the implied author and the real author as public figure, he is a child engaged in the struggle to become adult by rebelling and displacing the authority of one or more of his parents. Marsden’s public battle is therefore with the mother who, while either absent or silent in the novels, makes her unmistakable presence felt in the mostly female ranks of the CBC.
CHAPTER 8  GILLIAN RUBINSTEIN, THE PRIZE AND THE PRICE

CASE STUDY: BEYOND THE LABYRINTH

Like Wrightson, Rubinstein seems at first to have a relationship with the CBC and its awards that is far less troubled than either Southall’s or Marsden’s, and points to the possibility that the gender of the award recipient is a determining factor. But the following case study shows that although an award can raise a writer’s profile and income, its demands that the writer become an increasingly public figure also have the potential to destroy, whether the writer is male or female.

Invited to deliver a formal acceptance speech at the Book of the Year awards ceremony in 1990, Gillian Rubinstein takes the opportunity to explain in detail and with customary frankness some of the feelings she experienced as she wrote the winner, Beyond the Labyrinth, and some of the responses to it made by publishers and agents. And indirectly she defends the book against some of its critics. But there is a moment early on in the speech that evokes a double take from the student of her work.

Out of all my books I feel that Beyond the Labyrinth has the most claim to being a work of art. I say this at the risk of sounding pretentious, because the original concept of the book came to me, whole and entire, in a flash, like a vision.

(Reading Time, vol.34, no.2, 1990, p.5)

The arresting phrase is neither ‘work of art’ nor ‘vision’, because this least pretentious of writers shares with many Australian writers the desire to fend off scrutiny with a perhaps surprisingly Romantic view of the creative process. Rather, it is the expression ‘all my books’. Australian readers were introduced to Rubinstein with her first novel, Space Demons in 1986. Beyond the Labyrinth was published in 1989 and in frustration at her original publisher’s response to that novel in manuscript, Rubinstein says she wrote the two short chapter books, Melanie and the Night Animal and Answers to Brut, which
appeared in 1988. Although other books were being edited and written, in 1990 ‘all my books’, then, refers to two published novels and the two shorter works.

It is the kind of expression that might have been used in the past retrospectively, by a writer contemplating decades of publishing. And with Rubinstein beginning to publish in her late forties, perhaps these four years felt unusually intense, as if a lifetime of stories was at last being written down. At the same time, it demands consideration of the role played by both publishers and the CBC in a writer’s career. The frequency of publication and multiple short listings indicates an industry almost too eager to embrace new talent, but the CBC seems unaware that this embrace is sometimes felt as smother love.

In 1984, when Patricia Wrightson’s project seems to be drawing to a close and A Little Fear wins Book of the Year, a new writer, Robin Klein, has two novels on the short list – People Might Hear You and Penny Pollard’s Diary, which won a Highly Commended (later renamed Honour Book) award and in each of the two years following, Klein again has two novels short listed: 1985 Hating Alison Ashley and Penny Pollard’s Letters, and in 1986 Halfway Across the Galaxy and Turn Left and The Enemies.

This clustering alone is not a new development. Southall’s prolific output and slew of awards 20 years earlier has already been demonstrated. But in the context of short listings for Mem Fox, Pamela Allen and later Margaret Wild, Klein’s frequent appearance on the short list indicates change. Admittedly, Wrightson’s novels, for example, are longer than Klein’s, but she and others of her generation typically published a new book every two or three years. In the 80s and 90s, however, it was quite common for a writer to publish more than one book in a single year – sometimes many more.

In terms of word count, it is not surprising that writers of picture books such as Mem Fox or Margaret Wild began to publish more frequently than novelists. Mem Fox, for example, publishes four picture books in 1986, two in 1987, four in 1988 and again in 1989. The year of a picture book’s publication depends partly on the illustrator’s availability and work rate, and is generally outside the
author’s control. So this clustering may not correlate with the pattern of writing. And the frequency may also simply point to an unusually creative period in Australian children’s literature.

In the 1980s a whole new generation of writers and illustrators for children did in fact appear and were to become major artists – among them Pamela Allen, Kerry Argent, Allan Baillie, Terry Denton, Mem Fox, Simon French, Libby Gleeson, Morris Gleitzman, Libby Hathorn, Paul Jennings, Victor Kelleher, Alison Lester, John Marsden, Donna Rawlins, Gillian Rubinstein, Craig Smith, Jane Tanner, Julie Vivas and Margaret Wild. The burst of publishing activity is to some extent the result of 40 years of lobbying from the CBC and indicates how competitive and profitable the industry had become.

Other factors were involved, such as the increased availability of grants and prizes, a new wave of Australian nationalism, and the growth of writers’ festivals. But chief among them were the introduction of the CBC short list in 1982 and the proliferation of author visits in schools, to service the new emphasis on process writing in the syllabus, noted somewhat disparagingly by Marsden in chapter 7. These factors combined to back up publishers’ marketing campaigns and met several objectives of both the CBC and the publishers. For writers and illustrators, the additional income from sales and appearance fees was naturally attractive, but the pressure to perform and to spend longer periods of time away from writing were at times less so.

Of all the writers who appeared in the 80s, few were celebrated more warmly by the CBC than Gillian Rubinstein. Between 1987 and 1997, Rubinstein won Book of the Year twice, Honour Book four times and was short listed a further four times. However, while others of her generation continued to write for young readers, after 15 years, Rubinstein changed her name, her audience and her marketing strategy and in 2001 began a new career as a novelist for adults, with Lian Hearn’s Tales of the Otori. To date it appears that she now intends to write only for adults. Reading the trajectory of her career over those 15 years becomes a case study in the success of the Book of the Year awards and some
of its potential costs, as one writer – who is in some ways typical – grapples with her identity as a writer for children.

When *Space Demons* was published in 1986 it was immediately the subject of casual conversation among teachers, librarians, booksellers and other specialists in children’s literature, with the kind of spontaneous publicity that 15 years later was to be constructed and bought by publishers as a ‘whispering campaign’. Unlike the careers of Southall, Wrightson and even Marsden, whose first novel appeared a year later in 1987, Rubinstein was being launched straight into paperback. Anecdotal industry feedback was showing that, while librarians were cautious about the durability of soft covers, affordability had become an issue for institutions as it was for families, and young readers preferred paperbacks, because hardbacks were associated with adults, literariness and required reading.

So the format was new, the subject matter of Australian children being trapped in cyberspace reflected the excitement being generated by personal computers among children, and the concerns among many adults, and despite a Knarelle Beard illustration that now looks rather stilted and naïve, the cover depicting two fair haired children, a black gun and an endless line of black ‘space demons’ hinted at genre fiction. The book was therefore likely to be picked up by the CBC’s main constituents: the young readers, who were looking for books that reflected the urban and technological present, rather than Australia’s rural past; and the teachers and librarians who felt that competence in the new media was being forced on them, when they had reservations about cyberspace’s potential to disempower adult carers and dumb down education. Inside the cover, the writing was at times less commercial than readers might have hoped, although *Magpies* editor Alf Mappin, himself trying to negotiate both colloquial and written grammar, remarked, ‘It is one of those rare books that appeals on its literary merits and is also a very popular read.’ (Mappin 1989, p.18).

The book was designed therefore to appeal to both the general trade and the education market. The significance of this presentation may be inferred from
the jacket notes on Rubinstein’s third novel for older readers, *At Ardilla*, published in 1991 and, like her second novel *Beyond the Labyrinth*, in hardback.

Gillian Rubinstein is today one of the best known and most popular writers for children in Australia. She is also one of the most highly regarded: since 1986, when her first book, *Space Demons*, was published, she has won a dazzling array of awards and commendations.

*Space Demons* vindicated its enormous popular success by being voted an Honour Book in the Children’s Book Council of Australia’s 1987 Awards; and the 1989 Awards saw Gillian take out the Book of the Year (Older Readers) with *Beyond the Labyrinth*, while *Answers to Brut* and *Melanie and the Night Animal* were Honour Books in the Older Readers and Younger Readers categories respectively.

First, it’s clear that this copy is addressed to adults – librarians and teachers; the word ‘vindicated’ tells us that. Secondly, the idea that an award vindicates a book’s popularity is a reversal of what might be expected – that popularity vindicates an award. Like Klein, Rubinstein was a word-of-mouth favourite with readers before the awards began to roll in. By implication, popularity and award winning literary excellence are in opposition. The comment seems, then, to be addressed to the CBC, which has constructed itself as a last bastion of traditional standards, regardless of sales. Given Omnibus’s experience with Mem Fox’s *Possum Magic*, which was not Picture Book of the Year in 1984, but quickly became and remains Australia’s best selling picture book, they might well assert defensively that popularity and literary excellence are not mutually exclusive.

*Space Demons* introduces themes that are later to distinguish all Rubinstein’s fiction for older readers. It focuses on middle class Anglo-Australian families that have become dysfunctional. The two main characters feel abandoned by their parents: in the course of the novel Andrew Hayford’s father leaves the family home, and Elaine Taylor’s mother left years ago. Alienation therefore makes both characters susceptible to the uncertain zone that vibrates between
the imagined world and the actual, and boredom – which is often code for lack of attention and love – leads them to seek physical and psychological sensation. Fantasy challenges their perception of what is real and the constitutive nature of language becomes a major theme.

Andrew’s father is a doctor and brings home, after one of his increasingly frequent trips away, the latest Japanese computer game, *Space Demons.* It is clear that this is a substitute for the time and affection he seems unable to give his son. Elaine, on the other hand, is being brought up by her father, who works as a cleaner, but is an itinerant performer – wild looking and a free spirit. The plot works through a series of binary oppositions and in the contrast between these two families the narrative maps out two paths taken by the generation who, like the implied author, grew up in the 60s. The Hayfords have pursued formal education and material possessions and become part of the settled urban upper middle class; the Taylors have pursued their artistic talents, retained the outward appearances of the ‘hippie’ life and now risk becoming a hidden under-class in the constant struggle to make ends meet.

Next door to Elaine live John and Mario Ferrone, the children or grandchildren of Italian immigrants. The narrative doesn’t explore the Ferrones’ home life, so Mario’s sense of alienation, like Andrew’s and Elaine’s, may be due to family dysfunction. John says that their brother Frank teases Mario and calls him Maria (p.60). Although the conversation about gender that develops in Rubinstein’s work is explored by Minchinton (1994) and Scutter (1999), the implied reader may interpret such teasing as simply a ‘normal’ rite of passage among Australian boys. The visible source of Mario’s anger is unmistakably school and that anger is what traps the children in cyberspace, where they must confront and defeat it if they are to escape.

When Mario is banned from the school library for a month, his brother John implies that it is because Mario turns up at school with a new punk haircut and ear-piercings. “‘They can’t have thrown him out of the library for that,’ Elaine said.” (p.59). (To Scutter’s observation that novels featuring English teachers are practically a sub-genre, might be added a list of texts that assert none too
subtly the importance of librarians.) But when John goes on to describe Mario throwing other kids off the library’s TV monitor, where they are playing a computer game, it becomes clear that he is being punished for bullying. The narrative implies that exclusion from the library for a month is excessive, and that the school is forfeiting whatever chance there might be for the library to tame Mario’s behaviour. Appearing as it does in a book that is designed to appeal to young people, particularly boys, who have not learnt to love reading, the scene introduces a metafictional strand that becomes increasingly important in Rubinstein’s work and focuses on the counterproductive ways books are often handled by schools.

The question does remain of whether Mario’s changing his appearance may have in fact set off this chain of events. At every turn, the characters in Space Demons are confronted by the need to choose, and each choice has consequences. Can appearance determine behaviour? This is clearly a society that looks different on the surface – but has that changed its fundamental values? The game turns out to be about refusing to hate. To some extent those critics who regard Space Demons as didactic seem to be registering disappointment that, despite the appearance of newness in a contemporary world where families are changing their shape and computers may be displacing books, many of the concepts and emotions in play here are familiar – at this stage, anyway, in the history of cyberspace. The narrative does venture into the idea that a computer program may have an independent unpredictable intelligence, but it is revealed that the changes within Andrew himself are determining the changes in the program. These questions about the newness of the game and about unfamiliar appearances are related to the potential of the word to constitute reality, and they interrogate both the writing process and the act of reading.

For young readers, if not adults, at the time, the name Mario referred to the popular Nintendo arcade game, ‘Mario Bros’. So this character’s name indicates at once that the fantasy world has become the actual and it is language that creates the change in perception. At times the characters feel on the verge of an unfamiliar dimension that is the object of desire. Elaine, for example, sees
the warmly lit houses on the other side of the street as an escape from her father’s principle of acquiring as few possessions as possible.

She wished she could walk up to one of them and slip into the life inside it for a few hours, be one of a family, have tea made for her and watch television, cosy and nice.

(Space Demons, p.31)

To the young middle class reader implied here, her desires are almost pathetically simple, so the text challenges that reader not to take such privileges for granted.

When the digital gun from cyberspace materialises in Andrew’s hand, however, and like his friend Ben he is zapped physically into the game, the change in perception is both exciting and terrifying. To Andrew the game becomes more compellingly ‘real’ than the suburban reality of his existence outside it, and his mother’s decision to take him to a psychiatrist sets up one final thread that Rubinstein follows in subsequent novels: the need for therapy and the various forms it might take.

Andrew’s first impression is that Dr Freeman looks more like a TV actor than a real psychiatrist, which begs the question of how he would know, since he has never met a psychiatrist before. And although the text is on the verge of satirising Dr Freeman, with its emphasis on his calm voice and the arm he puts round Andrew’s shoulders, it doesn’t push any reservations. Andrew resists the question about his real feelings: ‘If I told you what I was feeling right now, you’d cart me off to the funny farm at once!’(p.152). And when pills are prescribed he decides not to take them, but generally he is co-operative and polite. Clearly the inference is that therapy can be useful.
It is a subject that Australians began to discuss more frankly in the 1980s. Harris (2006) explains that a major reason for this greater openness was the development of ACT, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, in 1983. This shifted the emphasis away from the diagnosis and elimination of unwanted thoughts and feelings towards acknowledgment and acceptance, followed by a commitment to goals that would make room for them and defuse their importance in the individual psyche. Rubinstein speaks openly about her own childhood, feeling torn apart by her parents’ divorce, abandoned by her mother, unsettled, alienated and lonely. And she refers to writing as a way of working through those feelings.

Each book I write…seems to deal with an aspect of my childhood and it clears it up.

(Foster 1991, p.123)

As well as anticipating the battle between free will and a determinist view of human life in her next novel, Beyond the Labyrinth, the name ‘Freeman’ confirms the generally positive construction of writing and reading as therapeutic, although the lightly ironic shading becomes far more intense as Rubinstein’s career progresses.

Rubinstein refers to the difficulty she had in finding the right narrative voice for this novel:

I had been writing it as a straightforward narrative in the past tense, omniscient author, and I could feel that there was something wrong with that way of writing it. Then I woke up with these short, rather detached sentences going through my head and I thought, Yes, that’s the way to do it. It forces the reader to be an observer of all that’s happening.

(Mappin 1989, p.19)

This is one of a number of occasions when Rubinstein emphasises the role of the unconscious in her writing, which is significant because it demonstrates the
investment she has in what she writes and therefore the possibility that if it is rejected forcefully enough by the reader it will be taken as a rejection of the self.

Because of the way I write I am often surprised afterwards at what I turn out to have said! I try to write out everything, straight from the unconscious, letting things crop up as they want to and trying to follow them to the limit. Then comes the painful process of sifting through, rejecting whole chunks, rewriting –

(Rubinstein 1987, p.15)

She says of *Beyond the Labyrinth*:

It is very personal and was very difficult to write. I wrote it almost entirely for myself, not thinking of the market, the publishers, the reviewers – barely even thinking of the readership. When I had finished it I found it very weird, and I fully expected everyone else to hate it.

(Rubinstein 1990, p.5)

As indicated briefly in chapter 1 of this thesis, the publishers who had been so supportive of *Space Demons* did hate it, and only one of the four readers’ reports in the Lu Rees Archives at the University of Canberra indicates any real enthusiasm or understanding of its distinctive features, such as the game of chance, the alternate endings and the controversial language, and it was eventually published by Hyland House.

*Beyond the Labyrinth* starts with the act of reading. Brenton Trethewan has allowed the popular role-playing books of the 1980s, such as ‘Dungeons and Dragons’, to overtake his life to the point where he will not make a decision or a move without first throwing the dice and letting them determine his choice. When ‘Dungeons and Dragons’ was launched in 1974, it was ‘a brand-new type of game without boards or set goals in which all the action took place in the

So here the commitment to the book and the freedom of the imagination are initially even greater than is implied by the theme of their absence in Space Demons. But it is the book being used in an almost perverse way. Although the concept of role-playing entails the freedom to change roles according to individual desires and needs, here Brenton appears to be allowing the book to dictate every move, as if it were a computer program. Will he buy Christmas presents for the family this year (p.53)? Will he smile at the visitor (p.14)? The choices can have larger implications or they can be quite trivial; Brenton makes each move on the roll of the dice.

Vicky comes to board with the Trethewans seemingly by chance, and yet it is implied that because they are old family friends, she has nowhere else to go. Her parents have decided to stay in Nigeria and continue their humanitarian work with the people there. She was originally Michael’s friend, but because, like Brenton, she is feeling somewhat isolated, her presence changes the dynamics of the family and shifts allegiances.

Brenton is preoccupied with the impending end of the world and his bedroom wall is covered with pictures of nuclear explosions. Rubinstein had intended to call the novel Dead End (Notes to the Editor, Rubinstein Papers, Lu Rees Archives, Series 7). Unlike his brother and sister, Michael and Shelley, who are off doing other things, Brenton often appears to be a loser, hanging round at home, with his books. To one young male reader implied here, he appears to be the antithesis of one of the most powerful stereotypes in Australian cultural mythology, since he rarely seems to be outdoors doing anything physical. But to an implied reader who is more bookish, Brenton’s life of the mind is a validation. The character is to be read both ways.

Possibly he has a brilliant and original mind, but no one has ever recognised it, partly because no one has ever been looking for it. Brenton himself does not recognise it. He pretends not to be clever, because he learnt at an early age
that to be clever was to stand out in some way that was not appreciated by either children or parents. But even when he tries to do the same things as other people he does them in a different way. He makes people uneasy.

(Beyond the Labyrinth, p.8)

So Brenton’s role-playing is both overt and conscious. He is making a comment on not just society, but life itself. However, his family don’t have as big a picture in mind. They see his erratic behaviour as personal or cultural: he uses the game of chance to absolve himself from having to make an active choice. To them he goes along with the group by default. But Brenton’s throwing of the dice is a comment on the arbitrariness of choice and its consequences: choice itself is a game of chance.

From the implied author’s point of view, the act of writing proceeds as a series of choices, each of them with consequences. Before a sentence is begun, there are many possible choices the writer in English can make for an opening word. As soon as one word is chosen, the range of choices for the next word in the sentence narrows and, due to the consensus structuring of English grammar, the sentence proceeds by means of a diminishing series of choices to its conclusion. Similarly, each new event in the plot or development of character is determined by the grammar of plot or character that precedes it. The act of reading, too, proceeds by the series of choices that are made in decoding the text.

Although Brenton shrugs and laughs at life by turning it into a game, the text argues that there are consequences. The individual’s choices may have a profound effect on others. That is what the concept of society entails. Two chance meetings on Vicky’s walk down to the beach shack, where she spent idyllic times in childhood, have major consequences. The second of these, her meeting with the alien Cal, drives the plot of the novel to its conclusion. As an anthropologist diverted from her original intention to study Indigenous Australians and into observing the strange non-Indigenous society she finds on Earth, Cal is a proxy figure for the conventional omniscient author. She stands outside the action and has the clear insight of the stranger. But eventually she is
drawn into the action against her will when she injures her foot, it becomes severely infected and the novel offers the reader two possible conclusions.

Cal needs to leave Earth, because it is poisoning her, both literally and metaphorically, and Brenton tells Vicky that he thinks he will go with her. He has never felt truly at home here.

There is a pause that seems to last for ever. The afternoon breeze from the sea suddenly awakes and sets tinkling the wind chimes that hang outside on the verandah. A blowfly buzzes erratically against the flyscreen, and then is quiet. The two children feel as though they are standing at an axis, a point of perfect balance between what is and what might be, the meeting point of two different worlds. Neither of them dares move or speak.

The one who speaks into this poised silence is Cal. 
‘Throw the dice!’ Her eyes are bright and feverish, her voice harsh and urgent. She is not speaking to Brenton or Victoria. She is speaking to you, the Reader. You who have been the observer so far. You who have been watching the whole story.  
Throw the dice!

(Beyond the Labyrinth, p.143)

As in Fowles’s 1969 novel, The French Lieutenant’s Woman, the reader is then offered alternative endings. Cal dies in both – as an alien stranded on Earth must – although the echoes from Spielberg’s 1982 movie of ET’s desire to ‘phone home’ and then be saved, which lurk in the background, are finally made explicit on page 163. Brenton says the ending could be ‘just like ET’. But the text demonstrates that literary allusions depend on shared knowledge for their meaning – otherwise to the reader without knowledge they are just empty words. Vicky immediately says to Brenton, ‘I’ve never seen ET.’ In one of the endings, Brenton lives. Due to the linear nature of narrative in a book, true alternative endings are physically difficult to produce, so the second ending is inevitably the ‘real’ ending, and this is the one that has him tossing his dice over the cliff and looking to a distant future.
It is, however, the chance meeting Vicky has before her encounter with Cal that had a profound effect on the Book of the Year awards and, it can be argued, on Rubinstein’s career as a children’s writer. On her way to the beach shack, Vicky takes a short cut across private property and is warned by the owner.

The speaker is a woman who could be any age between thirty-five and fifty. She is wearing a red swimsuit, with a tracksuit top of not quite the same red over her shoulders. She’s not tall, but she’s firm-muscled, and she looks tough and powerful. Her hair, eyes and skin are all the same colour, bleached brown like the shale of the cliff. She would be good-looking, but for a certain set of the mouth and a look in the eyes that suggest she is carrying rage and pain around with her like darkness.

(Beyond the Labyrinth, p.29)

There are cues in this description that prepare the reader for the woman’s rejection of Vicky’s attempts to soothe her and justify her own actions, and the fact that the woman talks to herself and uses a mild swear word diminishes her offensiveness.

‘You’d think they’d bloody well know better,’ she hisses.  
‘Letting a bloody kid wander around the place on her own.’

(p.29)

She rants about the dangers of blue-ring octopus and warns Vicky about razor shells that could cut her feet in two, and when Vicky laughs nervously, the woman’s restraint up to this point makes her outburst all the more shocking.

‘Don’t you fucking laugh at me, you fucking little turd!’

(p.30)

This verbal assault affects Vicky so badly that she feels a sense of loss.
Her face is burning, not from the sun, but from anger and humiliation. Something that used to belong to her and that she held precious has been destroyed. Childhood memories have been trampled on.

In a very real sense her memories are what constitute her childhood in this place now. And it has been destroyed by words. So in this confrontation between an adult and a child, the scene demonstrates succinctly both the fragile reality of ideas and emotions, and the constitutive power of words.

Later, Vicky and Brenton go into Rawlings’ general store and Michael is inside with his best mates, Danny and Craig. The swearing that breaks out here reminds Vicky how much she misses her brother Simon, who is much better than any of these boys. It makes her anxious about surviving this family; the other boys tease Brenton about Vicky being his girlfriend, they make fun of him as he tries on some diving gear. The swearing is a result of boys in groups, trying to play the role of men. It comes from fear.

‘Oh how gay!’
‘You really turn me on, Brenton!’
Brenton is trying on a diving mask. Its black oval eclipses his thin face. Ignoring the teasing he puts it back and tries on another.
‘It’s the monster from the fucking deep!’
‘It’s the poofter from the fucking deep!’

The doorbell rings. Looking up from her scrutiny of the shells Vicky sees Brenton disappear down the street.
‘Hey, Brenton!’ the boys yell after him. ‘You forgot your fucking girlfriend!’
‘She fucking scared him off!’
‘He wouldn’t know what to fucking do with her!’

(Beyond the Labyrinth, p.60)

Here the language of sex is used as a destructive weapon to accuse Brenton of a failure at adult sexuality, specifically macho sexuality. It’s about exerting
power over him, alienating him. By creating him as Other, as the child, the boys in the shop use what they perceive as adult language to attempt to define themselves as adults. Of course the sheer barrage of swear words used indicates their own childlike insecurity.

In both scenes, the text probes the choice of words used and exposes the emotions that have created the language and that in turn create a new – and in these cases – frightening reality. It therefore confirms the usefulness of psychology conveyed in *Space Demons* – here in its analytical if not therapeutic practice. The woman who screams abuse at Vicky is Pam. She lost her son Brett when he drowned a year ago, and she has since been terrified whenever she has seen young people in danger. So there are reasons for her behaviour, but she may not realise how far-reaching its consequences may be.

Repeatedly in Rubinstein’s fiction, while language does have the power to create beauty, laughter and understanding, more often it has the power to control or destroy. There is an almost karmic belief in the risk of passing on bad energy, through the fragile relationships that hold society together. In *Beyond the Labyrinth* adults have responsibilities to young people. They are role models, and their use of aggressive language licenses young people to use it too. Although Vicky herself does not swear, Pam seems to unleash this language on the world of the novel among Vicky’s peers, who use it in a group to bolster their vulnerable sense of their own masculinity.

Given the careful framing of the few passages that feature this language, the reaction to it by some members of the public was hurtful. The frequency of letters in the Queensland press and their recurrent phrasing point to a campaign – not against Rubinstein herself, but against the dereliction of duty by the CBC and what is assumed to be its liberal left-wing ideology. Letter writers called for stricter criteria in the judging of the awards and for the sacking of the CBC.

The accusation that *Beyond the Labyrinth* is full of bad language indicates that most of those who denounced the book had not read it. One writer to the editor of the *Advertiser*, the daily paper in Rubinstein’s home city, Adelaide, unwitt-
ingly concedes in her opening sentence that the source of her information is the newspaper rather than the novel itself.

Having just read the article on the front page regarding the offensive language in the book ‘beyond the labyrinth’ (it doesn’t deserve capital letters) I am hopping mad. If the role of the Children’s Book Council is not to ensure that our children get not only good reading matter, but clean, well-worded reading, then it is time for a change.

Teachers in the school system will continue to be battling the filthy language now so prevalent when it is being fed to children by the so-called book of the year.

Please, mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers and all adults, inundate the Children’s Book Council of Australia with your objections in an effort to stem this flow of obscenity.

(F Y Robinson, Letter to the Editor, Advertiser 18/9/89)

Another writer in the same edition of the paper makes no distinction between author and character, whereas the novel itself makes the distinction clear. Again, the phrase ‘referred to’ indicates that the response is not based on a first hand reading.

It is an example of the growing depravity of our times that an author of children’s books would use the disgusting language referred to.

The fact that the book was nominated as Children’s Book of the Year, again without compunction, shows gross irresponsibility in the Children’s Book Council.

(I Martin, Letter to the Editor, Advertiser 18/9/89)

Objections such as these might have been dismissed by the writer, had there not been so many of them across the country over several months. But when even journalists and reporters who commented on the book appeared not to have read it, her dismay and disappointment are understandable. Under the headline, ‘Author Defends Obscene Word Tag’, a journalist in the News writes:
A typical passage critics object to is: ‘Don’t you f-g laugh at me, you f-g little turd!’

(The News (SA) 23/8/89, p.25)

Given that the public controversy is based on four passages, each no more than a few lines long, the use of the word ‘typical’ is either based on hearsay or intended to mislead. The whole point is that in 170 pages such a sentence is exceptional rather than typical.

The adults who expressed outrage that a Book of the Year and its agents, the writer and the CBC, were setting such a bad example to young readers apparently missed altogether the novel’s theme of adult responsibility. Asked to defend the book on television, Rubinstein discussed the request with her agent and decided against appearing and it is difficult to interpret the tabloid strategy that ensued as anything but payback.

After it won its award, a reporter for a television current affairs program read excerpts from the novel to startled (and often horrified) members of the public in the main shopping street of Rubinstein’s hometown, Adelaide, and asked them whether they would allow their children to be submitted to such material. The answer in many cases was no, and the book, despite the award, was not taken by a number of school libraries.

(Foster 1991, p.125)

Among the letters of support Rubinstein received from fellow writers, on the other hand, one from Jenny Pausacker reads both the novel and its reception with characteristic insight.

I think it’s very ironic that none of your critics seem to have noticed that you yourself are criticising the way teenagers use swear words – however my own belief is that their fuss about the swear words is a displacement for a strong reaction to the basic theme of the book. Those who see childhood as a sheltered haven would undoubtedly dislike being shown that today’s kids feel the opposite of
secure – but they can’t write letters to the paper complaining about that, since the bombs are there and our generation hasn’t succeeded in changing that…Some people, at any rate, are thankful for your ability to set that down in a complex and moving story, even if others become defensive about it.

(Letter to GR 8/9/89, Rubinstein Papers, Lu Rees Archives, series 7)

A subsequent letter from Nadia Wheatley highlights the alarmingly broad sweep of children’s books that are subject to censorship. She points out that the censoring of Louise Fitzhugh’s award-winning classic Harriet the Spy in 1965, was due not to:

swear words or sex, but a presentation of somewhat non-perfect parents. I feel that deep-down, it might be the parents in BTL who worry the moralists, rather than the swearing and dice-throwing. I mean that some adults do seem to feel threatened by portrayals of the fallibility of other adults.

(Letter dated 5/2/90, Rubinstein Papers, Lu Rees Archives, series 7)

Rubinstein replies to Pausacker

I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised at the hypocrisy of society since it’s one of the things I often write about but even I am a bit boggled by the wilful misunderstanding of the themes of the book…I’m trying to stay aloof from all the controversy, but I’m surprised at how vulnerable I feel. Of course, being a writer, at the same time I’m finding it all very interesting!

(Letter to JP 14/9/89, Rubinstein Papers, Lu Rees Archives, series 7)

The characteristic honesty and refusal to take herself too seriously, however, do little to hide the vulnerability, which had been made acute by renewed publicity surrounding a case in the Adelaide Magistrates’ Court. A 21-year-old charged
for using offensive language to police officers was not convicted, it was reported,

‘…because of a recent newspaper article about a Children’s Book Council of Australia Book of the Year winner, in which similar language was used.’

(quoted in Kroll 1996, p.337)

Once again, newspaper accounts rather than the novel itself are cited as evidence, and Kroll points out that one of the offensive words the defendant was alleged to have used does not appear in Beyond the Labyrinth at all.

The Melbourne Age reported the magistrate as saying that

if that was the quality of literature children in the community were encouraged to read, then he found himself hard pressed to punish young people for it.

(The Age 13/9/89, p.22)

One 11-year-old reader identified only as ‘Sara’ reports to Rubinstein that she had to seek permission to read the novel in her school library. It is interesting to speculate on the credentials that might have persuaded a librarian to grant or deny permission. And as a way of managing a controversial book, such rating seems only marginally better than the refusal to buy it referred to by Foster. Rubinstein writes back to Sara:

I’m glad you liked BEYOND THE Labyrinth so much… I thought it was such a weird book I never expected anyone else to like it. I still can’t believe it won the Book of the Year award! I’ve got into a bit of trouble about the swearing – you may have read about it in the papers. I’m sorry you weren’t allowed to read it without permission. I never thought all these things would happen – I was trying to show the way people really talk.

(Letter to Sara 30/8/89 Rubinstein Papers, Lu Rees Archives, series 5, item 1)
Allowing for the fact that she is writing to a child, the slightly naïve tone of this last remark lends weight to the note of disbelief in Foster’s claim that the censorship ‘cannot have come as a total surprise to the author’ (Foster 1991, p.126). But that is exactly what seems to have taken Rubinstein by surprise. For such a traditional liberal thinker, censorship was an affront to her belief in the free exchange of ideas and free speech.

Despite the public interrogation of its judging criteria, the Children’s Book Council appears throughout to be very little affected by this controversy. Margot Tyrell adds an advisory note to her review in *Reading Time*:

There is some language in this novel which some readers might find disturbing, but Rubinstein never uses ‘bad language’ gratuitously. Where it is included, it is done deliberately, as part of the establishing of a particular character. The characters are well drawn and convincing. This is a finely structured, well written and deeply absorbing novel.

(*Reading Time*, vol.33, no.2, 1989, p.29)

The often acerbic reviewer Jo Goodman – at various times a member of the CBC national and Victorian branch executives – does not even mention bad language in her review in *Magpies*. Both responses are typical. And the National President Jenni Connor simply points out the public’s erroneous identification of children’s books with the youngest of readers and restates the CBC’s belief in ‘literary merit’.

The role of the council is to identify literary merit, not to censor words. The important consideration was the author did not condone nor morally approve of the language. She said the book was intended for the 14-and-over group, not younger readers for whom it would be inappropriate.

(*The News* 23/8/89, p.25)
Where ‘bad language’, sexual frankness and even violence can be justified on artistic grounds, the CBC has repeatedly proved itself ready for a fight. Its willingness to appear unpopular is, after all, its customary stance. The CBC had reluctantly begun to publish the advisory referred to earlier in the discussion of *The Dark Bright Water* (chapter 6): ‘Some of these books are for mature readers.’ And, with far less artistic justification than Rubinstein could claim, the use of language in Donna Sharp’s novel determined the way some adult readers responded to *Beyond the Labyrinth*. There was clearly a trend here to undermine social values, and it was being sponsored by the Children’s Book Council.

Given that Australia had already had this conversation with the new wave of Australian playwrights and short story writers for adults in the early 70s, its belated reappearance attached to children’s books seemed odd. Why now in the late 1980s? Some of the calls for censorship came from a new vocal minority in fundamentalist schools, who were learning to use talkback radio and letter writing campaigns referred to earlier to air their views. Other calls came from a growing sense among some adults that they were not equipped to exercise parental authority over the new media. Rubinstein’s references to ‘Mario Bros’ and then ‘Dungeons and Dragons’ reflected their fear. In a sense this fear was displaced from the drug trade – another battle that parents and teachers felt they had lost. If they could not control cyberspace or addictive mind games, they could at least control books. Books were old technology, which they understood. Books were hard copy that could be shredded, removed from sale or from library shelves, or burned. An unidentified library aide in a Catholic school library asks a supervisor her view of *Beyond the Labyrinth*:

‘Haven’t you read it?’ she said aghast. ‘It’s full of dirty language…we had to burn it.’

(Letter to GR 5/7/92, Rubinstein Papers, Lu Rees Archives, General Letters 1993-95)

The supervisor’s motives in reporting such a response back to Rubinstein are unclear. Perhaps the most powerful factor, however, in this late wave of censorship was the rise of book clubs, which began increasingly to assume an
editorial, rather than simply a purchasing, role in their control over the titles that were offered directly for sale to schools.

Towards the end of her Book of the Year acceptance speech, Rubinstein deals indirectly, but unmistakably, with the public response to her award, when she warns that being censored by others is not the greatest danger faced by writers.

We run the risk of censoring ourselves, of writing what we know will not upset any publishers’ readers, or children’s librarians, along the way. We feel the need to tread warily to get past these guardians, for it is they in most cases who dictate what books will reach young people, not the young people themselves.

The danger is that we will cut ourselves down to the average and the bland, confining ourselves to writing the nice books that will not upset anyone.

... In our books we must face with our kids the issues that are so desperately important to them, and to us all, and we must write about them in ways that make them accessible, using colloquial language if necessary, in fact using all the resources of realism, so that our readers gasp with recognition and know they hold a mirror of their own lives.

(Reading Time, vol.34, no.2, 1990, p.6)

Like other writers of her generation, including Marsden, Crew, Clark and Parry, Rubinstein misses the real target when she cites librarians here. Making a book available for those who want to borrow it is quite different from requiring everybody to read it as a set text. So it was in fact classroom teachers who became more cautious about potentially offensive children’s books in the 80s. Her references to the conservatism of librarians here, in Space Demons and in Foxspell fall back on old stereotypes, although her 2001 picture book, Prue Theroux, the Cool Librarian is a lighthearted attempt to make amends.

Kidd (2009) offers an insightful perspective on censorship, which he argues complements the giving of literary awards, since both attempt to define ‘Literature’ and construct the authority of the arbiter. The CBC’s role in the controversy over the 1989 Book of the Year is, therefore, complex, since the
organisation is expected to defend its award and a writer in whom it has made a considerable investment, and yet the public outcry is, as English (2005) contends, exactly the kind of endorsement of authority that literary awards thrive on.

The loser in this battle is Rubinstein. Her insistence on a commitment to unflinching realism in fiction aligns her somewhat unexpectedly with Marsden and yet she seems in the long run to have been less well suited to a combative role than he was in the ongoing public discourse about censorship. Despite the fact that she accepted many invitations to speak against the censorship of children’s books in the years following the controversy over her award, she herself observes ‘it’s interesting that I haven’t used the word *fuck* again since *Beyond the Labyrinth.*’ (Kroll 1996, p.341). But more telling evidence of the effect that it had on her personally can be inferred from the themes of subsequent novels and the course taken by her career as a writer for young people.

The playful author photograph on the dustjacket of *At Ardilla* has Rubinstein with her back to the viewer. Taken by broadcaster, writer and organiser of the Australia Council-funded Women Writers’ Trains, Kate Veitch, it is a clever metaphor of withdrawal, with the writer, mesmerised by the track and the countryside passing on the other side of the window, and either unaware of or indifferent to anyone watching her.

In frank autobiographical commentary, Rubinstein writes about the shame she felt over her parents’ separation and divorce when she was in primary school, and the stammer that resulted.

I don’t know whether the stammer caused my subsequent extreme shyness or if it was the other way round...Nothing I said was spontaneous. Every sentence was a fearful struggle, and a compromise between what I wanted to say and what I could actually articulate.

(Rubinstein 2000, p.155)
Referring to this affliction in an earlier article as a ‘stutter’, she says that reading to her children every night when they were small released her voice once again.

An unexpected consequence of all this reading aloud was that since the children didn’t seem to mind if their mother stuttered, or took half a minute to finish a sentence, gradually the stutter faded away, returning only when I’m tired or upset.

(Rubinstein 1996, p.29)

For a writer as aware as Rubinstein is of the value of therapy and the therapeutic value of reading, these comments alone help to decode the response to *Beyond the Labyrinth* as a threat to her freedom of speech.

But the theme of her next novel for young adults, *Galax-Arena*, which she says is her favourite (Rubinstein 2000, p.161), is unmistakably significant in that context. When the narrator, Joella, senses that her brother Peter is being abducted by the good-looking man Hythe, she lowers her instinctive defences and allows herself to be tricked into going along with him. Language here is the agent of seduction. Hythe uses a fake American accent and sings Bernstein’s ‘Maria’ from ‘West Side Story’, but substitutes her name for Maria in the lyrics.

Just because that dreamy looking guy sang a corny song with my name in it, I started to grin like an idiot and for a couple of moments I felt as happy as I’d ever felt in my life.

(*Galax-Arena*, p.10)
The children are to be transported to another dimension by spacecraft. When Joella tries to resist, Hythe raises his arm to hit her and it is the constitutive power of language that is threatened.

From the silvery bandage that covered his hand came a sickening buzzing that penetrated right into my brain. It hit the place where language begins, so words became scrambled and thought impossible. The person that was me, that made me Joella, began to dissolve.

*(Galax-Arena, p.23)*

Hythe is a cyborg figure and the buzzing in that hand will be the eventual key to their escape, but at this stage Joella and Peter are totally within his control. Along with a group of other captive children, they are being held to perform almost like circus animals in outer space in the Galax-Arena for the all-powerful extra-terrestrials, the Vexa.

The children must learn to speak the language called *patwa* that is spoken by the performers here who are known as the *peb*. It is a rudimentary kriol that infantilises the children and brutalises them. When one of the boys teases the youngest girl, Liane, she spits at him, and when he goes to hit her, her toy puppet Bro Rabbit speaks for her and tells the boy he is going to die.

‘Take that back,’ Ashmaq said quietly. ‘Unsay it. Quick!’
Bro Rabbit’s ears waggled. ‘Cyan be unsaid,’ he growled.
‘Ah has spoken. An Ah spiks ony de trus.’

*(Galax-Arena, p.42)*

The echoes in *patwa* of Caribbean dialect invite a reading of the text as an exploration of colonialism, following on from the mirrors-and-beads imagery around the alien Cal in *Beyond the Labyrinth*. But as Bro Rabbit becomes an increasingly sinister presence and children are killed, the other echoes of Uncle Remus make it clear that *Galax-Arena* is mocking the safe and affectionate folksiness, which nostalgic adults often associate with children and their stories.
There are many images of the storyteller in this novel. Hythe is one, who deceives children with his fake language, his lies. Bro Rabbit is another. He is the puppet, mouthpiece for a wicked child. ‘He never tell good tings, ony de bad wans.’ (p.73). Bro Rabbit foretells disaster until it takes place, after which the child denies that he has ever spoken (p.92). All the other peb, who are being trained as gymnasts, are also being trained to communicate with their bodies, to make do with only rudimentary words, which parody both the infantilised kriol imposed on colonised indigenes and the language of children, constructed as ‘cute’ by adults. Then there is Joella herself. Aware that she is not agile enough to become a performer, she is the storyteller as mouthpiece for the unconscious, who can intuit entirely without words, although her ability to communicate what she sees is limited without them.

The grand deception into which the children have been drawn is exposed when Joella sees a common blow fly in the spacecraft (p.97) and realises that they are not travelling through space at all; they have never left earth. They have been imprisoned, as if by wanton boys. The Vexa are merely:

old, rich people who wanted to live forever. They had joined a secret project called Genesis Five, which was researching immortality. Enormous amounts of money had been given to the project – enough to kidnap who knew how many peb, enough to build dozens of fake spaceships and Galax-Arenas.

*(Galax-Arena, p.101)*

There is an oblique reference here to the popular 1985 film ‘Cocoon’ directed by former ‘Happy Days’ teen star, Ron Howard, in which a group of Florida retirees exploit the eternally youthful energy of visiting extra-terrestrial adult beings. But *Galax-Arena* takes this theme a step further by making the Other children.

Consequently, however persuasive the reading of *Galax-Arena* favoured by most critics as a text about slavery may be, a more chilling reading is a meta-
A fictional one that focuses on the storyteller as deceiver and the adult as exploiter of the powerlessness of children. And in the context of Rubinstein’s alleged imposing of ‘adult’ language on children and the destruction of their innocence in Beyond the Labyrinth, therefore, the retreat from language altogether in Foxspell is a logical extension of the metafictional reading of Galax-Arena.

The main character in Foxspell, 12-year-old Tod, his older sisters Charm and Dallas move interstate to live with Grandma when their father abandons them and returns to England. Their mother Leonie comes with them. The opening exchange between Tod and his grandmother on the subject of swearing is a playful nod to Beyond the Labyrinth.

‘And don’t swear out here. I don’t want the neighbours thinking I’ve got a pack of low lifes staying with me from Sydney.’
‘I’ve heard you swear,’ he retorted.
‘I’m allowed to! I’m an adult. I’ve earned my right to swear when I want to. You’re just a kid. So no swearing out here, okay?’
She grinned at him, making him unsure.

(Foxspell, pp.6-7)

Although Grandma makes explicit the view that swearing is an indicator of maturity, her enigmatic smile may be an indulgent signal that she accepts his growing up – or it may be a conspiratorial acknowledgment that in some ways she is a child at heart. When Tod hears her say that ‘bloody men’ are ‘Too much bloody trouble’ on the following page, he ignores it – thereby adopting exactly the strategy that many parents use when their children utter their first swear words – hoping that if they don’t make a big deal about the swearing, it will go away. Here, as the child behaves like an adult, the text deftly reverses their roles.

Tod’s sisters are readers: Charm only reads magazines, but Dallas loves books and studying. Tod, on the other hand, is a reluctant reader.
‘It’s not that I can’t read,’ Tod said. ‘I can read the letters all right. I just don’t see the point of all those words. And I’d rather be outside doing things, you know?’

‘Yeah, I know,’ Dallas came and sat down next to him, ‘but you need to be able to read well to study, and you need to study to get anywhere. That’s what I think.’ She looked round the kitchen and a savage look came over her usually gentle face. ‘I’m never going to end up like this,’ she said quietly. ‘I will never, ever go back to my mother with three children. I’m going to be rich if it kills me.’

(Foxspell, p.11)

Here Tod expresses the cliché macho priorities that have often been used to stereotype Australian culture: real men should be outdoors playing sport or doing physical work; not indoors reading. Dallas puts a different adult point of view, that studying is the way to get ahead. But the text immediately interrogates that view by suggesting that wealth can help the individual overcome limited education.

In positioning Tod as a reluctant reader and validating him, the text invites the implied reader to assume that subject position. However, the kind of reader constructed here is unlikely to read such a book as Foxspell. So the text invites the confident literary reader to imagine the loss of the confidence required to read literary language such as this – and ultimately, as Tod enters his animal self later in the novel, the loss of that language altogether.

When Tod sees the dead fox strung up on a fence in the quarry, he understands immediately that the real violence and obscenity here is not the shooting of the fox, but the degradation done to its spirit.

It was stringing it up on the fence like that that outraged him. I’m sorry, he said to the fox’s spirit, wherever it was. I’m sorry they did that to you.

(Foxspell, p.21)
The site of this understanding is separate from the school but nearby, and in highlighting the Otherness of place, the text contrasts two ways of learning. As his art folder demonstrates, Tod communicates visually; his learning does not depend on words. It is intuitive. This parallels the romantic image Rubinstein has conveyed of herself in interviews such as the one on finding the right voice for Beyond the Labyrinth – as a writer subject to the power of her unconscious, which can suddenly take over and create a vision of the impression that she must try to approach through her use of words.

When Tod confronts a fox in the bush for the first time all they exchange is a look:

He felt as if something wild leaped from the animal’s eyes and planted itself deep inside him. It was the most exciting moment of his life.

(Foxspell, p.35)

Here, without words or thought, is direct communication and understanding. Tod is a boy for whom reading has brought nothing but frustration and low self-esteem, and who regards a single look exchanged with an animal as ‘the most exciting moment of his life’. The paradox of a wordsmith, such as the implied author, imagining the absence of words as a high and perhaps for her unattainable goal, is reminiscent of the poet Randolph Stow’s Taoist view that silence is the ultimate goal of language and that his writing ‘tries to counterfeit the communication of those who communicate by silence’ (Craig A (ed.), 1971, p.175).

When Tod asks Adrian to go to the library with him (p.36) to find out who brought foxes to Australia, Adrian says, ‘What do you want books for?…You never read anything.’ Here the text interrogates the irrelevance of much reading that is given to young people. Tod really wants to learn something, he at last finds a practical use for books that he cares about – rather than those that other people care about on his behalf – and he gets no encouragement. His response
echoes Gary Crew’s comment, referred to earlier, that the irrelevance of most of the books available to him when he was a child was the main factor that inspired him to become a writer himself.

Neither the basic information books nor the anthropomorphic fables that Tod’s friends bring him are useful.

_Fox at School, Fantastic Mr Fox, The Tale of Mr Tod._

‘It’s a book about Tod,’ Adrian yelped, making Ms Livetti turn around and frown at them. ‘It’s his story. He’s made it into print already! The tale of Mr Tod!’

Tod opened the little book. The fox was wearing clothes. ‘These are just stories,’ he said disappointed. ‘These aren’t about real foxes.’ He looked at _Fox at School_. ‘Foxes don’t do this sort of thing,’ he said. The books made him angry. They had nothing to do with the dead fox with a bullet through its skull, nothing to do with the wild feeling that had jumped into him from the live fox’s eyes.

_(Foxspell, p.37)_

The books that disgust Tod are all children’s classics, and his anger is ironically for the reader self-referential, since this book _Foxspell_ is now itself a contemporary Australian classic. It is significant that the two criteria Tod invokes for rejecting them are different. This is not just a plea from the implied author for books conventionally thought to be more appropriate to boys, marked by confronting realism. The absence of any ‘wild feeling’ also highlights a more metaphysical kind of book that might be more relevant to boys like Tod than what is available – in effect the kind of book that the present narrative is about to become.

Out in the quarry again, Tod sees a scat and a paw print, he tastes the water in a pool and instantly imagines what it is like to be a fox: it is a vision of life with the human world removed. Like the later vision of communication with human language removed, the text imagines what life would be like without all the aspects that cause Tod pain and separation.
When one of his friends finds a book that tells him how to summon a fox by imitating the cry of a wounded rabbit, Tod tries it out and a fox appears immediately. So books are seen to have a practical and specific use for readers like Tod. By implication, the reason they are not confident or committed readers is that no one has bothered to find out what kinds of books might be useful to such people.

Tod’s life outside the quarry becomes steadily less real and he begins to assume his animal identity, signalled by his name, which is Scots, from the Early Middle English ‘tod’, meaning ‘a fox’. When Grandma’s hens are killed by a fox and hunters prowl through the bush armed with guns, Dan Russell the fox appears to Tod and tells him that because of the kindness he showed to the spirit of the fox strung up on the fence, he will always be protected from the hunters. The spirit world will repay him.

He seemed to receive images from Dan Russell, both from external signals like the way his ears moved or the way he held his head, and from some shared channel of communication that they were both tuned into. Tod himself was thinking without words, in instant pictures that leaped into his mind in response to the world around him. His senses were sharp and alert to everything. They were far more acute than when he had been a human.

(Foxspell, p.118)

Tod’s affinity with Dan Russell has eliminated the need for words altogether. As an image of desire, the absence of words referred to here seems to be not just an intellectual hypothesis for the implied and actual author, but to be connected with her statements about the painfulness of writing and its role as therapy – that through it she is writing partly from her own childhood and that entails painful memories. So the painful controversy over the Book of the Year award to Beyond the Labyrinth coincides with the pain involved in revisiting some of the personal sources of her fiction and produces the hypothesis that silence is the only solution.
As she did in *Galax-Arena* and in her *Jake and Pete* chapter books, Rubinstein invents a distinctive language for those characters who represent Otherness. In *Foxspell*, Dan Russell’s *kriol* begins as an attempt to morph English words into the sounds of a fox howling – ‘*Yarp*, at last we meet *here ere ere!*’ (p.115). But towards the end of the novel, as he shares with Tod the pain involved in his descendants coming here to Australia specifically to be hunted and shot, the invented dialect becomes more of a stammer, a painful attempt to get the words out. So the act of uttering language itself is physically painful and teeters on the edge of impossibility.

‘My children call out to me from this strange land. *We have no lan an and. We are lo o ost. Our feet bur ur urn. We cannot touch the ur ur earth. So I come yarp yarp. Teach them to live here in this new land, look after them.*’

(*Foxspell*, p.121)

Although Tod at first refuses to join the gang of bullies who paint graffiti outside the railway tunnel, he is curious about the way it looks and asks Shaun whether it’s any good. But Shaun doesn’t accept his terminology.

‘It’s there,’ Shaun added. ‘That’s the main thing. I don’t care if it’s good or not. What the hell does “good” mean anyway? No one’s going to give me any awards for it. No one’s going to hang it in an art gallery. It’s not going to get me an A for Art. But it’s there. It says “I exist”.’

(*Foxspell*, p.146)

The word ‘awards’ almost vibrates here, and makes a subtext that is personal to the actual author unavoidable, given the rapid acquisition of the description ‘award-winning’ so early in her career. And it is doubly ironic since *Foxspell* went on to win Rubinstein’s second Book of the Year for Older Readers in 1995.
Just before the conclusion of the novel, Tod feels himself being drawn back to the human world and he is left poised between the two. When Dan Russell brings the body of the pet cat Inkspot to his home as a sign that the natural world will exact retribution from humans, however, Tod feels his fox-self returning.

the feeling grew stronger and stronger and the need for language began to fade…
Dan Russell looked pleased with himself.
*Cat. Dead. Good.*
With a swing of his brush Tod agreed.

*Hunting?*
*Hunting.*
*Hungry.* Tod signalled. Words had disappeared all together.

(*Foxspell, p.163*)

Tod goes on one more killing spree with Dan Russell, but he knows that this is his last; he must remain in the human world. The lack of closure in the final chapter, however, headed ‘Ending’, teases the reader with other possibilities.

Although in the three-page general preamble to the 1995 judges’ report, comment is made on the ‘push towards the adult range of reading’ and the ‘bleak themes’ in the Older Readers category, when it comes to *Foxspell* specifically, the judges appear to restrict their commentary with some caution to elaborating on the plot and praising the author for her ‘ability to slip so seamlessly from reality to fantasy’ (*Reading Time* vol.39, no.3, 1995, pp.7-8). Their restraint here is in contrast to the language advisory that accompanied the report on *Beyond the Labyrinth* (*Reading Time* vol.33, no.3, 1989, p.7).

*Foxspell* is followed by a series of picture books, chapter books, minor novels for older readers, and a moderately successful sequel to *Galax-Arena*. (A further sequel mentioned by the author several times has, perhaps fortunately, never appeared.) And then from 2002, under the name Lian Hearn, Rubinstein has reinvented herself to great international acclaim as a writer for adults.
When the first Hearn novel, *Across the Nightingale Floor*, appeared in 2002, all publicity was to be done by point-of-sale material, with none of the personal appearances by the author that are standard in the marketing of children’s books. Commenting on the brief speculation about the identity of ‘Lian Hearn’, publisher Lisa Highton said:

> I think there is a strong tendency among the spectators or the readers of culture to pigeonhole people, and that’s the thing that artists hate having done to them…We’re respecting the author’s and agent’s wishes. It’s an open secret, but it doesn’t make any difference to us because it’s still an authorless book.

(Wyndham 2002, p.6)

Although in conversation with the present writer, Rubinstein explained that she had decided to do no personal publicity as Lian Hearn because she had always hated her voice, the opportunity to leave behind the constant pressure and the responsibilities associated with being an award-winning writer for children was clearly irresistible. The testing of the truthfulness and efficacy of language in texts written by adults about and for children seems inevitably in retrospect to have led to the repudiation of words, of awards and to the ‘authorless book’.

Looking back on her initiation as a Book of the Year winner, Rubinstein says:

> I found the publicity painful and embarrassing. It showed me all too clearly that there were boundaries in children’s literature and I had crossed them. I have never written again with the same freedom and unself-consciousness.

(Rubinstein 2000, p.159)

By 2008 the CBC and its awards are being challenged, not by a few scattered voices, but a well co-ordinated campaign – this time against its Picture Book of the Year, Matt Ottley’s *Requiem for a Beast*. The response to what Fremantle Children’s Literature Centre director Lesley Reece predicts will be ‘one of the
great books of this century’ focuses on its offensive language and racially motivated violence. Under the heading ‘Book Bungle’, Melbourne’s Herald-Sun is relatively restrained in asserting that:

Whatever the work’s merits, the council, a not-for-profit organisation run by volunteers and donor-funded, needs to revise the criteria by which it decides a book is suitable for children.

(Herald-Sun, 18 August, 2008, p.18)

But lecturer in journalism at Queensland University of Technology and commentator on children’s issues for Brisbane’s Courier-Mail, Susan Hetherington quotes the offending words out of context:

Since when did we reward picture books for phrases such as – “if you do it again ya little black arsehole, you’re goin’ to be in the f*#^#n’ river” or “Jesus Christ he even pissed himself. You f*%$#n’ dirty little animal.”

News organisations could not print in full the words that are contained in Matt Ottley’s Requiem for a Beast, but the Children’s Book Council didn’t see that as an impediment to honouring it with the coveted award. This is a mindblowingly arrogant decision which surely flies in the face of community standards when it comes to appropriate reading material for children…

Unfortunately the Children’s Book Council has a long history of bestowing gold-plated endorsements on books that can at best be described as “important” and “worthy” but rarely “popular” or “engaging to children”. Time and again its winning books are dark and confronting.

(Courier-Mail, 22 August 2008, p.33)

Letter writer ‘Peter Keogh, Bokarina’ complains to the Courier-Mail four days after Hetherington’s article appears and his letter is published with minor, but significant, changes the day after that in the regional Sunshine Coast Daily.

The Children’s Book Council has just given approval and praise to a disgusting book for children that is full of
obscene, filthy language that should not be heard or read, especially by children. There needs to be some kind of censorship organisation that has the ability to examine and vet this rubbish from children’s literature.

Peter Keogh, Bokarina.

(Courier-Mail, 26 August 2008, p.22)

The Children’s Book Council has just approved a book for children that is full of obscene filthy language that should not be heard or read, especially by children. That organisation should be disbanded if that is the standard they set.

Peter Keogh, Bokarina.

(Sunshine Coast Daily, 27 August 2008, p.19)

Documenting the controversy, the Lu Rees Archives at the University of Canberra has collected 40 clippings of similar letters to the editor from regional and suburban newspapers, most of them in Queensland. Clearly, the censorship lobby has become better organised. It uses the same strategy that was used against Rubinstein, taking quotes out of context, ignoring the question of whether the implied author endorses the opinions of his characters, misrepresenting a few instances of bad language as the general discourse of the text, and collapsing the wide age range covered by the awards to imply that the book is intended for readers of the Early Childhood category.

Ottley appears to be as ill-equipped for this kind of public assault as Rubinstein was. Somewhat naively, he counters the complaints with phrasing that constructs his position as that of a child:

People just simply assume if it’s called anything like a picture book it’s got to be suitable for young children. Then they see words like f--- or images of violence, then everyone seems to chuck a spat.

(Salip 2008, p.3)
One *Courier-Mail* correspondent reports that *Requiem for a Beast* is on sale in the 8 to 12-year-old section of Borders’ chain store (*Courier-Mail* 22 August 2008, p.11) and Neill (2008, p.14) points out that this misshelving is what has started the trouble. Perhaps understandably, Ottley’s defence is based on the practices of independent children’s booksellers, who actually read the books and try to match them to their customers’ ages and needs. These booksellers control his market, they invite him and other writers and illustrators to appear in their shops and to speak at schools and gatherings of teachers who know what to expect.

The majority of children’s books, however, are purchased in discount department stores that offer no advice or ‘hand-selling’ – and it is here that some of the letter-writers may be justified in claiming that they were given a nasty surprise. *Requiem for a Beast* is published in standard picture book format, its author is known for his books about a lovable dog called Faust, and the text is so wordy that it is unlikely to be read before the customer gets it home. Furthermore, one astute journalist points out that the CBC logo is misleading:

> The award stickers that now adorn the book’s cover have only added to the confusion, as they feature a stylised image of a young child reading.

(Neill 2008, p.14)

For Ottley to argue that the book’s challenges are obvious only reveals that he has had little supportive advice from his publishers or the CBC about the day-to-day working of the book trade. That said, there remains the issue of whether confronting subject matter and language in books for young adults are outside the CBC’s brief.

Like *Beyond the Labyrinth*, *Requiem for a Beast* depends on the education market for its sales and, given that racially motivated violence is reported daily in Australia – often both directed at and perpetrated by young people themselves – perhaps the CBC should do more, rather than less, to ensure that
the serious literary treatment of racism and aggressive male behaviour is discussed in the classroom.

The hate mail started rolling onto Matt Ottley’s website one hour after his newly awarded book, *Requiem for a Beast*, was pilloried on primetime television.

(Neill 2008, p.14)

For a rather softly spoken writer such as Ottley or Rubinstein, who necessarily spends much of the day working in solitude, the raucous contest that literary awards thrive on is an ordeal. The unruffled response of the CBC’s national president, Bronwen Bennett, however, tells a different story. She says simply that Ottley’s book ‘has been recognised for its artistic excellence and the brilliance of the story, and we are an awards for literary merit’ (Field 2008). The CBC, therefore, emerges from this renewed controversy over its awards apparently unscathed, reaffirming its commitment to literary excellence and its opposition to censorship. But, as the study of Rubinstein’s experience demonstrates, that may end up being at some personal cost to the writer.
CHAPTER 9  GARY CREW, INTELLECTUAL VALIDATION

CASE STUDY: *STRANGE OBJECTS*

To a greater degree than other literary genres, perhaps, the novel requires that the writer lead almost a double life and be in the world, but not of the world. Time spent out in the community provides the subject matter for fiction, but then the writing process requires that long stretches of time be spent at the keyboard in solitude. In the period covered by these case studies, the demand on writers to be public figures meant that they spent increasing stretches of time away from the activity that created the demand for their personal appearances in the first place.

Furthermore, a life spent so often in solitude, reading and writing, is unlikely to prepare the writer to be an effective public speaker. Out of the six writers studied here, only two had extensive experience in public speaking before they received their awards, and that was as school teachers. And neither of those teacher-writers – John Marsden and Gary Crew – at first demonstrated an easy public speaking style. (Melina Marchetta’s teaching experience followed the award.) It hardly needs to be said that addressing a class or even an assembly hall full of young students is quite different from having to address a theatre full of teachers and librarians, having to speak on national radio or face television cameras – despite the contentious proverbial wisdom that children are the most demanding audience. But the winning of a Book of the Year award in the period under discussion leaves the writer little choice.

Stephens’s disparaging reference to the ‘celebratory practices’ of the CBC, quoted in chapter 2, reveals more than his lack of interest in a way of responding to the literary text that privileges authorship; it suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of both the history of the CBC and the marketplace. This, in turn, makes Nodelman’s locating of Stephens’s work in the tradition of Gramsci, Althusser and Williams to some extent questionable (Nodelman 1997, p.9).
It is interesting to consider the origin of these celebratory practices that have caused some divergence between the aims and practices of the Children’s Book Council and organisations such as ACLAR, the Australasian Children’s Literature Association for Research. In 1945 there were no university courses in children’s literature, and when they did emerge it was in departments of librarianship and teaching, rather than literature. Given the relegation of librarianship and primary education referred to in chapter 4 of this thesis, a working relationship between teacher-librarians and the writers and illustrators of children’s books offered mutual support. Access to writers and illustrators gave the CBC an advantage as personal appearances became an important part of publicity and bookselling and as the writing process began to dominate literature and language studies in the classroom. The celebration of the author was therefore historically inevitable and indeed facilitated the later pursuit of academic research in children’s literature.

Rubinstein’s insistence that personal appearances play no part in her reinvented career as Lian Hearn was only possible because the international rights and movie deals on the Otori series supplied a hefty marketing budget. Across the Nightingale Floor was funded to be an international blockbuster well before publication. Given the size of the market and the head office locations of multinational publishing, that is a rare experience for an Australian writer, and one that none of the other writers here has enjoyed. So the festival and lecture circuit is an important source of income for them and the CBC’s involvement with personal appearances inevitable.

Although Marsden comes closest to Rubinstein’s late commercial success, sales of his books still depend on personal appearances, not simply due to changes in publishing and bookselling, but because during the period under discussion – with the development of electronic media and what was eventually termed ‘multiliteracies’ in the school curriculum (Cope & Kalantzis 2000) – the author has become an indispensable text for study, alongside the literary work and its various contexts. Given the dependence on the education market referred to in
chapters 2 and 3, if Gary Crew had not appeared when he did, the CBC might have been forced to invent him.

In their report on Crew’s *Strange Objects*, Book of the Year in 1991, the judges say it is an outstanding novel that ‘breaks new ground and introduces young readers to a different kind of writing…a challenging, demanding and highly entertaining book for mature readers, and one which will repay repeated re-reading.’ (*Reading Time*, vol.5, no.3, 1991, pp. 6-7).

Although two novels had preceded *Strange Objects*, they attracted little notice and this third novel was so unlike any previous Book of the Year that Crew seemed to have sprung from nowhere – achieving success, like Marsden, with what appeared to be a virtuoso first novel. A confident if not always lovable performer, who was generous with his time and, again like Marsden, often controversial, Crew came to dominate public discourse around literature for older readers and the CBC in the 1990s.

Whereas Rubinstein had won Book of the Year and Honour Book for two titles in the same category in 1989, in 1994 Crew became the first writer to win Book of the Year in two different categories in a single year. *Angel’s Gate* was 1994 Book of the Year (Older Readers) and *First Light*, illustrated by Peter Gouldthorpe, was 1994 Picture Book of the Year. Looking back at the history of the awards, it is therefore immediately surprising to note that Crew has been short listed just six times and on only two of those occasions has it been for fiction:

1991 *Strange Objects* Book of the Year (Older Readers) winner
1993 *Lucy’s Bay* (with Greg Rogers) Picture Book of the Year short listed
1994 *Angels’ Gate* Book of the Year (Older Readers) joint winner
1994 *First Light* (with Peter Gouldthorpe) Picture Book of the Year winner
1995 *The Watertower* (with Steven Woolman) Picture Book of the Year winner
2000 *Memorial* (with Shaun Tan) Picture Book of the Year short listed

Many of his peers would of course be happy with a fraction of that success, but an expectation has developed that it would be greater. During the 1990s one
academic journal alone, for example – Papers – published eight refereed articles on his work. Perhaps the fact that the most recent updating of his personal website was for several years recorded as 2005 was simply due to the pressure of other commitments, but it is difficult to resist the inference that readers had moved on from that burst of energy and interest between 1991 and 1995, and so perhaps had Crew himself.

To understand why Strange Objects made such an impact on readers of young adult fiction in Australia, and why it was embraced so enthusiastically by the CBC judges, it is important to consider changes to both the teaching of writing and reading in schools during the 1980s.

A keynote address (Walshe ed. 1981) given by Professor Donald Graves at the Third International Conference on the Teaching of English in Sydney on 19 August 1980 changed the way writing was taught in Australian schools. The teaching strategies he had developed at the University of New Hampshire, termed ‘Writing Process’, came to be known in Australia as ‘process writing’, referred to earlier in the discussion of John Marsden in chapter 7. Students were encouraged to examine their own process at the pre-writing stage, then again during writing, and at the post-writing or ‘publication’ stage. The individual discussions – or ‘conferences’ – they were required to have with the teacher gave this process its other common name of ‘conference writing’.

Graves himself remarks that this method of structuring the writing process is catching on like ‘wildfire’ (Graves 1984, p.4) and although Nolan questions aspects of Graves’s method, he agrees (Nolan 1987, p.98). Admittedly, Moore prefers the image of a virus, but he too acknowledges the rapid spread of the method when he reports that

‘Many teachers in the Australian Capital Territory have contracted a new “enthusiasm”. It is called either Process Writing or Creative Writing.’

(Moore 1985, p.1)
Writing in the conservative *ACES Review*, Moore equates these two terms, whereas Nolan points out usefully that ‘Creative Writing’ was in fact the dominant method used to teach writing in the 60s and 70s, and Process Writing in the 80s aims to demystify some of its romantic assumptions.

The most controversial aspect of Graves’s approach was the suggestion that conventions of spelling, grammar and punctuation should not be allowed to inhibit the student’s ability to write a first draft. He suggested that teachers encourage ‘invented spellings’, where the spelling of a word was unfamiliar, and that these could be revised later when ‘the words evolve from crude spellings to greater refinement’ (Walshe ed. 1981, p.20). Almost as challenging was the labelling of each student writer as an ‘author’ and the final stage of the process as ‘publication’.

The term ‘invented spellings’ may have been unintentionally inflammatory, but the concept of students using whatever word attack skills they had was not new. The concept of self-directed learning in Montessori and Steiner had long been established, although its application beyond early childhood challenged adults who were unfamiliar with their theories.

The title of Graves’s paper, ‘Patterns of Child Control of the Writing Process’, captures what was really exciting and new to teachers. At the same time the principle of putting the child in control of the learning process alarmed critics such as Moore, who regarded this apparent abrogation of pedagogical responsibility as further evidence that authority in society generally was breaking down. Turbill reports on the year-long trialling of the process in Sydney schools following Graves’s first visit.

> It’s a big change. We’re giving the children control of their own writing and learning – an opportunity to discover their own writing process.

(Turbill 1982, p.16)
Feedback from teachers engaged in the 1981 trials would only have confirmed the fears of conservative critics.

‘In the conference the children see me more as a friend than as a teacher.’
- Linda Mein

‘I find the most difficult part is resisting the adult temptation to tell a child what to do or at least make leading suggestions.’
- Judy Antoniolli

(Turbill 1982, p.38)

Nolan (1987) and Gilbert (1989), on the other hand, interrogate the fashionable assumption that process writing was new and that it was entirely child-centred. Both point out that conferencing required the active participation of a teacher and it was often the teacher who initiated the invitation to ‘conference’. Furthermore Gilbert observes (1989, p.36) there was a continuing gap between research and classroom practice in the teaching of writing, as in other areas. Despite claims by university researchers that process writing put the child in control, and allowed students to determine their own areas of intellectual and emotional growth in writing, classroom practice lagged behind both theory and research findings, and the construction of teachers as a source of approval for students was maintained.

But the uneasiness generated by some of the process writing terminology points to an area of more substantial change.

Some teachers find the word ‘conference’ stilted; they prefer to use ‘talk’ or ‘discussion’. But most teachers overcome the initial awkwardness and find the term useful. Children readily respond to, ‘Are you ready for a conference on that piece yet?’ Perhaps they catch a suggestion that this is no passing chat but a one-to-one consultation that regards the piece of writing as a significant creation.

(Turbill 1982, p.34)
Ironically, given Barthes’ pronouncement that became a postmodernist catch-cry, it was in the labelling of students as ‘authors’ and the post-writing stage of the process as ‘publication’ that fundamental changes were signalled, not in the teaching of writing, but in the role of the reader and the construction of the text as literature. What was ‘literature’ – particularly as a subject for study – if all students were ‘authors’ engaged in ‘publication’?

Changes in the way writing was taught accelerated changes that were already taking place in reading, with the emphasis on reader reception or response and on critical literacy. Cambourne, who like Graves was regarded as a spokesman for the new writing, quotes Smith’s view that ‘Children must read like a writer’ (Butler & Turbill 1984, p.15).

To read like a writer we engage with the author in what the author is writing. We anticipate what the author will say, so that the author is in effect writing on our behalf, not showing how something is done, but doing it with us.

(Smith 1983, p.563)

So every reader in the class is also a writer and – more than that – an ‘author’. The collapsing in the 80s of the traditional categories of ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ into the widespread concern with ‘literacy’ in the 90s noted by Kress (1994, p.194) coincides with major shifts in universities in the construction of the reading process. If grand narratives were no longer sustainable, the author was not the producer of a literary text that the teacher had to interpret for the student reader. Power had shifted to the reader and the meaning of the text was contingent.

This shift in the way reading was conceived in university departments of English literature created a crisis more far-reaching than the departure of Goldberg from the University of Sydney, which was still being discussed 20 years later. Gilbert remarks that after the Third International Conference on the Teaching of English in 1980, when Graves issued his call for change, ‘studies
of teachers in English classrooms…indicate a lack of surety about what it is that the English teachers should be doing’ (Gilbert 1989, p.4).

The issue was not just how students should study, but what they should study. Was there any further use for a subject called ‘English’? If so, what was English and what was literature? The ascendancy of American literature and the growth of postcolonial studies had earlier redefined the tradition of literature in English. But the growth of studies in communication and cultural materialism in the 70s and 80s challenged the word-based concept of the ‘text’.

Kress observes that in the extended application of the term ‘literacy’ to electronic media, computers and culture, its field of reference shifted away from the reading of words on a page to mean ‘not much more than (competence in) some form of culturally significant behaviour’ (1994, p.194). So in the education system the text as an object of study was drawn increasingly from popular culture.

This only convinced critics of the new literacy that ‘standards’ had been abandoned along with the literary ‘classics’ (the ACES Review was the journal of the Australian Council for Educational Standards) and reports that the most popular reading for primary school students were their own ‘publications’ provided further evidence of decline. Instead of signifying an exciting multidisciplinary approach to reading, the term ‘critical literacy’ was used by conservative journalists as a political catchcry for all that was wrong with contemporary education. Michaels (2001, p. 212) highlights the anxiety created by the repositioning of language rather than literature in the foreground of the 1988 English syllabus in New South Wales, and the judgment of such critics as federal government adviser Barry McGaw that ‘since there is apparently less literature studied in this syllabus, it is less valuable’ than its 1953 or 1982 counterparts. Crew’s fiction can make considerable demands on the reader, so by endorsing it in the Book of the Year awards, the CBC effectively makes a defence of Literature, and issues a challenge to those who refuse to rank it as a more important subject for study than, say, popular community texts.
On the other hand, Brabazon (2005) defends the study of a broader range of texts. She contends that while the speed of technological change in the 80s and 90s was driving the emphasis on critical literacy, 9/11 had a profound effect on education – arguably greater than its impact on travel and security. The educational emphasis on language, the individual’s ability to sift data and ideas were seen as matters of life and death:

At this time, a precise understanding and application of cultural difference, information management and critical literacy theory is an imperative, not a luxury.

(Brabazon 2005, p.6)

In a 1990 interview Crew said that his personal message to young readers of Strange Objects was, ‘Watch out! Take care of how you read things!’ (Nieuwenhuizen 1990, p.4). His fiction was an obvious site for them to test their reading skills in the classroom and to explore changes in the relationships between themselves and their teachers, between writing and reading.

Whereas Southall’s story to some extent participates in the Australian tradition of the autodidact, who left school through financial necessity at the age of 14 and eventually became a pilot, a journalist and freelance writer before achieving international fame as an award winning novelist, and Wrightson speaks of herself as an apprentice who is still learning with each new book and is ‘filled with terror’ at the idea that she might make a mistake, Crew like Marsden is a new kind of writer in Australia, although it was a tradition long established in the United States: a teacher of English who eventually leaves his profession to write full time. Highly educated, with a Master’s degree thesis on two challenging writers, Wilson Harris and Patrick White, Crew comes to writing informed about, and always conscious of, what he is doing.

Again like Marsden, he says that bad reading experiences when he was at school have led him to write the kinds of books he wishes he had been given to study. These were adventures, thrillers and mysteries. Although he cites the
Queensland School Reader as having introduced him to Dickens, Bunyan, Shakespeare, Coleridge, Goldsmith and other classic writers of the English literary tradition:

all I knew about books – or all I cared about them, was that Enid Blyton wrote the best. In spite of the literary feast provided by the School Reader, what else was there to know?

*(Magpies, vol.7, no.3, 1992, p.6)*

Later in his schooling his favourite authors included Idriess and Poe, and when he was an adult, Stephen King. As a teacher in the 80s Crew ‘came to feel that students, like himself at an earlier age, were being taught to value the wrong books’ under the influence of what he calls the ‘castor oil’ theory of literature *(McKenna & Pearce 1999, p.13)*.

Books and reading are inscribed in everything Crew says about himself and the stories he creates. Behind Marsden’s novels there is a constant struggle between the experiential learning of a young man who had an astonishing number of jobs before he found his calling as a teacher, and the writer who challenges himself each time he sits at the keyboard to see whether he can excel at different text types. In Crew’s fiction, however, the source of experience and learning never appears to be anything but the text.

I was simply one of those kids for whom books were the answer. They provided me with a way out of facing the world – and a self – that I did not know particularly well and, I guess, did not particularly like.

*(Magpies, vol.7, no.3, 1992, p.6)*

This autobiographical statement connects with two other tropes in his work: emotional withdrawal and fiction as therapy – in this case for the reader, but just as significantly, for the writer.
Although Crew’s first two novels, *The Inner Circle* (1986) and *The House of Tomorrow* (1988) were republished into the general market after the success of *Strange Objects* in 1991, they were originally published straight into the education market by Heinemann Educational Australia. Most writers and agents now would regard this as an oddly limiting move. They would prefer to offer such novels to what is known as a ‘trade’ or mainstream publisher and hope that, before publication, this publisher would then onsell a quantity to an educational supplier and, therefore, increase the print run.

To offer a novel straight to an educational publisher would appear to define it as a textbook – and create the inference, among some readers, that it was less significant as a work of art. The fact that Crew acted contrary to this general assumption demonstrates the high value he places on teaching. Even his sympathetic critics (Mills, 1998), (McKenna & Pearce, 1999), however, acknowledge that this sense of commitment to students also entails the risk of didacticism – although Crew himself might not regard that as necessarily a ‘risk’.

McKenna and Pearce say that his first novel, *The Inner Circle* ‘can be aptly defined as Crew’s “teacher’s book”’, designed expressly to fill a glaring gap in secondary school English courses at that time’ (McKenna & Pearce 1999, p.14). Its structure is among the simplest of his novels, with the first person narration of its two main characters, Tony and Joe, alternating throughout and each chapter headed by the narrator’s name to avoid confusion. It is not until the third novel, *Strange Objects*, that multiple narrators are differentiated by voice, so this labelling cannot be attributed merely to the age of the implied young adult reader.

The simple schematic contrast between the lives of these two narrators, however, does raise questions. Tony Landon is 17 and has been emotionally damaged by his parents’ separation, but there are not quite enough complications to his character to save him from becoming a stereotypical alienated white teenager. His mother lives with her boss, who Tony calls ‘Phone Voice’. Like his father, she plies Tony with enough money for him to be able to buy a
bike for himself and one for a friend when he finally meets someone who can break through the flat affect he has adopted in self-protection. That friend is Joe Carney, an Aboriginal teenager, who has a loving and supportive family in the country. He has come to the city to find work, but walked out on his job because he has too much self-respect to endure the racist taunts he is subjected to. He squats temporarily in a disused power station and this is where they meet, when Tony is shuttling from one parent’s house to the other and breaks in to shelter from the rain.

The novel contrasts black and white, country and city, integrated and divided families, employment and unemployment, house and squat, modest income and wealth, spiritual and material happiness, emotional availability and withdrawal. And the minor subliminal theme of tentative same sex attraction and guilt that escapes the critics would not go unnoticed by young adult readers.

It is part of Crew’s distinctive input in this first novel that he has gone against racial stereotypes not only in granting Joe an educated voice without any obvious patois, but also in using Joes and his family as instruments of Tony’s ‘salvation’. Instead of portraying an Aborigine as a dispossessed loser, a sad reminder of a once proud race, or an unwilling victim of cultural genocide, Crew was one of Australia’s first children’s and adolescents’ writers to show that an Aborigine, so frequently seen by others as having a ‘deprived’ upbringing, can in fact be the product of an enriching environment which will enable him to have the courage and dignity to create an adult life as an autonomous and ‘whole’ human being. And what’s more he can help other white people to do so as well.

(McKenna & Pearce 1999, pp.26-27)

In their enthusiasm to teach here – which is crying out for an editor – McKenna and Pearce seem unaware of the romantic stereotype of Indigenous culture as a source of healing that unexpectedly aligns this novel with Wrightson’s early work and, in adult fiction, with White. Nevertheless, their general point stands: that the binary opposites in The Inner Circle create questions and opportunities for learning.

In Crew’s opinion the greatest gift that a novelist can give is not hope, direction or guidance, all of which he
considers too prescriptive, but the ability to question, inquire, and never to be complacent.

(McKenna & Pearce 1999, p.19)

The questions raised by *The Inner Circle* are mostly about its subject matter. But in the context of the metafictional tropes that were to distinguish his later work, the opening sentence is significant.

I heard a story once about a little kid who came home from school and found his mother dead on the kitchen floor.

(*The Inner Circle*, p.1)

Although it appears here that, like Marsden, Crew will be a novelist who confronts the implied middle class reader – both young adult and adult – with working class suburban reality, the narrative is self-referential. And as the opening paragraph continues, it becomes clear that Crew is drawn to the Gothic – unlike Marsden.

A screwdriver was lying next to her and the toaster was still on.

(*The Inner Circle*, p.1)

The subject of Crew’s fascination with death, crime, museums and with the macabre generally in both history and literature, has been well documented by his critics and by Crew himself, and will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter in relation to *Strange Objects*. In considering *The Inner Circle* as a mapping-out of Crew’s fictional territory, however, it is useful to observe that the highly charged gothic elements of the plot are juxtaposed with the themes of absence and emotional withdrawal.

The opening story is told by the young non-Indigenous narrator, Tony, when he recalls himself at the age of eight, hearing from his father that his mother has run off with her boss. The gothic details of the toaster and screwdriver serve to emphasise how ordinary and undramatic his own story is by comparison – but
the reported story also indicates the way Tony feels in retrospect about his mother abandoning him. It’s as if he wishes her dead. His parents’ separation changes everything:

Mum and Dad became Angie and Stan, two people I stayed with, when they were home, on a divided week basis...To an outside observer, if there had been one, it would have been difficult to tell which of them cared the least.

(The Inner Circle, p.3)

It is unwise to assume that anything is unconscious in the work of this most conscious of Australian writers for young adults. But at least as significant as the comment about emotional withdrawal in the second sentence here is the indirect reference to the absence of an omniscient narrator in the aside ‘if there had been one’. The absence of a single narrator, the death of grand narratives and the constant search for meaning in Crew’s work must also be read in the context of a strict religious upbringing that he refers to in interviews.

Readers must search for the meanings of The Inner Circle in the relationship between the stories the two boys tell and in the silences. This novel is strangely evasive. It is about friendship across a racial divide and it is about someone who has family connections – Joe – meeting someone who doesn’t and is a loner – Tony. Tony is also an artist, but in secret. But why does Tony withdraw when Joe seems to respond to his friendship? Is it an unacknowledged sexual aspect to the connection that makes the book appear to step around the edges of its subject matter? The mandala and circle imagery noted by Humphery (1996, p.38) is as much about going round in circles or circling its true subject, as it is about spiritual wholeness inspired by White and Stow.

Emotional withdrawal and emptiness are catalysts in most of Crew’s novels. And the obverse of that deadness is the frequently extreme nature of the plotting and the imagery – almost as if the gothic elements represent a desperate attempt to evoke some sort of, any sort of, emotional response. They also demonstrate Crew’s intense awareness of his young adult audience, the
possibility that they may not have much interest in reading and that therefore they may need to be taught to like it.

Crew’s second novel, *The House of Tomorrow*, seems at first to have dispensed with the idea of complicating the narrative structure. It opens with a single narrator and he is a teacher. This is extremely unusual in a young adult novel, where we would expect the narrator of a school novel to be a student. Clearly the novel reverses the expectation and positions the young reader as both learner and teacher. This positioning functions to complicate our perspective on teacher-student relationships. It may expose the fallibility of teachers; it may also evoke a young reader’s compassion.

Although the general pattern of children’s fiction, as discussed earlier in the Southall case study, is to dispose of the adult characters as soon as possible, so the young characters are free to experience all the risks of their drama alone, this often limits the narrative possibilities. There are places children cannot go in our society and actions they cannot witness or be involved in. Southall’s novels juxtapose adults and children in situations where adults must literally be in the driver’s seat, such as a plane or truck, but then some sort of physical trauma disables the adult and enables the child to take control. Or an adult is disabled psychologically, as in *The Fox Hole*.

The *House of Tomorrow* therefore appears at the beginning to be an old fashioned book about young people rather than for them – specifically a book for teachers about students. Or it can be read as taking a risk and challenging the young reader to wait before rejecting the idea of being obliged to listen to an adult’s version of events involving young characters for two hundred pages.

That afternoon, when I had dismissed my class and returned to the office, I found on my desk a student’s essay, with a note attached.

Mr Mac,
Could you read this, please? I’m worried about the boy who wrote it. Sorry I can’t stay now. Will explain in the morning.
Despite the scenario here of a dialogue between two adults – which may or may not be a hook for a young adult – this opening implores the reader to continue reading with that direct question, ‘Could you read this, please?’ and it refers to the act of reading once again before we turn the page.

Later, when the loose ends of the day had been cleared away, I made coffee, opened a packet of smokes, and picking up the essay began to read.

This sentence deftly anticipates a potential lack of enthusiasm in the young reader. It’s only when there is nothing more compelling to do that the teacher’s response to a student’s essay becomes the centre of attention. And over the page, the narrative perspective switches, with the name of a student, Daniel Coley, in 10D English, written at the top of the page and the student’s essay quoted in full over the following two and a half pages.

Clearly, although the young character’s voice is still contained by the voice of the adult narrator who quotes it, it is allowed to proceed uninterrupted. While not alternating ‘he said/ he said’ as the voices of Tony and Joe do in The Inner Circle, here three voices are established within the opening pages as texts that invite cross-referencing and comparison.

Whenever Daniel is asked to write a critical essay on a set literary text, he writes about a personal experience inspired by the text. This disturbs one teacher and infuriates another. But the main narrator, Mr Mac, wants to understand what lies behind it. Mac’s real text is not the poem or the novel, but life. Daniel writes about walking on the beach on his fifteenth birthday and seeing a drowned family brought ashore. The blanket is pulled away from the
bodies and between the parents is a boy with sightless eyes staring at him and the hint of a grin on his face.

It was like I had seen myself there, that the boy was myself, and I would die like he had. I wanted to vomit but could only cry. It was the most terrible thing I had ever seen.

(The House of Tomorrow, p.4)

When Daniel’s essay closes, the narrative reverts to Mr Mac’s voice:

Beneath this was written, in a completely different and curiously old-fashioned handwriting: then I heard voices but this had been crossed out.

Again, as with the references to the act of reading at the beginning of the novel, here the word ‘old-fashioned’ anticipates a young reader’s response. The essay and Mr Mac’s note do echo the old-fashioned gothic tradition and the mysteries of Poe and Conan Doyle, but as a boy Crew himself loved them and remembers their narrative power. So the novel is a teaching vehicle for Crew to convey to young adults in the 1980s some of the excitement he himself felt when he read books by those writers over 20 years earlier.

The novel even includes two reading lists, when the librarian sends a note home to Daniel’s parents, informing them that their son has books overdue that must be returned.

*The Old Man and the Sea* (Hemingway)  
*Creatures from Elsewhere* (Brooke-Smith. Ed.)  
*The Prophet* (Gibran)  
*Wuthering Heights* (Bronte)  
*Arthur C Clarke’s Mysterious World* (Welfare & Fairley)

(The House of Tomorrow, p.28)
The second list (p.53) is set out similarly. What is the function of the authors’ names here? Although most of the books are well known classics, the inclusion of the authors’ names does indicate the librarian’s officious manner, but also the fact that the implied author is making no assumption that young readers will recognise the titles alone, and that this student’s reading list may therefore serve as a model for their own reading and facilitate their pursuit of the books cited. It is the implied author as teacher once again. Indeed Humphery remarks that there are:

many literary allusions scattered throughout the text (which reads almost like an English teacher’s ‘wish list’!)

(Humphery 1996, p.39)

Mac may be older, but he is a Mr Chips kind of character. He sees a young teacher such as Mr Cooper leave the profession and go off to Thailand or Malaysia to find his true calling. And although, as mentioned earlier, his age makes him an odd choice for a narrator in a young adult novel, the construction of his nemesis, Miss Rackman, positions him almost as ‘one of the kids’. She is a member of his English staff, but the name alone tells readers much of what they need to know. It echoes Nurse Ratched in One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, the Australian wrestler of the 80s Steve ‘Crusher’ Rackman, and also Peter Rackman, the taxidermist and infamous landlord associated with the Kray twins.

Here is the implied author as undisguised teacher:

She was a spot-the-simile, mind-the-metaphor type, lacking all sensitivity to language and destroying any love of literature her classes may have had. The kids hated her. She was an emotional bully, maintaining discipline by threat, sarcasm and innuendo.

…it was a waste of time trying to change Rackman’s attitude to kids – she had missed her calling when the Third Reich fell.

(The House of Tomorrow, pp.16-17)
What infuriates Rackman more than anything, but worries Mr Cooper (p.7) and pleases Mac (p.35), is that Daniel personalises his responses to literature. Gilbert remarks that Graves’s 1980 paper coincided with a shift that was already happening in the teaching of writing and reading – towards ‘speech-oriented and personalist discourse’ (Gilbert 1989, p.5). So here the novel attempts frankly to engage readers in the 1980s conversation about the nature of literature studies in English and a renewed interest in reflective writing. Asked to write an essay on Wilfred Owen’s ‘Strange Meeting’, Daniel writes about his Uncle Keith, who was killed in Vietnam. The novel is plotted like a mystery and withholds the information that Uncle Keith was in fact his father. This explains Daniel’s alienation and the strange voices of the dead that he keeps hearing.

When Mr Cooper resigns to pursue his journey of self-discovery, Daniel ends up with Miss Rackman as his teacher and when that relationship breaks down completely, Mac transfers him into his own class. Mac asks Daniel why he is so preoccupied with death and to help them both unpack that concern, he asks him to keep a journal or ‘think book’. Here the novel engages the young adult reader in the ironies of an act that is an important part of literacy studies in the 80s and draws together the pursuits of both writing and reading. For Mac writing is therapy and reading is psychoanalysis:

‘That’s what you’re going to do; keep a think book so you can work out all this rubbish that’s in your head. And one last thing, if you haven’t shown it to me by this time next week, with something written in it, that is, back to Miss Rackman’s class you go. Is that clear?’

(The House of Tomorrow, p.51)

As it is for the teacher in Marsden’s So Much to Tell You, the function of writing here is to help the writer clarify his thoughts and emotions and unburden his life. Mac tells Daniel that this think book is ‘like a confidential diary’ (p.50). But if the teacher must read it, what is the true value of its
personal expression? And to what extent can it be said to empower the child? This is one of the contradictions in process writing highlighted by Gilbert (1989, p.39).

So the text here also interrogates the nature of reading. While many writers influenced by New Criticism asserted that their primary responsibility was to the text and denied that they were aware of writing for a reader, The House of Tomorrow argues that anticipation of the reader’s presence must determine what is written. There are several metafictional layers to this conversation, given Crew’s well-known practice of keeping a journal or notebook before he writes a novel. The only book-length study of his work reproduces 23 pages from several of his journals (McKenna & Pearce 1999). They include notes, observations, quotes, drafts, diagrams, maps and illustrations that are executed with such precision they would appear to have been drawn with an eye to eventual publication – were it not for the fact that Crew’s earliest professional training was as a draftsman. He refers to these notebooks and uses images from them in his talks to students after the book is published and they have been archived along with his manuscripts. So it is not accurate to regard them as ‘private’ writing. This theme in the novel derives from Crew’s interest in historiography. Historians studying confessional documents, for example, were conscious of the reader’s influence on the text long before it became part of narratology studies in literature.

Surrounding this novel there is an unresolved conversation about the relationship between the literary text and life that shows the implied author using the process of writing to unpack his own responses to this complex issue. When Daniel asks Mac to read aloud Poe’s story ‘A Descent into the Maelstrom’, both Mac and the reader immediately become aware that this is the story that compelled Daniel to write his piece about the drowned family. So the reading of one literary text evokes an experience from the writer’s own life and inspires the production of another literary text.

Some time later, Daniel asks about the story ‘The Tell-tale Heart’, in which a murderer hears the heart of his victim still beating under the floorboards where
he has buried him. He wants to know whether this could really happen in life, or whether it is pure invention. In the context of his sometimes macabre library borrowings, Mac becomes worried about the effect Daniel’s reading may be having on his actions. The unvoiced concern is for Daniel’s own life. The strange death of the student Jules Kerwin, whom Daniel tries to reach out to, seems quite unreal – like a scene from a novel or even a film or painting, right down to the image of his body at the foot of the cliff in ‘a perfect cruciform’(p.69). And Daniel’s eventual death and the revelation of his ‘uncle’s identity at the same time appear to be the inevitable result of his experiences, both lived and vicariously lived through reading.

At the same time, Crew defends popular fiction – regardless of the extreme violence and sexual frankness – on the grounds that it’s only fiction. Responding to a survey conducted by USA Today in March 1991 that found Virginia Andrews’ gothic Flowers in the Attic was the most popular teenage novel, he says:

I admit to reading trash as a kid, and confess that I still vary my adult literary diet with a fair sprinkling of junk-reading. Most of us do. Let’s be honest – at least pulp fiction has a plot. So while my reading of Idriess did not turn me into a cannibal, I doubt that your teenage daughter will seek out sex with your spouse after reading Virginia Andrews’ work…nor will your son sprout fangs after reading Stephen King.

(Magpies, vol.7, no.3, 1992, p.8)

To understand the way the relationship between Crew and the CBC eventually developed, it is useful to put this comment alongside the judges’ references to ‘dross’ and books that were ‘beneath consideration’ referred to earlier in chapter 3.

The deaths of teenage boys here – the drowned boy, Jules Kerwin and Daniel – cannot be explained simply by a single theme. Accident, coincidence, emotional withdrawal and fear, karma all play a part in a novel where there is a
strange synthesis of scenes that appear almost reported directly from school life and scenes that seem to flaunt their own invention. On the one hand the novel raises the question of whether young people are victims of bad parenting and bad teaching; and on the other hand, like Marsden’s fiction, it maps the journeys that are driven by young people themselves, quite apart from adult control. A passage from Gibran’s *The Prophet* that Daniel Coley has copied down is the source of the title Crew gives to this novel. Miss Rackman has called Daniel’s parents up before the school principal, because she reads the passage as a threat that ‘preaches nonconformity’ (p.39). Mac reads it out aloud to the other four adults:

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you.
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of to-morrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them
like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

(*The House of Tomorrow*, p.40)

The empowerment and independence of children expressed in these words is in alignment with the new strategies for the teaching of writing and reading in the 80s and with the views Marsden expresses both in his fiction and in his commentary about it. And, given the unqualified endorsement given to Crew’s third novel, *Strange Objects*, it appears to be in alignment with the values of the CBC.

In retrospect it is easy to understand why *Strange Objects* and its writer were embraced so wholeheartedly by the CBC. The judges’ comment that it introduced a ‘different type of writing’ (*Reading Time* vol.35, no.3, 1991, p.6)
has already been quoted, and they go on to indicate their approval of ‘a strong sense of history’ in several of the novels entered for the 1991 award.

Over 65 years, the Book of the Year in various categories has frequently gone to titles focusing on Australian history, and in the Older Readers category they include *Shackleton’s Argonauts* (1948) *Verity of Sydney Town* (1951) *The Australia Book* (1952) *When Jays Fly to Barbmo* (1969) *Fly West* (1976) *Playing Beatie Bow* (1981) *The Valley Between* (1982) and *The Green Wind* (1986). This is to be expected, since the encouragement of Australian publication, referred to in chapter 2, was cited in the CBC’s constitution and Australian historical subject matter was unlikely to feature in books imported from the United Kingdom or the United States. Furthermore, the CBC’s sense of its own history and its place in Australian cultural history have already been discussed, so on two levels it is an organisation predisposed to welcome children’s books on historical subjects. Thirdly, from the beginning, the CBC has regarded reading as a means of creating cross-cultural understanding, and since *Strange Objects* develops more fully the theme of cultural contact explored in Crew’s first two novels, it is again aligned with the organisation’s values.

At a time when there is an increasingly conservative reaction by many adults against the displacement of books by electronic media, the celebration of reading – particularly the classics – and of writing in Crew’s work was appealing. And the acknowledgment of popular literature and film and its resistance to closure appeared to endorse the interests of young adults themselves, albeit in a narrative produced and controlled by adults. Although its unconventional narrative structure invites readers to rearrange the pieces in their search for a personal meaning, *Strange Objects* is such a complex text that it also creates an important role for teachers, and because some of the more extreme statements about reading and writing in the 80s seemed to diminish the teacher’s role in the classroom, such a demand on the teacher’s skills appeared to be a strong professional endorsement. Furthermore, since most Book of the Year judges are teachers or teacher-librarians, the possibly coincidental short listing in the same year of another novel inspired by
the wreck of the *Batavia*, Deborah Lisson’s *The Devil’s Own*, would immediately have presented as an opportunity for a comparative classroom study of the two novels.

Finally, the sheer intellectual challenge posed by *Strange Objects* was a major part of its appeal. As discussed in chapter 4 of this thesis, the history of children’s literature is one of subordination: its producers have been children’s writers, illustrators and publishers in a hierarchy where their counterparts in adults’ books are regarded as superior. And its consumers have been children in a world dominated by adults, women in a world dominated by men, and pre-school, primary school teachers and female librarians, who have had to fight for professional status – often in confrontation with their colleagues higher up in the pecking order.

Nodelman and Reimer argue that such circumstances may make these people

> prone to justifying their interest in what others look down on, by giving awards and other attention to texts complex enough to defy popular perceptions of children’s literature as simple texts for simple minds.

(Nodelman & Reimer 2003, pp.109-110)

In a number of ways, then, *Strange Objects* was the justification that the CBC had been waiting for. As in *Wuthering Heights* – a novel on one of the reading lists in *The House of Tomorrow* – readers of *Strange Objects* must first peel back an outer layer to get to what is presented as the main story. Dr Hope Michaels, Director of the Western Australian Institute of Marine Archaeology, introduces a collection of documents pertaining to a gruesome discovery made by a 16-year-old student at Hamelin High School, Steven Messenger. The bulk of the novel is the contents of Messenger’s project book about his discoveries. He has been missing for two years now.
On an excursion he finds a cave with a pot in it and a leather-bound journal, together with a severed hand and a gold ring. The journal is over three hundred years old and was written by Wouter Loos, one of two mariners set adrift for their part in the murder of 120 of the 260 survivors of the wreck of the *Batavia* off the Western Australian coast in 1629. The other mariner is the sinister young man, Jan Pelgrom. The hand turns out to belong to Ela, a white woman who survived another shipwreck several years earlier and lived among the Aboriginal people. Like Messenger, the ring is missing.

Messenger’s papers consist of 34 ‘Items’, each of which contributes to the narrative as a chapter might in a more conventional novel. They are official reports, transcripts of interviews, newspaper clippings, letters and some are first person accounts by Messenger himself.

The absence of a single clear narrative thread invites readers to try to piece together what happened in both the recent and distant past: Whose hand was it? How did it become severed and mummified? Who was Ela? What happened to the ring? What happened to Messenger? What – if anything – in all the conflicting information he gathers and relates is true? The moment an answer seems to beckon, there is an endless series of questions, like a mirror held up to a mirror.

Although the novel in presenting a collection of ‘Items’ attempts to detach itself from the notion of a single author, the very number of the ‘Items’ and their arrangement argues against randomness in a game of storytelling. Almost as Lawson’s narrator says in “The Union Buries Its Dead” (Lawson 1986, 1st edn.1893) that he has left out all the romantic clichés of fiction – while he lists them and therefore includes them to say that they have *not* been included – here there is an appearance of ‘Items’ – strange objects – but they are not random. They are a collection and they are a sequence – although the text appears to allow the reader freedom to make the connections. A prior intelligence has got there first. This characteristically postmodernist process of de-naturalising (Hutcheon 1989, p.49), which both inscribes and subverts narrative conventions, is a direct challenge to the strategies of the realist tradition in Australian

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fiction. Is a random reading of the ‘Items’ possible anyway? As soon as the reading process begins, it establishes a narrative grammar that diminishes the reader’s freedom as it progresses.

Crew says the novel began with his postgraduate studies in postcolonial literature. 

I became fascinated by the notion of history as an ever-changing discourse, rather than some fixed and absolute body of fact. 


One relevant source of inspiration is White’s 1976 novel A Fringe of Leaves, which is about cultural contact of a less violent kind on the opposite side of the continent. But Crew says he was also inspired by an unforgettable object that he saw on childhood visits to the Queensland Museum, but which was later removed in a rewriting of history.

The first time he tells this story is in an article that gives a surprisingly detailed reading of Strange Objects. Other novelists politely brush aside readers’ requests for interpretation of their work, whether from embarrassment, weariness or some romantic desire to maintain an element of mystery about the construction of a work of art. He cites his sources, discusses the influence that Todorov’s definition of the ‘fantastic’ had on the novel, points out the deliberate pairing of characters in the time-switching, lists the literary genres that he is playing with, and so on.

So why does Crew explain so much here? Is it from some lack of confidence in his audience of young adults and teachers – a momentary concern that they might not have understood? Or does it suggest that Crew’s main focus is teaching, in particular the writing process? He collects exotic moments in history, images, quotes with an anthropologist’s perspective, almost as he enjoys his hobby of collecting antique jewellery. And like any collector, he welcomes an opportunity to show his collection to someone who will admire
both it and the effort that has gone into the collecting. Does his willingness to explain, then, come from his enjoyment of all the material he has accumulated in his research, most of which can never be included in the novel?

As a child I had often visited the old museum with my parents, and one exhibit – now unfortunately removed – particularly haunted me: this was a tank of badly corroded iron, possibly three metres square and one metre deep, in which a certain Mrs Watson, wife of a beche-de-mer fisherman, had made her escape from Lizard Island off the Great Barrier Reef. Mrs Watson had evidently upset or disturbed the local aboriginal population and had cast herself away in the iron tank – taking her baby and a Chinese servant with her. All three died of exposure. I never forgot that story, and the displayed remains of Mrs Watson’s tattered journal, handwritten with the stub of a pencil, are very clear in my memory.


In his acceptance speech at the awards presentation, Crew tells the story again, and his willingness to expose the changes in print reveals the writing process and perhaps a consciousness that the text of this speech is about to become part of history.

First among these exhibits, I well remember, was the iron beche-de-mer boiler, accompanied by a yellowing card, which told the fateful tale of the heroic Mrs Watson who, being left alone by her fisherman husband, had clambered into the boiler and cast away from Lizard Island in the vain hope of saving her baby and Chinese servant from ‘hostile aborigines’.

As a child of the times, I saw only what was intended; the last breathings of a Victorian folktale – transforming Mrs Watson, somewhat awkwardly, into an Antipodean Grace Darling. I was not alert to the racism, not the gross inaccuracies of the History told as Moral Fable concept, so rife in school readers at the time.

Many years later I realised the truth of these exhibitions. The true horror was that their exposure to the public gaze had neither scientific nor historical intent.

(Reading Time, vol.35, no.4, 1991, p.4)
The real intent he refers to was to shock, to entertain with the macabre and
gothic nature of imagery that made history appear to be no more serious than a
fictional game.

Although much has been made of genre in the critical writing and of Strange
Objects as an example of Todorov’s ‘fantastic’ – as opposed to ‘fantasy’, a
distinction Crew is particular about – the other critical preoccupation has been
with the allusiveness of the text. Pearce (1990), Kneale (1996), Humphery
(1996), McKenna and Pearce (1999) and Heyde (2000) all praise the novel’s
use of literary allusions and at the same time the tropes drawn from popular
culture, which, they claim, make it accessible to young adults. McKenna and
Pearce say that Strange Objects is ‘the most commercially successful of Crew’s
books’ (1999, p.52). Although they don’t support this with sales figures –
which, as noted in chapter 1 of this thesis, are difficult to get and of doubtful
value whether they come from the publisher or the writer – and they don’t
define ‘commercially’, it is hard to believe the implication that the book has
experienced strong sales outside the education market.

Despite the violent subject matter, the possible supernatural reading of several
scenes, the gradual emergence of Steven Messenger as a psychotic killer, and
the historical basis of the subject matter – all of which might appeal to a reader
looking for entertainment rather than a text to study – the novel is simply too
densely textured for many general readers, and perhaps many young adults too.
While Stone’s 1992 account of the ambiguity of hesitation in the novel is
impressive in its elucidation of the endlessly deferred meanings of the text, the
sheer number of ambiguities it documents also makes his reading unsatisfying.
To expose my own reading process for a moment, I found myself finally
exhausted by the cleverness of this article and felt a growing tendency to say,
‘It’s an endlessly complicated game and I don’t care, because the implied
author doesn’t care.’ Both the novel and the article based on it begin to read
like intellectual showing off.
On the other hand, there are repeated moments in the novel when readers are drawn to a metaphysical explanation that hints at greater spiritual depth. When Steven is delirious and imagines the Aboriginal man Charlie Sunrise reaching through the window to snatch the gold ring from around his neck, Steven takes the ring off and instantly feels better. Is this mere coincidence, or is there an energy and a spirit in objects?

It is difficult to avoid reading this novel in the context of Australian and contemporary materialism – is there a spirit and a meaning in things? Is there a life beyond the physical? While the text resists grand narratives as unreliable – religion, history, mythology – and raises this in a seemingly infinite series of questions, the constant unfolding of questions itself indicates an unwillingness to dismiss the possibility and simply settle for the material and empirical. Just as reading seems to bring a moment of clarity, however, the moment slips away again.

More challenging still is Ross’s article written in response to Stone. Within a year of the Book of the Year award, the state literary awards and American awards heaped upon *Strange Objects*, Ross says he is struggling not only to understand what the novel is about, but whether it deserves all the accolades.

As a story, *Strange Objects* is riddled with coincidences and silliness…

The pseudo-objective narrative and ‘Items’ of *Strange Objects* culminate in the exposure of a disturbed teenager who has not accepted that his absent father has recently died. This teenager happens to be coincidentally, and (via the magic ring) fantastically linked with the coincidences of the wreck of the *Batavia*, the castaway murderers, their confrontation with Aboriginal tribes and with yet another castaway. A lot of narrative flash and baggage is attached to the lesser matter of being confronted with Steven Messenger, but to little real purpose

(Ross 1992, pp.86-87)
As a text that invites young adults to interrogate the various binary concepts on which European ways of seeing are based, *Strange Objects* is appealing: past and present, fact and fiction, truth and lies, black and white, accidental and deliberate, sane and insane. At a time when young people turn increasingly to the raw data on the internet for information as well as entertainment, critical literacy is essential and a healthy scepticism useful.

But at what point does that scepticism become alienation and emptiness? The reading process begins to enact the emotional withdrawal that has been one of the most persistent themes in Crew’s fiction. *Strange Objects* demands a high degree of sophistication from the reader. In a text so packed with distractions in the detail, it would be easy to miss the gradual process of alienation from the narrator, Steven. At the beginning of the novel, he is positioned as missing, a possible victim, a young searcher, like the implied reader at the beginning of this adventure. When he begins to make racist comments on page 23, presumably given the treatment of racial difference in Crew’s first two novels, the narrator is being positioned further away from the implied author. But how clear are the signals for young adult readers? Where are they being positioned in scenes such as this?

There were plenty of Aborigines at this school, and some Asians too. The Asians were descended from divers who used to collect sea slugs off the coast from here; some were Malays, some Chinese, but they all looked alike. I couldn’t tell the difference and didn’t have anything to do with them. Of course, the Aborigines were in this country all the time, so I can’t say they’re exactly foreign, just different. The Abo kids from near the town were OK and clean enough, but the ones who came in from the properties weren’t the same. They needed a wash and looked as if they’d cut your throat. If one came near me I’d move.

(*Strange Objects*, p.23)

The racism is sly here, because not every statement is objectionable. And while experienced and confident readers may be aware of the way the positions of implied reader, implied author and narrator are changing in this scene, the
present writer has witnessed enough racist comments by young adults on trains to and from the Central Coast of New South Wales to know that the text here is playing a dangerous game.

That danger is in fact acknowledged right at the beginning of the novel. First there is the epigraph from Lovecraft:

‘For there are strange objects in the great abyss, and the seeker of dreams must take care not to stir up, or meet, the wrong ones…’

Then in a footnote on page 2, there is the first reference to the town Steven lives in, with the mention of the Hamelin Herald. Crew transforms the actual Western Australian town of Hamelin with literary myth. So who is the piper and who are the rats? The footnote is a playful reference to Crew as a writer for young readers, in the implied author’s warning to himself about misleading children with his playing. And the confusion of history and fiction over the Pied Piper story itself is outlined in a website: ‘Was the Pied Piper of Hamelin a Child Molester?’ http://www.straightdope.com/mailbag/mpiedpiper.html

Even the opening plotline revealed by the novel’s first narrator, the invented Dr Hope Michaels, is metafictional. A young adult has disappeared and has been missing for over two years, presumed dead. The novel is playing dangerous games with young readers. When Steven’s own journal ‘Items’ begin to appear, he makes the comment that ‘The library at the school wasn’t much good – the books were childish.’(p.22) So within the first few pages the text sets up a dialogue between the proposition that books for young people should challenge them more than they do, and the view that a piper could sing young people into trouble. This could be playful and mocking – as the repeated reference to Hamelin High suggests, or it could sound a note of warning and fear – comparable to Wrightson’s fear that she may be placing material into the hands of young readers which they are not equipped to deal with.

Then the novel turns again. Steven’s racist comments about Asians and Aborigines on the following page throw a different light on his opinion of
libraries – which now seems less a comment on the literariness of books like this one and maybe more of a macho comment on the absence of men’s books. It is of course possible to preface a classroom discussion with questions about where students have heard the name ‘Hamelin’ before and why it might be significant. But to provide young adult readers with all the experience of literature that they might need to decode this text would be about as effective as explaining a joke. Suddenly all the fun would go out of it and reading would become a chore. But what about a reading experience that doesn’t have the support of a classroom?

It is unlikely that *Strange Objects* would ‘subvert’ any reader’s world view. A racist reader would read the nasty racist remarks of the main protagonist Steven Messenger without being jolted into rethinking such attitudes. Indeed, because so much of the novel is presented through the first-person narration and structuring of Messenger, and then organised into an apparently value-neutral collection of ‘Items’ by the (fictitious) Director of the Western Australian Institute of Marine Archaeology, there is a serious danger that inexperienced readers will accept at face value Messenger’s attitudes in general, and fail to recognise how psychopathic (and hence wholly unreliable) he is, despite his claims to scrupulous objectivity and honesty and his conceited assessment of his own qualities.

(Ross 1992, p.86)

The failure of Crew’s next novel, *No Such Country* 1991 to even appear on the 1992 short list can perhaps be explained by all the critical attention that had been focused on *Strange Objects*. McKenna and Pearce argue that it is seriously underrated and a ‘more coherent and gripping narrative’ (1999, p.96). The judges’ puzzling silence about this novel is perhaps less due to an impression that Crew has had his turn for a while, and more to a feeling that readers are still grappling with *Strange Objects*. Although Crew goes on to win Book of the Year in this category for a second time, with a far more conventional novel, *Angel’s Gate* in 1994, his focus by then seems to have shifted towards picture books.
As mentioned earlier in this discussion, in terms of short listings, the picture books have been far more successful. But the sheer number of picture books Crew published created confusion and the denial of closure that was so startling in *Strange Objects* quickly became a cliché. Although the application of the term ‘postmodern’ to Crew’s fiction is contentious, the decline of critical interest in the postmodern project and some weariness with the repetitious tropes in Crew’s work across several genres coincide.

At the third national conference of the CBC in Brisbane, 3-6 May, 1996, Crew was a member of a panel that was discussing the future of the organisation. In a packed theatre he stood at the microphone, dressed in a tracksuit and cap, and without a word, but with amplified breathing and some awkwardness, he proceeded to strip off the sports gear to reveal his ordinary street clothes underneath. Twelve years later those who were there, including the present writer, still wonder what this performance meant. Was it some symbolic peeling away of the outer layer that reflected the fiction and aimed to reveal the real person underneath? If so, he didn’t go far enough. Was it just a flippant gesture to relieve the seriousness of other conference papers, without any significance beyond itself? Was it an image of the fact that writers often feel exposed and vulnerable in gatherings of their readers?

Whatever the intention, once he had finished Crew launched into a sometimes strident attack on the amateurism of the CBC and its use of underfunding as an excuse for limited thinking, substandard performance and the avoiding of responsibility. In what incoming national president Val Van Putten later described as ‘a fairly angry and not particularly constructive session’ (Van Putten 1996, p.13) he attacked the awards process as sexist, citing the habitual domination of the judging panel by women and claiming that the CBC’s excuse was its voluntary status.

In print Van Putten took him to task on both counts and defended the CBC against Agnes Nieuwenhuizen’s charge that the organisation would never move forward while it clung sentimentally to its tradition of voluntary labour.
Without large-scale voluntary labour the CBC would collapse overnight. But Agnes does not like voluntarism, and Gary thinks amateurism enables us to avoid responsibility. Agnes’ objection to voluntarism seems to arise from connections she makes between modernity, excellence and professionalism on the one hand, and naivety, gullibility, luddism, outdatedness, shoddiness and voluntarism on the other.

(Van Putten 1996, p.13)

She went on to argue that given budget cutbacks and increased workloads in the professions that the CBC can draw on, even professionals can’t always do a good job, so that the simple equation of ‘professional’, meaning paid, and ‘excellent’ is often manifestly false.

We operate within a culture where the professions concerned with children, reading and education in relation to literacy and literature are, unfortunately, dominated by women, and the younger the children the greater the female dominance.…the CBC simply has to have expert judges. If we don’t we will certainly be accused…of being no more than a bunch of bumbling, if well-meaning, incompetents. And, as I’ve made clear, the groups of people from whom we can draw expert judges are largely female. Having said that, I don’t think we can be accused of not using the men who are available. In the last ten years fifteen percent of CBC judges have been men, which seems to me a far higher percentage than the percentage of men in the community with credible qualifications in children’s literature.

After 1996 Crew’s focus seems to shift once again towards his work as a professor at the University of the Sunshine Coast, a role that brings together the two pursuits that produced five years of extremely intense publishing activity in the first place: teaching and writing. It is unclear whether that was merely coincidence or whether he and the CBC had lost some interest in one another. Crew continued to publish and to make regular appearances at literary festivals, but at a less frantic pace. In 2000, Memorial with Shaun Tan was shortlisted for Picture Book of the year and in 2002 his new publisher, Pan Macmillan, attempted to launch Crew as a novelist for adults with a good novel that was
poorly presented, *The Diviner’s Son*. It was a strategy that has so far not succeeded.

Many have tried to reposition themselves as writers for adults, but few writers who have established themselves in the children’s or young adults’ market make that transition successfully – although a few spectacular exceptions such as Markus Zusak and Gillian Rubinstein make it seem possible. It may be a marketing issue, rather than the nature of the novels themselves, but it appears that Gary Crew is still identified as a writer for young readers. Nurtured by the women of the Children’s Book Council, like Marsden, and possibly Southall before him, Crew seemed compelled finally to push the nurturing hand away and behave like a naughty boy.
CHAPTER 10  MELINA MARCHETTA AND  
THE FAMILIARITY OF THE NEW 

CASE STUDY: LOOKING FOR ALIBRANDI

The choice of Strange Objects as Book of the Year, like that of Bread and Honey, The Ice is Coming, and So Much to Tell You, could have been predicted, given the CBC’s stated agenda and its history – although, as chapters 5 and 7 argue, similar expectations were attached to Josh and Tomorrow, When the War Began, if not The Journey. But as the references to Jennings and Griffiths in chapter 3 imply, a number of memorably unpredictable choices interrogate the judging process.

Are those choices due to voting deadlocks, where a repeated tie between the first two choices is finally resolved with the sudden ascent of the title ranked third? Do the emphasis on ‘literary excellence’ and the destruction of the individual judges’ written reports referred to in chapter 3 allow a single eloquent judge to determine the voting outcome, as former judges have told the present writer in conversation? Or, despite the view that an unpopular decision enhances rather than diminishes the authority of an award, referred to in chapters 1 and 8, do the judges occasionally respond to criticism with a consciously popular choice that will deflect the charge that they are out of touch?

Such questions must be included in any response to the 1993 Book of the Year, Looking for Alibrandi. Like the early work of Marsden, Klein and Rubinstein, it attracted immediately the word-of-mouth publicity that signalled its eventual popularity, and yet its critical reception has been, to say the least, mixed. Scutter (1996), for example, dismisses it as:

little more than a prosaic version of the television soapie  
Home and Away: overlong, loosely edited, full of maudlin sentiments and the usual justifying of self, daddy and eventually even mummy.  

(Scutter 1996, p.13)
As the judges’ reports cited in chapter 4 indicate, repeated stylistic infelicities have not prevented a novel being made Book of the Year in the past, although the CBC may have learnt not to highlight the shortcomings of its winners. The historical context of *Looking for Alibrandi*’s publication, however, clarifies several reasons for its appeal.

Reporting on the worsening international financial crisis in 2009, ABC news cites what had become a common reference point for Australians in its coverage of a fall in employment opportunities:

> taking the annual growth rate of newspaper job ads to its weakest level since December 1982 - worse than the recession of 1991


The recession referred to is the one Prime Minister Paul Keating infamously said that Australia ‘had to have’ (National Film and Sound Archive ref. no.518210, 29/11/90). After the boom years of the 1980s, this was the bust. For the book publishing industry, there was the added concern over the development of CD-ROM technology, which seemed briefly to threaten the future of the book itself.

Bunbury argues that to some extent, however, the assumed importance of books, both to the development of early literacy and in school education, modified that concern.

> Even during the international recession of the early 1990s, publishers of children’s and adolescents’ books were expanding – as though hope could only be sustained through youth.

(Bunbury 2004, p.838)
The perception of optimism inscribed in representations of both children and their books, as argued in chapter 2, was the driving force behind the creation of the CBC in the aftermath of war. Change books and you would change children; change children and you would change the world.

When *Looking for Alibrandi* was published in October 1992, it was immediately acclaimed for its high energy and freshness. SBSTV ‘Book Show’ presenter Andrea Stretton’s remark that the book is ‘so fresh and strong it bounces off the page’ is still used in publicity material. And the shout line on the cover of the current edition is from reviewer Moira Robinson:

> I love this book for its passion, its commitment to life, its bubbling ideas, its warmth and vivacity.

Specialist children’s bookseller and academic Robin Morrow, in one of the earliest reviews, contrasts the narrator Josephine Alibrandi with the gloomy young adult stereotypes that seem ironically to dominate periods of economic confidence in American and British, if not Australian, fiction.

> Learning that Josephine is…illegitimate and has been reared alone by her brave mother, despite gossip from the local community, I feared this might turn into a “problem novel” of the type recently so popular with American writers for the young. But the liveliness and individuality of the main character lift this book well above such a category…While *Looking for Alibrandi* does not avoid dealing with some of the major troubles of adolescence, particularly the challenges of conformism, the book is cheerful and optimistic.

(Morrow 1992, p.6)

The *Courier-Mail* calls it ‘a book from the heart with a message of hope for those treading the difficult path through the teenage years’ (Crowe 1993, p.6). After the novel wins Book of the Year, the NSW and Victorian Family Therapy
Association includes it in a list of ‘Books for Therapy’, advising that it ‘Describes difficulties faced by a teenager trying to reconcile Italian and Australian values.’ (Orana Nov 1993, p.274) and the CBC judges comment that the social and personal issues in the book are ‘all seen as part of life, and Josephine accepts responsibility for her choices’ (Reading Time vol. 37, no.3, 1993, p.6). This last phrase comes straight from the discourse of psychotherapy and the self-development workshops in such programs as Insight that originated in the United States and became popular in Australia during the 1980s.

The Book of the Year judges’ report highlights the process of renewal and a fresh outlook – not just in the book itself, but in Australian publishing too.

Publishers are to be commended for having the courage to take the economic risk involved in publishing new authors.

(Reading Time, vol.37, no.3, 1993, p.6)

The judges’ report is also one of the few early responses to include the word ‘writing’ in its comments on Looking for Alibrandi, but even so, the emphasis is on energy and authenticity.

The great strengths of the book lie in the vitality of its writing, the excellence of its characterisation and the realism of its social setting.

(Reading Time, vol.37, no.3, 1993, p.6)

It is the potential for this novel to revitalise young adult literature – and young adults – that is being embraced. Looking for Alibrandi was Marchetta’s first novel and, at 27, she was the youngest of the winners being considered in these case studies. Southall was 29 when the first book in his Simon Black series for children was published, although the novels that attracted the CBC’s interest did not begin to appear until Hills End, when he was 41. The others under discussion would not qualify as ‘young writers’: Wrightson was 34 when her first novel was also her first Book of the Year. Marsden was 37.
Rubinstein and Crew won with their second and third novels respectively, at the ages of 44 and 39.

So Marchetta is being constructed as a fresh voice and a young writer. In the general preamble to their report, the judges also remark on the freshness of her subject matter.

> Australia’s diverse society is being represented in more and more books in all the categories, this year culminating in the winner of the Older Readers Award, *Looking for Alibrandi*. Aboriginality is not yet represented as consistently, with token (almost always male) Aborigines featuring in some adventure stories.

*(Reading Time, vol.37, no.3, 1993, p.6)*

One reason the judges are apparently unaware of the history of their own awards may be that they are lamenting the infrequency of entries by Indigenous writers with Indigenous narrative points of view, although the reference to tokenism in adventure stories makes this doubtful. Indigenous subject matter dominates at least the first 30 years of winning and commended Book of the Year titles, albeit mostly by non-Indigenous writers and illustrators.

Generally, when critical writing focuses on cultural diversity in Australian children’s literature, it treats ‘Indigenous’ and ‘multicultural’ as discrete categories. The judges’ use of the word ‘culminating’ indicates a longstanding project to encourage the development of cultural diversity in writing – and that development was slow. However, since multiculturalism had been enunciated as a new basis for government policy in a speech delivered by the Minister for Immigration, Al Grassby, on 11 August 1973, why did it take 20 years for a Book of the Year to reflect it?

In his account of the way multiculturalism replaced the former emphasis on assimilation, Lopez points out that while ‘many of the principal multiculturalists were Anglo-Australians’, Jean Martin’s research in 1971 found that
‘most ethnic groups resented being treated as if they shared a common voice and interests with other ethnic groups’ (Lopez 2000). The issues of how members of a minority group gain access to cultural power and whether they think they are entitled to do so are, of course, major factors. Do they write their stories down, and if so do they use the language of the majority? Do they submit those stories to publishers who would enter them for literary awards? It is also possible, however, that the late development of multicultural writing is partly due to a reluctance on the part of Italian-Australian, Greek-Australian, Chinese-Australian writers themselves to be identified as other than simply Australian writers in the first place and, secondly, to being grouped as ‘multicultural’.

Sircar refers to Nadia Wheatley’s 1982 novel _Five Times Dizzy_ as the ‘first Australian children’s book with a multicultural theme to enter the mainstream’ (Cullinan & Person, 2003, p.813) His use of the word ‘mainstream’ without defining it highlights the irony. To label a novel about Greek-Australians by an Anglo-Australian writer as the ‘first’ immediately raises the question: why not a novel by David Martin?

In the 1970s this Hungarian-born Australian poet and writer for adults published novels for young adults that deal with Italian-Australians (_Frank and Francesca_, 1972), the Chinese on the goldfields (_The Chinese Boy_, 1973) and Sikhs in regional Victoria (_The Man in the Red Turban_, 1978). His 1971 novel _Hughie_ deals with the racist exclusion of an Indigenous boy from the new swimming pool in a country town. And _Mister P and his Remarkable Flight_ (1975), about an ordinary park pigeon that wants to become a racer, a homing pigeon, makes it appear that throughout these novels, Martin is pursuing metaphors to deal with his own history as an immigrant. Born Ludwig Detsinyi, he fled Nazi occupation and became the London journalist and poet David Martin, then emigrated to Australia, where he became one of the country’s most prolific writers and eventually won the 1991 Patrick White Award.
Martin says that *Mister P* is his favourite among his children’s novels (Alderman & Reeder 1987, p.45). And it may not be coincidental that he tells one unnamed interviewer:

> He finds it difficult to draw on early domestic and family experiences: ‘I keep away from my childhood. It’s too close to the bone.’

*(Canberra Times 23/4/86, p.26)*

This is unexpected because he and his twin brother were ‘bullied unmercifully at school because they were Jews’ (Buckley 1965, p.33) and a German childhood between the wars would have provided a writer with abundant material. Perhaps, however, the assumption that an immigrant Australian must inevitably draw on autobiography when he writes about immigrant characters merely demonstrates the tendency to generalise Otherness that is identified by Said in *Orientalism* (1978) and subsequent studies.

Only one of Martin’s novels received any acknowledgment in the Book of the Year Awards – *Hughie*, Commended 1972 – but it would be difficult to argue that this story of exclusion has even a metaphorical link with the author’s own life, when he specifically says:

> I have hardly ever felt myself an outsider wherever I have been…I seem to belong as much in one place as any other.

*(Hetherington 1962, p.153)*

In overlooking Martin’s body of work and focusing instead on a novel by Wheatley as the beginning of mainstream multicultural writing, Sircar may be dismissing Martin’s fiction for its overtly political nature and the stereotyping of characters that often results from it. McVitty’s complex response to Martin amplifies the kind of ambivalence inscribed in Australia’s multicultural project generally. He praises him as
a profoundly humanist man and he writes as such, espousing the cause of persecuted minorities

(McVitty 1977, p.36)

In pointing out the shortcomings of Martin’s characterisation, however, McVitty makes a typically acerbic remark that shows he is missing the point of *Mister P and His Remarkable Flight* or that, seduced by his own wit, he chooses to miss it:

(It is not merely an amusing curiosity that some readers find the pigeon a far more convincing character than the boy Vincent…)

(McVitty 1977, p.38)

The pigeon is quite clearly the main character in this novel and the narrative draws on some of the poetic tropes of fable to explore the themes of class, displacement and home. McVitty does praise Martin’s interest in unconventional family structures and goes on to say that although

David Martin fails to reproduce, convincingly, the normal speech of children, it must be said that one of his real contributions to Australian children’s literature is his recognition of what they talk (and think) about.

(McVitty 1977, p.40)

So there are aspects of the work that he admires: the ideas and the commitment, mainly. The conflict, then, is between endorsing the new subject matter of these texts and wishing that it had been better handled. He observes with a suggestion of disapproval that Martin

seems to view the moulding of children’s sensibilities as a legitimate and possible way of improving an imperfect world.

(McVitty 1977, p.36)
If that is a shortcoming of Martin’s approach to fiction, it is one that he shares with the Australian government’s shortlived Multicultural Children’s Literature Awards.

Bunbury cites a rapid increase in the number of entries, from 5 in 1990 to 49 in 1993, as evidence of a perceived need for these awards (Bunbury 2004, p. 852). Presenting the 1993 winners, which included *Looking for Alibrandi* as multicultural Book of the Year, Senator Nick Bolkus is reported as observing that:

> although one in four Australian children comes from a non-English speaking background, only one in eight books submitted to the Children’s Book Council this year included characters from such backgrounds.

While his point that these children ‘should not feel marginalised or excluded from our national culture’ deserves consideration, it would be a mistake to read it as a plea for a political-correctness-by-numbers approach to literature.

Diversity enriches a culture, but it must be diversity that comes naturally, not through do-the-right-thing sanctions. Besides which, the extent to which multiculturalism is really enriching our culture is evident in the quality of the winners.


As Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Bolkus takes advantage of the occasion to promote the use of government policy to accelerate social change, but he wants to avoid the inference that the result is an institutionally created product. ‘Do The Right Thing’, accompanied by an animated character dropping garbage into a bin, was the slogan for a national anti-litter campaign at the time, and his allusion to it ostensibly disavows the kind of policy-making that had created the Multicultural Children’s Literature Awards and their state counterparts in the first place. It also prefigures the demise of the awards, due to the writers’ perception that special ‘ethnic’ or ‘multicultural’ awards in the long run ghettoised them and that being judged simply as Australian writers would be preferable.
Fernandez sees the creation of the multicultural awards as epitomising the problem with multiculturalism generally: that it is a government imposed aspirational policy – what she calls a ‘top-down phenomenon’ – rather than a grass-roots movement (Fernandez 2001, p.41). Bunbury argues, however, that before the introduction of these awards, most Australian children’s books dealing with multicultural subject matter were:

written by long-resident Anglo-Celtic Australian writers, whose acute observations of cultural mores articulate and try to soften or provide alternative resolutions to the conflicts they observe; and who believe in the capacities of literature to foster respect and knowledge about other cultures: Allan Baillie and Nadia Wheatley are such writers.

(Bunbury 2004, p.852)

There is a parallel here with the century of non-Indigenous writing of Indigenous stories. It may be tempting to read this as evidence of a patriarchal – or matriarchal – indifference to the rights of a minority culture to express its own being. Or of the voraciousness of representational realism identified by Hume in western literature (Hume 1984, p.40) and referred to in chapter 7, always looking to colonise and consume unfamiliar subject matter as it exhausts and discards the familiar. On the other hand it may be read more sympathetically as the enthusiasm of an explorer or initiator, eager to share his or her discoveries with the uninitiated. This reason might be expected from a constituency connected so closely with teaching and librarianship, if not parenting. Would these writers and the CBC have been better advised to wait and let non-Anglo-Celtic Australians speak for themselves? The fact that the Anglo-Celtic population chose not to do so may have discouraged those Other Australians from speaking, but the limitations of those who thought they were speaking on behalf of the Other may also have acted as a useful catalyst for change.
Writing before the emergence of Marchetta, Stephens points to a desire for the new among those involved in the production and consumption of children’s books.

Writers of children’s fiction …are usually quick to appropriate current social issues, and …by the mid-seventies multiculturalism had become an "issue" in Australian books written for children, where it was strongly advocated as a desirable social value and one to be inculcated in child readers.

(Stephens 1990, p.180)

He notes, however, the general conservatism of ‘multicultural’ texts by writers such as Baillie, Wheatley and Spence (all of them from the Anglo-Celtic community), which attempted to satisfy that desire for newness, and he identifies the focalisation of the narrative as the source of that conservatism:

their narratives are usually focalized by members of the majority culture, and hence the privilege of narrative subjectivity is rarely bestowed upon minority groups

(Stephens 1990, p.181)

So in terms of narratology as well, the appearance of Looking for Alibrandi marked what seemed like a radical development, since it focalised the narrative through a first person narrator who was Italian-Australian, and furthermore focalised important scenes through minor characters who represented Italian-Australian women from two preceding generations.

Although a film and its years as a set text have no doubt helped to make Looking for Alibrandi one of the most popular choices in the history of the Book of the Year awards, it was clearly on its way to that success right from the beginning. Published in October 1992 (Austin 2003, p.4), by the time the award was announced in August 1993, it had sold 37,000 copies ‘at a time when many
Australian books are struggling to sell a tenth of that’ (Horsfield 1993, p.28). By 1995 the sales are reported as 113 000 (Ricketson 1995, p.9) and by 2004, 300 000 (Minus 2004, p.7). Sales figures are now generally quoted as over 600 000. (The general confidentiality of sales figures for young adult fiction referred to in chapter 1 is occasionally relaxed for the rare bestsellers.)

Subsequent criticism of *Looking for Alibrandi*, however, has focused on the question of whether the novel’s treatment of its subject matter is as fresh as this enthusiasm, the early reviews and its awards imply. Josephine Alibrandi is intelligent, rebellious and articulate. She is a working class Italian-Australian girl, born in Australia to her mother, Christina, who was also born in Australia. Christina was not married when, at the age of 17, she had Josie, and as a result she has struggled as a single mother to raise and educate her. To make matters worse, she has been ostracised by the Italian community, but by no one more than her own Italian-born mother, Nonna Katia Alibrandi. By the end of the novel it is revealed that, also at the age of 17, Nonna had an affair with an Australian man, and that the man Christina has grown up with as her father was never able to have children. Her father is in fact Nonna’s Australian lover, Marcus Sandford. This dark secret undermines Nonna’s claim to the high moral ground that she has occupied throughout the novel.

So in its construction of these three generations of women, *Looking for Alibrandi* appears to challenge the authority of the older generation of Italian-Australians as brashly as Josie challenges the nuns who teach her and the girls who condescend to her in the playground. The question of the novel’s freshness must first be applied to the fact that it is about Italians. It seems immediately that the struggle by Italian immigrants against prejudice based on their language, their appearance, their food, housing and domestic arrangements belongs to a past generation. By 1992, Italians had acquired middle class power, and young readers might have been expected to find a novel about Vietnamese- or Lebanese-Australians more relevant.

The paradox is even clearer in the popularity of the film, which was not released until 2000 – eight years later. Reviewing the year in Australian film,
Bunney links its success to the ‘Wogs Out of Work’ phenomenon, itself a belated response to Italian- and Greek-Australian culture.

by the end of the year 2000, Nick Giannopoulos' mission to claim the word 'wog' for his people had been accomplished...'Euro-wogs' are now mainstream Australian. Two of the hit films, The Wogboy and the school-prescribed, book-based, Looking for Alibrandi, made previous waves of immigrants the well-represented darlings of our cinema.

…On the other hand, the real 'wogs' now, Asians, 'illegals', Aborigines, women, were all-but omitted from the year's screen stories.

(Bunney 2001: http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/12/australian.html)

The odd inclusion of women among the ‘wogs’ here relates to a comment about this particular year in Australian film and is clarified later, when he says that Pia Miranda as Josephine Alibrandi takes the award for 'Only Woman In a Leading Role.'

However belated, then, there is a sense that dealing with representatives of multicultural Australia such as the Wogboys, or Effie, or the Alibrandis is simply unfinished business. And, as with Barry Humphries’ characters Edna Everage and Les Patterson, the slightly embarrassing suspicion that they have lost their political relevance or satirical edge contends with the enjoyment of their comic clownsing.

The question of why a book about Italian-Australians achieved such popular success should also be considered in the context of AB Facey’s A Fortunate Life (1981) and Sally Morgan’s My Place (1987). The extraordinary acclaim that greeted these two autobiographies bookended the decade of Australia’s Bicentenary, and with the Anglo-Australian and the Indigenous struggle of ordinary Australians having been told with both humour and optimism, the elephant in the room was the story of multicultural Australia. Clearly Looking for Alibrandi fulfilled a need, and after it Li Cunxin’s Mao’s Last Dancer in
2003. Phillips, then, is not overstating it when she claims that Alibrandi ‘perfectly captured the zeitgeist of late 20th century multicultural Australia’ (Phillips 2008, p.12).

That Facey can say on the final page of a long saga of poverty and suffering that he has had a fortunate life and is ‘thrilled’ to look back on it is, to middle class Australian readers at the end of the century, an almost unbelievably optimistic viewpoint – albeit consonant with the dominant Australian mythology of battling against the odds and surviving. Similarly, the energy and comedy of Looking for Alibrandi inscribes non-Anglo-Australian cultures with a determination to survive and succeed, despite poverty and the experience of prejudice. The answer to why Italian-Australians and why so late has a good deal to do with Anglo-Australian preoccupations. On the other hand, in a culture that confers as much authority on parents and grandparents and on maintaining face – ‘la bella figura’ – as Italian culture does, perhaps challenging that authority is only possible from a distance of one or two generations.

The war in Vietnam was still being fought and was unmistakably the subtext of Robert Altman’s 1970 film ‘M.A.S.H.’(as distinct from the subsequent TV series), although by setting the story in the 1950-53 Korean War, Altman allowed audiences to deal with the text’s political and emotional currency at a safe distance, if they needed to. Similarly, novelist and teacher Irini Savvides has said in a conversation with the present writer that anyone who thinks Looking for Alibrandi is merely about a past generation simply hasn’t been in an Australian classroom and seen the way readers from a range of non-Anglo-Celtic Australian backgrounds respond to its story as if it were their own. The same observation could be made about Savvides’ fiction too, which is ostensibly about a past generation of Greek-Australian immigrants.

In celebrating Josie’s education, her intelligence and her refusal to be a victim just because she is female, Looking for Alibrandi endorses the freedom of self-expression that has been facilitated by the hard work and suffering of previous generations. While it therefore celebrates the Italian heritage of an Australian-born girl such as Josie, it also satirises that heritage, with varying degrees of
affection. The mock embarrassment in the opening lines of chapter 19 cannot disguise the narrator’s fond memories of her community.

Tomato day.
Oh God, if anyone found out about it I’d die.

*(Looking for Alibrandi, p.171)*

But in both the novel and the film, the ensuing scene gives non-Italian readers and audiences exactly what they are expecting and recalls Sneja Gunew’s early criticism of Australia’s multicultural broadcasting network, SBSTV, when she condemned its defaulting to the easy and limited theatrical space that Said argues Europe has constructed for the concept of ‘Orientalism’:

Multiculturalism is the patented supplement, the addendum to Anglo-Celtic mono-culturalism. But what does it really offer?...Don’t certain folkloric puppets glide easily into one’s memory in the space reserved for migrants? For most New Australians growing up now and after the second World War wasn’t the acknowledgment of their difference palpably recognised in a song and dance act in some school auditorium? And now can’t we fill that theatrical space with even more public manifestations of multiculturalism – with multicultural television, for example? Contrary to the first conception of this project we have so far been offered very few *local* migrant voices. Instead the extra-Australian world has been ransacked for ‘entertainment’, which is defined by its alien and exotic characteristics. Even more than in the past the local migrants become further projections of this eternal repetition of the colourfully costumed singing dancing migrant. That’s entertainment; with subtitles.

*(Gunew 1983, p.18)*

Gunew is right to spoil the party. Although it is still a reality in some parts of the country, the tomato day scene in *Looking for Alibrandi* is hardly a fresh construction of Italian-Australian life. Such scenes are as amiable as a commercial for bottled pasta sauce, but simply feed back to Anglo-Celtic
Australia the imagery it has already constructed and do nothing to add any depth. On the other hand, the contrast between the three generations in the novel is often sharply observed and adds a degree of surface complexity. Josie says that the Higher School Certificate is the least of her problems.

I could write a book about problems. Yet my mother says that as long as we have a roof over our head we have nothing to worry about. Her naivety really scares me.

*(Looking for Alibrandi, p.5)*

Here the novel is contrasting the attitudes of two generations. One is a post-war generation of immigrants and their children, fleeing genocide and poverty, and embracing Australia as a welcome escape, with what may later appear uncritical gratitude. The other generation includes their children and grandchildren who, like Josie, have grown up in physical safety, but with concerns that perhaps appear less tangible to their parents, yet are experienced as no less real. The ‘problems’ Josie faces as the novel develops include sex, sexuality, the pressures of being expected to succeed and suicide. To her surprise, it emerges that most of them are shared by earlier generations too.

The commonality of problems is shown not only within the Italian community, but, it is implied, within the Australian community as a whole.

I didn’t even get any Easter eggs. Just stuff for my glory box. It’s so exciting receiving table-cloths and crocheted doilies while everyone else is eating chocolate bunnies.

I thought about the glory box while I was sitting on the verandah on Wednesday night. The way my mother’s relatives had looked at me pointedly when they told her how grown-up I was now.

*(Looking for Alibrandi, p.73)*

To some extent the critique of Italian culture in *Looking for Alibrandi* seems to be coming from a feminist position: that Australian culture represents freedom
from older sexist constructions of femaleness and that Italian culture is stuck in
the past. As Scutter points out, such a contestable critique is hardly radical. But
more important here is the sense of wanting to enjoy childhood. This echoes the
nationalist imagery of Australia in the late 19th century as a young country
eager to shrug off the old imperialism of England.

The contrast the novel creates is, however, between an immigrant generation
who had no time to play because they were focused on working to get ahead in
their new country, and a younger generation who inherited the economic
stability they created for them and now want to enjoy it. That conflict may be
located in the Other community, but its deep resonance within the Anglo-
Australian ‘Baby Boomer’ generation of readers is inevitable, although not
made explicit in critical readings of the text. And that generation set up the
CBC and became its judges. So the novel reflects a degree of guilt about the
affluence of Australia that these adults have carried throughout their growing
up in the 1950s and 60s, and into their working years of the 70s and 80s.

The complexity in the novel’s perspective on Italian culture centres on the
change in Josie’s attitude to Nonna. Early on, she tells her mother:

‘She drives me crazy. She’s starting to tell me all those
boring Sicily stories. If she tells me one more time she was
beautiful, I’ll puke.’

(Looking for Alibrandi, pp.16-17)

In the space between the narrator who rejects her Italian heritage and the
implied author there is the beginning of compassion for the loss experienced by
an earlier generation, and Josie’s silence about Nonna’s loss is one of the most
powerful elements of the novel. So the feelings clearly vacillate. Although
Nonna is a controlling matriarch, and by implication strong enough to take
criticism, she becomes a scapegoat and Josie displaces her resentment for all
her own ‘problems’ onto her.
Nonna is the one character in the novel whose speech is rendered as kriol, occasionally approaching malapropism.

‘You misintrepid everyting, Jozzie.’

(Looking for Alibrandi, p.36)

But by the end of the novel, the revelation of Nonna’s secret affair and compromised morality moves Josie away from comic caricature, through anger and retaliation, to compassion for the loneliness of a girl who was, like her, seventeen but in a foreign country and, despite the company of her sister, feeling utterly alone. Nonna tells Josie about having, as yet, no experience of children, and being obliged to help her sister Patrizia through a ‘terrible pregnancy…there we were, two young women, alone in the bush.’

It is an image that recalls Barbara Baynton’s interrogation of Lawson’s stories about stoic survival and Josie realises she would not have had the strength to survive these conditions like Nonna did:

I don’t think I could ever handle the quiet world she lived in. I don’t think I could ever handle the silence of the bush in North Queensland. Or of the country. Especially the silence of the people.
I hope I never have to live in a country where I can’t communicate with my neighbour.

(Looking for Alibrandi, pp.117-118)

The novel discards Nonna’s kriol, which quite unkindly replicates the cliché dialect of the other – even more popular – novel of Italian-Australian experience, They’re a Weird Mob. Purporting to be an Italian immigrant’s guide to the strangeness of Australians, this was written for adults by the non-Italian writer John O’Grady under the pseudonym ‘Nino Culotta’ and published
in 1957. Maddison argues persuasively that while it was regarded with some affection by Italian-Australians themselves, They’re a Weird Mob in fact affirms Ward’s Australian Legend (1958), which excludes them.

Whereas Nonna experienced prejudice as an immigrant who was excluded from Australian society, Josie is taunted by Italians and Greeks. The effect of this contrast is interesting. To some extent the conflicts Josie describes within the Italian community distance the non-Italian reader from responsibility for her discomfort. So the text describes a safe space – both insofar as prejudice against Italian-Australians may be perceived as an issue from the past, and because that prejudice is partly self-inflicted. Of course, as Said argues, in all colonial relationships the marginalised are taught very effectively how to oppress themselves, so the comfort offered by this perceived distance is an illusion.

This novel is aligned with the CBC’s agenda to unite society through books in two ways. For young readers, the perhaps old-fashioned Italian subject matter displaces current issues about immigrants into a safe space. But the novel will impact differently on the generation who ostracised Italian migrants – the older teachers, librarians and parents – by allowing them to revisit a time past and observe most of its conflicts resolved. In its construction of Italian-Australian experience, then, Looking for Alibrandi is conservative and comforting, rather than adventurous or confronting.

McInally argues that the novel is at its most conservative in the treatment of the absent father and of men generally (McInally 2007, p.63). McInally’s reliance on Ghassan Hage’s concept of ‘whiteness’ (Hage 1998) is problematic, because she uses it to exclude the Italian characters. The concept of Italians longing for ‘whiteness’ is an odd one, partly determined by the darker complexion of the southern Italians who migrated to Australia, but if the symbolism of their skin colour is somewhat tenuous, McInally’s reading of the desire for the father as a metaphor for Australia’s traditional policy of assimilation is insightful.
Despite the fact that he abandoned Christina before Josie was born, Josie is determined to connect with the father she has never known. He is a wealthy and powerful barrister. The surname that Marchetta gives him – Andretti – is one he shares with the Italian-American driver, Mario Andretti, who dominated formula one motor racing throughout the 1970s and 80s. So this surname alone associates Josie’s father Michael with international glamour and power, and with elusive speed.

For Josie, Michael’s appeal is not just that he uses his skills as a lawyer to help her avoid a charge of bullying another student; she refers to him with the kind of romantic clichés that might have been attached to the two young men in her life, John Barton and Jacob Coote. As she tries to deal with her grief over John Barton’s suicide, Josie remembers what her life was like a year ago before her father came into it, and says, ‘It was the scariest feeling in the world.’ (Looking for Alibrandi p.246). But when she tries to construct even the most obvious negatives of having a father as positives, the result is ludicrous:

the best thing about living with him was that he snored.
Remember how I said that night-time scares me because I feel as if everyone could be dead? Well, just being able to hear Michael snoring made the night-time sound so alive.

(Looking for Alibrandi, p.163)

Since Josephine’s search for her father is established as a storyline early in the novel, a first reading of the title is that a man named Alibrandi is the object of that search. But her father’s surname is Andretti. Her mother, Christina, has the name Alibrandi – from her grandparents, Nonna Katia and Nonno Francesco Alibrandi – and since she was a single mother, that was the surname she gave to Josie. That name alone would have been a constant source of ostracism in an earlier Australian generation, although like the term ‘illegitimate’ that Josie uses to describe herself, the connotations of shame in having your mother’s rather than your father’s surname seem oddly out of place in a novel published in 1992.
When it is revealed that her real grandfather is Marcus Sandford, the meaning of the title shifts squarely onto Josie herself. She is the object of her search – and to a lesser extent her mother and grandmother are objects too, because understanding them enriches self-understanding.

Katia Alibrandi, Christina Alibrandi, Josephine Alibrandi. Our whole lives, just like our names, are lies.

*(Looking for Alibrandi, p.219)*

Josie can only come to that conclusion if the ultimate validation of a woman’s life is her relationship with a man. McInally argues that discovering the identity of her real grandfather offers Josie the compensation that she is more legitimately Australian than she had thought.

Her grandmother’s dark secret is that she had a sexual liaison with a man who is the very emblem of the white Australian male and the tryst between this man and her grandmother resulted in the birth of Josie’s mother. Josie thus discovers that she has white Australian (grand) paternity. 

…this biologically proven whiteness is…an embedded indicator of her possibilities for merging seamlessly into white Australian culture.

*(McInally 2007, p.60)*

Although again the use of the terms ‘white’ and ‘whiteness’ is distracting, McInally mounts a compelling case for the growing popularity of *Looking for Alibrandi* in an isolationist and conservative Australia, where the prime minister can say ‘We’ve drawn back from being too obsessed with diversity’ (John Howard, quoted by McInally, p.62).

If the novel’s construction of Italian-Australian culture, diversity and gender relations default to conservative positions that are consonant with the CBC’s desire to bridge, to unite, to heal, rather than to challenge and disturb, perhaps returning to the construction of the 27-year-old writer herself, her subsequent publishing history and the discourse about writing both in and around the text,
will help to explain the most significant popular success in the history of an award that is often regarded as eschewing popularity as a criterion, in favour of ‘literary excellence’.

Because the judges’ written comments on individual books entered for the Book of the Year are destroyed after the meeting, as noted in chapter 1, and because public statements based on their deliberations have traditionally been limited to the single Judges’ Report – although recently the CBC has been encouraging judges to make general statements at public forums in the interest of transparency – it is difficult to know how conscious the judges are of the continuing discourse in the history of the awards.

The minutes of the CBC’s annual general meeting sometimes make reference to controversy, as demonstrated earlier in this study in the discussion of Southall’s Carnegie Medal for a novel that was not even mentioned by the Book of the Year judges. In the early history of the award for Picture Book of the Year, and in unexpected awards and short listings for popular writers such as Jennings and Griffiths, it can be argued that an award is occasionally made in response to a history of public comment. So when *Looking for Alibrandi* is chosen Book of the Year over a far more challenging and more obviously ‘literary’ novel, Rubinstein’s *Galax-Arena*, which is an Honour Book, and when that win comes two years after the most difficult and literary winner in the history of the awards, Crew’s *Strange Objects*, it is hard to ignore the contribution that *Looking for Alibrandi* will make to the public perception of the CBC. It is accessible, funny, rebellious and wears its literariness lightly.

Marchetta herself is perceived as natural, unaffected. Her acceptance speech at the Book of the Year presentation is a simple expression of thanks. Unlike other winners, she does not see this as an occasion when she is expected to make some profound generalisation about children and their books, or to intellectualise her own process. She thanks the specialist children’s booksellers and librarians, and her editor. In her remarks about her family, there is just a hint that *Looking for Alibrandi* should be read as fiction:
I’m very excited that my mum and my sisters are here with me today. It would have been complete if my father could be here, but someone had to look after my nonna, who is not as self-sufficient as Katia. Thank you for providing such a stimulating and insane home environment.

(Reading Time, vol.37, no.4, 1993, p.4)

In the light of McInally’s thesis about fathers and men generally in the novel, it is hard to resist stopping at the reference to her father and then deciding that it is unconscious. But the reference to her grandmother is clearly a playful warning against reading the novel as autobiography. Elsewhere in this speech, however, a reference to Josie seems unconsciously relevant to Marchetta herself.

I chose to write about a seventeen year old girl, not because it was her HSC year, as many people believe, but because of the confusion at times faced by people that age. I hope people recognise the child in Josephine Alibrandi, and the need for her to still be nurtured as a child whilst she’s emerging as an adult.

(Reading Time, vol.37, no.4, 1993, p.3)

The journalist Dorothy Horsfield opens an engaging interview on the occasion with an autobiographical reference of her own.

‘What should I talk to her about?’ I ask my 12-year-old son…

‘Ask her if the book’s autobiographical.’ He assures me that’s what just about everyone in his English class wants to know.

He had asked to come along, but entering the subdued swankiness of the hotel he says, ‘Listen, Mum, you don’t have to introduce me to her or anything.’

But I do and watch him visibly relax. Melina is warm, direct, talkative, a little nervous too.

(Horsfield 1993, p.28)
Like her young reader, Marchetta is portrayed as slightly overawed by the swanky hotel of literary celebrity, but the awkwardness is less powerful than her natural warmth. She tells Horsfield that although the first draft of the novel took six to eight months to write, she spent five years revising it.

The final book is half the size of the original and was rejected five times by publishers.

(Horsfield 1993, p.28)

In a much later interview Marchetta repeats the point, when journalist Penelope Green reports that

it was no overnight fairytale: it took three years of rewriting and five rejections until Penguin expressed interest in 1989.

(Green 2000, p.48)

The discrepancy in the length of time quoted for the redrafting can be explained by the years of rewriting that would have followed the signing of a contract. But it is interesting to note Penguin’s children’s publisher at the time, Julie Watts, either protecting her author from her own frankness or possibly trying to prevent the novel from being seen as a loser, when she refers to its having had two rejections, rather than five (Ricketson 1995, p.9). In terms of the earlier argument that the appeal of Looking for Alibrandi must be considered in the context of the gloom created by the economy of the early 1990s, it is significant that Marchetta herself explains that the acceptance process at Penguin

…took three years because of the recession and the fact that they were taking a chance on a first writer.

(Horsfield 1993, p.28)
When successful and wealthy writers such as JK Rowling or Mem Fox talk, as they frequently do, about the long road to publication and the number of rejections they have had, the revelation functions to restate the working class roots of their art, to correct any impression that they have become fat cats who are out of touch with ordinary readers, and children in particular, and to pay back those publishers who failed to recognise their talent. From children’s writers, such revelations are also part of the demystification of the writing process, which enabled the teaching of creative writing to all students in the late 20th century, not just those who are gifted – the implication being ‘If I can do it, you can do it.’

By focusing on the time involved in redrafting, writers may incidentally be ensuring that they are regarded as hard working ants, rather than crickets singing on the taxpayers’ grant money. But when these comments are directed at children, they function to reassure young writers that famous writers too make mistakes and have to work hard to overcome them. So here Marchetta is to some extent fending off celebrity, but more importantly she is positioning herself as just a somewhat older student.

Announcing the 1993 winners, the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s longstanding reviewer of children’s books, Sally McInerney says:

Marchetta’s *Looking for Alibrandi* – the book of the year for older readers – is a particularly good effort; it is not only her first book for children but her first book.

*(Sydney Morning Herald, 21/11/1993)*

Like the phrase remembered and much resented by Baby Boomers, ‘could do better’, McInerney’s condescending ‘a particularly good effort’ is a cliché comment from a teacher, written on the bottom of some student composition. Marchetta did not sit for her HSC, but left school at 15 to go to business college, and in one interview she says she shrugged off the irony when one of her friends
…who did finish the HSC pointed out to her that she had got it wrong in the book. Josephine has economics as her first HSC exam but, as her friend pointed out, economics is never the first exam.

(Butler 1993, p.10)

As the winner of a book that is already at this point being studied in schools and considered as a set text for the exam Marchetta decided not to sit, she can of course afford to be relaxed about a minor error. But ten years later, teacher-librarian and Magpies reviewer Anne Hanzl highlights a grammatical error Marchetta made in an interview after her 1993 win.

In 1993 Melina Marchetta was quoted as saying *This could be my one and only big book. The reviews and everything has [sic] been so fantastic that it can only be downhill after this*  
...Marchetta has at last found the time and the courage to write that difficult second book.

(Hanzl 2003, p.24)

Common journalistic practice has changed. In the past such a conversational slip would have been discreetly corrected. Now, however, journalists for various reasons reproduce a subject’s speech with minimal editing. Whatever Hanzl’s reason, the effect of her preserving and highlighting the error is to position Marchetta as natural, unpolished, working class, Italian and not quite in control of the language – childlike. By this time Marchetta had become an English teacher and it may be that Hanzl is trying to demonstrate that she has come a long way. But the review perpetuates the construction of *Looking for Alibrandi* and its author as authentic and spontaneous.

The question of whether Marchetta would ever write again dominated discussion of the novel for ten years and, as Hanzl’s quote indicates, she herself did not discourage it – perhaps in the hope of deflecting unwanted attention.
Morrow closed her review with words of encouragement that would put pressure on any first time writer:

It will be a hard task for the young author to follow up such a rich first book, but I hope she does before too long.

(Morrow 1992, p.6)

In a discussing the popularity of They’re a Weird Mob, David Carter compares it with Steele Rudd’s On Our Selection and makes a general observation about the fate of their authors that is useful when considering Marchetta’s experience after winning Book of the Year with her first novel.

Both were first books which, because of their spectacular success, virtually ‘wrote’ the rest of their authors’ careers. In both, the pseudonymous narrator came more or less to obliterate the name of the author, to reproduce itself in ways that could only partially be controlled by its creator. (C.J. Dennis and The Sentimental Bloke could also be considered in the equation; Dennis was often known, simply, as ‘the Sentimental Bloke’.) Both books were pitched at a local, popular market, though both authors carefully measured their relationship to literary fiction. Both are comedies of national character. Both drew on vernacular language and returned it with interest to their readers, so much so they entered the vernacular themselves. Both were remarkable bestsellers with a multiplying afterlife that extended way beyond the original text into other print, radio, visual, musical, theatrical and cinematic offspring. Both bound their authors to a series of returns to the original scene of their success, producing a kind of repetition compulsion, partly driven by the industry and the marketplace, partly by the individual and institutional structures of popular authorship.

(Carter 2004, p.71)

Although, of course, Marchetta had not invented a pseudonym that eclipsed her own identity, over the ten years she became quite open about her weariness. Less successful writers might well dismiss her weariness of celebrity as a
Faustian pact of her own making, but it echoes the exhaustion of Rubinstein and to some extent Crew, discussed earlier in this study.

‘I love Alibrandi, but I’m over it,’ she said recently. ‘When you think of how many people have read it – it’s bigger than me and I can’t compete with that.’

(Minus 2004, p.7)

After ten years the initial responses to the publication of her second novel, *Saving Francesca*, were predictable.

It’s been ten years. It’s the author of *Looking for Alibrandi*, one of the most beloved Australian YA books ever – a phenomenon, indeed, in a country not prone to publishing phenomena. What if it’s dreadful? What if it is even just ordinary? What a letdown! How embarrassing! And so it is with some relief and great pleasure that I can report that *Saving Francesca* is neither.

(Ridge 2003, p.16)

When Phillips echoes Marchetta’s own words, significantly she uses the word ‘story’ rather than book.

For a long time it looked as if Melina Marchetta only had one story in her.

(Phillips 2008, p.12)

*Saving Francesca* (2003) was followed in relatively quick succession by *On the Jellicoe Road* in 2006 and *Finnikin of the Rock* in 2007. With Marchetta free of the inference that she had exhausted her life and source material in a single book, in retrospect the fictional nature of *Looking for Alibrandi* has become clearer. Repeatedly in interviews between her first two books, Marchetta points out that, unlike Josie she was not an HSC student, her family was not
dysfunctional, she has a loving live-in father, her grandmother is different from Nonna Katia, and so on. There are a surprising number of references in *Looking for Alibrandi* to fiction and English teaching. And indeed the alignment of the novel with the agenda of the CBC at several points is evident in its metafictional discourse on journalling or reflective writing, which had its roots in feminism and in process writing, referred to earlier in the case studies of Marsden and Crew.

When the present writer was an undergraduate in the late 1960s, the Australian academics who had been trained at Oxford, Cambridge and other British universities insisted on the use of the impersonal in all textual commentary. The professor who supervised my earlier postgraduate study was a graduate of Oxford and London and would preface any reference to her personal experience in her explication of the text with the words, ‘If you’ll forgive the personal note…’ On the other hand, the increasing number of academics who had been recruited from North American universities were inclined to accept and even encourage the personal and would say, ‘If you mean that it’s your opinion, then say so!’

In an early interview Marchetta says that during the redrafting of *Looking for Alibrandi*, a breakthrough came when she decided to change from third to first person. Up to this point, Josie’s own voice was heard intermittently.

Her story and her voice came through in a journal she had to write for school. I always knew I had to cut it down to one or the other, knew that it was going to be in Josephine’s voice, but was reluctant to do that because I wanted to somehow or other get into Christina’s or Michael’s mind.

One thing I had to do when I did cut it down to Josephine’s voice was to put these thoughts into words, which was really hard – some of the conversations between Michael and Josephine, a lot of those were made up of his thoughts about how he felt about her…and I felt very uncomfortable about that and wondered if he really would say these things to her

(Butler 1993, p.12)
There are many references to stories, words and talk in the novel, but mostly these are folded back into cliché mythology of Italians as unstoppable talkers. Nino Culotta says, ‘As for the…Sicilians, not even the Italian language can adequately reproduce their conversations...they speak like a machine gun’ (Culotta 1957, p.13). And again Marchetta herself contributes to that line of thought in the conversation about her work:

Marchetta…grew up in a very social and Italian family where "you almost had to take a ticket to talk"

(Janson 2003, p.90)

Perhaps with expectations that this is another Facey or Morgan, early reviewers construct the myth that Alibrandi is storytelling unmediated by considerations of narrative form. And yet, Josie refers twice to writing a book (pp.5, 46), she is told she is good at making up stories(p.26), there are references to life’s not being like Mills and Boon (pp.154, 198, 198, 255) and there are references to acting, drama and Shakespeare (pp.42,130). There is also the subplot about truth and lying that develops from the revelation of Nonna’s secret.

As in the novels by Marsden, Crew and Rubinstein, the metafictional aspects of the novel cohere around the theme of writing as therapy. The character of John Barton, Josie’s wealthy school friend who buckles under the pressure of his parents’ expectations and takes his own life, epitomises the romantic construction of men that is condemned by McInally and prompts Adams to review the novel almost as if it were a soap opera, when she says it is.

a quintessential girl book, and adolescent readers will relish the friendships, rivalries, and romance - as well as the thrilling bits of rebellion (Josie and her friends cut school to chase down a rock star and have the horrible luck of being caught on a TV camera).

(Adams 1999, p.334)
In references to his being a ‘pretty boy’ and to ‘pansies’ (pp.42, 192) there are suggestions that his father’s money and expectations are not the only problems that lead John Barton to suicide, but these are made in passing and the novel’s silence on the issue makes this one of its less satisfying aspects. Marchetta herself later acknowledges the lack of depth in characterisation here, telling interviewer Keith Austin:

‘I felt that the boys were just aliens. They were just the love interest. The father, even, was a bit of a love interest. I wanted the boys in *Francesca* to be real.

‘In the last seven years [of teaching], my view of boys has completely changed. The stereotypes drive me insane because they care, and they are the most sensitive, crazy little characters I've ever come across. And they give me the shits a lot of the time, too. I wanted that to come across.’

(Austin 2003, p.4)

But if a male character like John Barton is more closely related to Mills and Boon stereotypes than Marchetta wishes he was in retrospect, he is also the catalyst for the novel’s most poignant treatment of the act of writing. Josie tells him about the journal writing they have been asked to do for English.

‘We’ve been asked to write down the way we feel at the moment,’ I explained to him. ‘It’s because everyone is really stressed out about the HSC. We can do it in any style we want. Like a poem or a letter. We have to hand it to someone we trust and after the HSC we ask that person to read it. They’re to ask us if we still feel the same way.’

(*Looking for Alibrandi*, p.135)

The two friends write and exchange their pieces, but Josie regrets it immediately.
When he passed over his sealed paper his hand was trembling. When I handed mine over I instantly wanted to take it back. I had just handed over the deepest of my feelings. Feelings that I couldn’t even explain to my best friend or to my mother. It was as if I had let him into my soul and thinking about it now, nobody should be allowed into your soul.

*(Looking for Alibrandi, p.136)*

Josie doesn’t read what John has written until she hears of his death, and when she does, she is racked with the thought that if only she had read his poem earlier, she might have been able to save him.

> I am somewhere else now, outside
> I am surrounded by people and
> the sky. I see the people and the
> blueness of the sky
> but still nothing has changed
> Everything remains the same
> I am still alone.

> I sat on the floor under the window trying to remember
> what I had written to him. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t
> remember one word of it. I wondered if I had forgotten
> because what I had written was so unimportant. Slowly I
> stood up and tore up the poem.

*(Looking for Alibrandi, p.238)*

Would the processes of writing and reading have changed the course of his life? What is the function or possibility of ‘truth’ in writing anyway?

The question of whether writing is merely a lot of words that bear little relationship to life is at the centre of *Saving Francesca*, where Francesca’s mother Mia, who is a lecturer in communication, withdraws from her family due to clinical depression. Because her relationship with Francesca has been built on talk, when Mia withholds words and cannot bring herself to talk, Francesca feels that she herself is being invalidated to the point of destruction.
The use of words, particularly in writing, is seen in both novels as therapeutic and in *Looking for Alibrandi* that therapy is conducted in the classroom. Can such writing change the values and behaviour of its readers? In his study of the concept of a literary canon in education, Guillory (1993) explores the ways in which the syllabus is charged with the role of ‘democratic oversight’ (p.7), and a text is constructed as a mirror in which particular social groups either do or don’t see themselves reflected. But what is achieved by the politics of representation in which a story focuses on a single character or family?

Such a politics has real work to do, as complex and interesting as images themselves, but it is also inherently limited by its reduction of the political to the instance of representation, and of representation to the image.

(Guillory 1993, p.8)

In *Looking for Alibrandi* storytelling did not change John Barton’s life, but it is what heals the rift between Josie and her grandmother and unites the experiences of these two characters across time and space.

The stories, like most of the things Nonna has told me over the last couple of months, are really interesting. Stories of another way of life. Stories of another person who I know but I don’t know. Katia Alibrandi, what happened to you?

(*Looking for Alibrandi*, p.201)

The CBC could hardly have written a more explicit endorsement of – if not changing the world – then taking young readers one at a time and uniting them through books.
CONCLUSION

When the student is ready the teacher appears, and as my writing of this thesis drew to a close, I was chatting unexpectedly to a writer much loved by Older Readers, who has enjoyed both commercial and critical success for many years, but came to the conclusion long ago that literary awards determined by adults would inevitably go to other writers. At first this caused disappointment and then resignation. I have never detected resentment – rather self-doubt – but popularity and sales have perhaps been some compensation. This writer told me about having bumped into a mutual friend, another writer, who could be described in exactly the same terms.

‘So, what are you working on?’ the first writer said.
‘Ah, a new novel. It’s a bit of a worry at the moment.’ The friend winced. ‘I think the main character’s going to have to die.’
A playful nudge immediately interrupted what appeared to be self-indulgence. ‘You just want to win Book of the Year!’ The first writer laughed. And the conversation moved on.

Anonymity is useful here, because the point of the anecdote is the implication that literary awards are predictable. If the writers could be named, the relative merits of their writing and the question of whether either of them could justifiably expect an award in the future would be easy distractions. The assumption behind their exchange is part of the discourse of the fiction-writing and -reading community and, as chapter 10 of this thesis suggests, may itself be a factor in the decision-making process of a literary awards system.

Sharing a widespread desire to reshape the kind of societies that could have produced the horrors experienced between 1939 and 1945, the adults who set up the Children’s Book Council articulated a six-point plan for changing the world by changing children’s books and therefore the values and behaviour of children themselves, and the adults they would in turn become. In their desire
for a new start, ironically they restated the linking of childhood with Romantic concepts of innocence and freedom, as readers of Blyton did on the other side of the world. And the nationalist push for a locally centred publishing industry restated the metaphorical linking of Australia with that Romanticism. However clichéd, these values seemed to promise cultural cohesion.

Books could be stickered with gold and displayed, imposed in a syllabus or taken off the shelves. They were made of materials that could be burnt or shredded – the war had reminded society of that potential, too. Books could be used to represent consensus. Half a century later, the sense many adults have that they are engaged in a losing battle against electronic texts, which they can’t control quite as easily, emphasises the power to control childhood that once seemed to be offered by books. But along with optimism about a different future, the promise of cultural cohesion was motivated by fear, the fear of losing traditional constructions of childhood yet again. Nodelman mounts a passionate argument against this urge adults have to protect children by using narrative to impose neat paradigms on them:

> the real danger is not that literature might work to fragment childhood sensibility and provide children with a divided and incoherent view of themselves. It’s just the opposite of that. It might persuade children that one particular and partial representation is the complete and only truth.

(Nodelman 1997, p.12)

For much of its history, the CBC has acted to restrict and simplify concepts of childhood and although it has fought against Australia’s subordination of children’s books – along with other aspects of children’s culture – to some extent it has perpetuated that subordination. Fear of change has driven many of its decisions and created a deep uncertainty in the organisation, too. Masked by the constant assertion that its values are universal, a pedagogical prescriptiveness and a near obsession with its own process and history, that uncertainty has also created over 65 years a stubborn resistance to rethinking both
childhood and reading. So by unpacking the unacknowledged agenda of the CBC and comparing it with the official statement of its aims, this study has argued that the outcomes have at times been counterproductive.

In terms of its original constitution, the CBC has been remarkably successful, so much so that most of its emphases and functions were adopted as standard practice by the stakeholders it had set out to encourage: publishers raised the standards of production and appointed specialists in children’s editing, publicity, marketing and sales; specialist children’s booksellers opened shops; children’s book clubs sold their selections to schools; regular reviews, review segments and magazines that specialised in children’s books appeared across all media platforms; the number of graduates in teacher-librarianship increased, albeit temporarily; and ‘real’ children’s books began to displace reading schemes in the school syllabus.

But this thesis has also argued that the CBC’s broad aims of encouraging both ‘literary excellence’ and a healthy local publishing industry have not always been compatible, since the profitability of local publishing depends, not on a handful of award-winners, but on the majority of commercial titles. These might at least have been regarded by the CBC, not as the ‘dross’ referred to in chapter 4, but as reader-makers, if the organisation had not been preoccupied with shoring up its own cultural capital. That preoccupation has positioned the CBC as a last bastion, arbiter and teacher of standards, and in one of the cultural battles it has engaged in, it has positioned authors, illustrators and publishers on the opposing side as recalcitrant children.

In order to test the conclusion that the CBC’s narrowing of its focus and its preoccupation with the erosion of standards have created an adversarial position that may deter, rather than promote, the reading of books, the thesis has undertaken case studies of six Book of the Year winners in the Older Readers category. All six are drawn from a period of dramatic change in publishing and education, and a period that demonstrates both the rapid growth of the awards and signs that their power may be diminishing. The CBC’s conversation with the producers and consumers of these winning titles reveals predictable
assumptions and significant contradictions in the powerful role the organisation has played.

The starting point for this investigation was a question that has been asked more frequently than any other in the history of Australian publishing for young readers: ‘Can you predict the Book of the Year?’ The case studies suggest that, although in the history of the Older Readers category there have been some surprising choices and omissions, it is possible to identify parameters that facilitate some degree of predictability. Among these are a preference for:

- Anglo-Australian subject matter
- Indigenous subject matter, particularly from a non-Indigenous perspective
- The Jungian assumption that there are universal cultural tropes
- Historical setting
- Narrative set outside urban locations
- Realist but metafictional and intertextual narrative that is suited to classroom teaching
- Poetic language, verse novels, poetry collections
- Plots centred on school, featuring English classes and libraries
- Construction of the child as a non-sexualised ‘innocent’
- First-time authors or recent winners
- Books and authors untainted by commercial success

It may also be that, while the CBC has actively encouraged subject matter that is appealing to boys, if the writer is a male he had better behave.

Three of the writers studied here – Wrightson, Marsden and Marchetta – won Book of the Year with their first novel. In addition, Rubinstein won it with her second novel and the case study on Crew argues that, because his first two novels were originally released by an educational publisher, it appeared to the general book trade that he too had won Book of the Year with his first novel, although Strange Objects was, in fact, his third. The case studies of these
writers therefore demonstrate the CBC’s desire to embrace the role of initiator or parent, with an eye for whatever is new. The expectation set up by the award of Book of the Year to a first novel seems to have been felt most keenly by Marsden and, to a lesser extent, Crew. Australians are early adopters, but default very quickly to a position of self-doubt when continued success does not come immediately. The pressure the writer can feel – that anything less than another win will be construed as failure – is most clearly demonstrated in the case study of Marchetta’s *Looking for Alibrandi*. The Children’s Book Council’s enthusiasm for the new is shown by these case studies to be both seductive and dangerous.

But how ‘new’ are the values embedded in these six winning novels? The Marchetta case study, for example, suggests that the judges’ departure from Anglo-Australian subject matter in their choice of *Looking for Alibrandi* is less radical than it might at first appear. The novel’s safe distancing of cultural difference by locating it in the past is as easy for the CBC to accommodate as Patricia Wrightson’s framing of Indigenous Australia. One clear distinction between the two is that Wrightson’s project is incompatible with a political reality that is still changing, whereas Italian-Australians were encouraged to assume a powerful position within the culture a generation ago. So the otherness in these novels is different in both degree and kind.

Both Wrightson and Marchetta, however, make the implicit assumption that the elusive concept of ‘humanity’ is a universal that overrides cultural difference and should be given a high priority in the socialising of the child through literature. The Rubinstein texts share this belief, too. Even Marsden models an optimistic belief in ‘childhood’ as another universal and the possibility that forgiveness can overcome the psychological and physical violence done to children by their parents – although that belief can be inferred only from a reading of *So Much to Tell You*. By the time *Letters from the Inside* is short listed, it is far more tentative, if present at all. While in *Strange Objects*, *So Much to Tell You*, *Beyond the Labyrinth* and *Foxspell*, optimism about the human condition appears residual at best, the possibility that literary works of
the imagination may build bridges between individuals is one of the constant beliefs of the Children’s Book Council from its beginning.

Given the organisation’s fondness for its role as initiator or parent, it is significant that both Wrightson and Marsden articulate a view of their writing careers as an apprenticeship. Each new book is a conscious attempt to solve a creative problem and during the process the writer in a sense matures. Rubinstein and, again, Marsden – who, at least partly, regard writing as therapeutic – may work through an emotional issue drawn from their observation and their own experiences in their fiction, then reach a point where that issue can be laid to rest and their writing can move on. That is another kind of growing up. The case studies of Southall and Marsden, however, show that when the writer does move beyond the concerns that initially attracted the judges’ interest, the Children’s Book Council does not respond well.

The Southall, Marsden and Rubinstein texts studied here challenge Romantic constructions of childhood. That is why as Book of the Year winners they were so controversial at the time. Why would the CBC endorse novels that seemed to invalidate some of its core values? The answer must lie somewhere between James English’s assertion that any controversy in literary prize-giving is desirable, because it shores up the cultural capital of those who hand out the prizes, and the belief that for the CBC the concept of ‘literary excellence’ and the teachability of the text take precedence over all other considerations – again because the act of defining excellence reinforces the power of those who perform it.

Marsden’s fiction shares with Southall’s, Rubinstein’s and Crew’s a sense that adolescence can disrupt the concept of childhood so violently, past certainties are beyond recovery or repair. Although the CBC’s desire to construct itself as adventurous and not just indifferent to but eager for criticism, makes the idea of young adult fiction appealing, ultimately the organisation retreats from adolescence. This divergence results in some estrangement between the CBC and Southall, Marsden and Crew, and, as the case study of Beyond the Labyrinth argues, in Rubinstein’s growing disenchantment with the pursuit of
writing for children at all – as it is constructed by adults – if not disenchantment with the CBC itself.

In the case study of Patricia Wrightson the judges express the view that *The Dark Bright Water* steps outside the brief of the Children’s Book Council, but they do so with regret and reluctance, rather than the irritation they clearly feel towards Southall, Marsden and Crew. It is tempting to infer that gender accounts for the difference, or that Wrightson’s personality and relationship with the CBC are simply less combative. On the other hand, by the time the *Wirrun* trilogy is being considered by the judges, it is clear to Wrightson and to many of her readers that a project she has devoted her whole writing career to is no longer appropriate and, to some of her critics, never was. So the divergence here is as much due to the writer walking away from the CBC’s initial enthusiasm and investment, as it is to the CBC’s leaving her behind. There is both a sentimental reluctance to articulate the reasons for the mutual feelings of regret, and the possibility that the failure of Wrightson’s project interrogates the values of the CBC as much as those of the writer herself. Of course, if the CBC were not so attached to the idea that its values are immutable, it could move on with less discomfort.

Whatever the differences in emphasis given to the unacknowledged values surrounding the novels that are considered in chapters 5 to 10 of this thesis, however, they clearly share the kind of narrative complexity that lends itself to classroom study. Furthermore the metafictional concerns of *So Much to Tell You, Beyond the Labyrinth, Strange Objects* and *Looking for Alibrandi* (despite the reservations expressed by Scutter) enact and validate the literariness for which they were chosen in the first place. This highlights repeatedly the irony that children have little say in the decisions of the Children’s Book Council. The Book of the Year honours books that children can be taught to like. So the text’s suitability for study is finally the most predictable characteristic of the Book of the Year for Older Readers, particularly since the introduction of process writing in the early 1980s and the shift in the syllabus towards the reading of the text as a site of contingent meaning.
The fact that the question of predictability is asked at all does, however, testify to the success of the project conceived by a group of professionals and to the hundreds of thousands of adults and children who have since volunteered to help them. For many of those volunteers, answering the question is little more than an entertaining game, played with more or less passion than the annual attempt to predict the outcome of the various football grand finals. For those involved in the production and selling of children’s books, however, answering the question is not a game, but big business. And because the Children’s Book Council clings to the image of being above commercial interests, it has found itself – and positioned itself – at odds with the business it has helped to create. As the growth of that business has made redundant many of the functions of the CBC’s original brief, the organisation has resisted change in the one function over which it asserts exclusive control: the awarding of Book of the Year.

Nodelman, again with characteristic clarity, puts into perspective the desire many adults have to control by means of exclusion:

All we adults have to do…is not to fear – to fear neither children nor books. Not to fear children means to trust their ability to make wise decisions and enjoy playful possibilities once equipped with the strategies for doing so…

Not to fear literature is to not eliminate from children’s experience books whose representations personally distress us, but instead to allow children access to as wide a range of representations as possible, in books of all sorts from places of all sorts by people of all sorts.

If we can be that fearless, then children will indeed learn to belong to a different world than our current repressed and limiting world of grown-ups. But then we grown-ups will belong to that different world, too.

(Nodelman 1997, p.13)

Ostensibly, the Book of the Year awards are intended to promote children’s reading. But critics from McVitty to Nieuwenhuizen point out that the CBC’s focus has turned increasingly inward, as it seeks to strengthen its own authority. Among the consequences of that inward focus may be a diminishing of the
commercial influence that the awards have exerted in the past and – an irony more challenging to the organisation than any other – the possibility that its elitism may in fact discourage some of the young readers that it originally set out to nurture.
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__________ 1971, Josh, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.

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________ 1978, The Dark Bright Water, Hutchinson of Australia, Richmond, Vic.

________ 1981, Behind the Wind, Hutchinson of Australia, Richmond, Vic.

________ 1983, A Little Fear, Hutchinson of Australia, Richmond, Vic.

________ 1989, Balyet, Hutchinson, Sydney.


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APPENDIX A: MULTIPLE AWARD WINNERS

Carnegie Medal (UK)

Peter Dickinson 1979, 1980
Anne Fine 1989, 1992
Margaret Mahy 1982, 1984
Robert Westall 1975, 1981

Newbery Medal (USA)

EL Konigsburg 1968, 1997
Joseph Krumgold 1960, 2004
Lois Lowry 1990, 1994
Katherine Paterson 1978, 1981
Elizabeth George Speare 1959, 1962

CLA Book of the Year for Children (Canada)

Roderick Haig-Brown 1947, 1964
Christie Harris 1967, 1977
Dennis Lee 1975, 1978
Jean Little 1985, 2002
Janet Lunn 1982, 1987
Kevin Major 1979, 1992
Kenneth Oppel 1998, 2000
Kit Pearson 1988, 1990
Cora Taylor 1986, 1995
William Toye 1961, 1971
Tim Wynne-Jones 1994, 1999

Esther Glen Award (NZ)

Tessa Duder 1988, 1990, 1992
Maurice Gee 1986, 1995
David Hill 1998, 2003

CBC Book of the Year Award (Older Readers) (AUST)

Hesba Brinsmead 1965, 1972
Nan Chauncy 1958, 1959, 1961
Gary Crew 1991, 1994
Catherine Jinks 1996, 1998
Melina Marchetta 1993, 2004
Joan Phipson 1953, 1963
Gillian Rubinstein 1989, 1995
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eleanor Spence</td>
<td>1964, 1977</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B: WINNERS CBCA BOOK OF THE YEAR/ BOOK OF THE YEAR (OLDER READERS)

1946  Rees, L & Cunningham, W (illus.), Karrawingi the Emu, John Sands, Sydney.

1947  No award.


1949  No competition.

1950  Villiers, AJ & Pont, C (illus.), Whalers of the Midnight Sun, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.

1951  Williams, RC & Williams, R (illus.), Verity of Sydney Town, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.

1952  Pownall, E & Senior, M (illus.) The Australia Book, John Sands, Sydney.

1953  Phipson, J & Horder, M (illus.) Good Luck to the Rider, Angus & Robertson, Sydney. & Martin, JH & Martin, WD (illus.) Aircraft of Today and Tomorrow, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.


1955  No award.

1956  Wrightson, P & Horder, M The Crooked Snake, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.


1958  Chauncy, N & Horder, M (illus.) Tiger in the bush Oxford University Press, London.

1960  Tennant, K & Seale, C (illus.) *All the Proud Tribesmen*, Macmillan, London.


& Woodberry, J *Rafferty Rides a Winner*, Max Parrish, London.


1966  Southall, I & Seale, C (illus.) *Ash Road*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.


1968  Southall, I & Tuckwell, J (illus.) *To the Wild Sky*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.


1971  Southall, I *Bread and Honey*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney.


1975  No award.
1976  Southall, I *Fly West*,
       Angus & Robertson, Sydney.

1977  Spence, E & Green, M (illus.) *The October Child*,
       Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

1978  Wrightson, P *The Ice is Coming*,
       Hutchinson of Australia, Richmond South, Vic.

1979  Manley, R & Yamaguchi, M (illus.) *The Plum-rain Scroll*,
       Hodder & Stoughton, Sydney.

1980  Harding, L *Displaced Person*,
       Hyland House, Melbourne.

1981  Park, R *Playing Beatie Bow*,
       Nelson, West Melbourne.

1982  Thiele, C *The Valley Between*,
       Rigby, Adelaide.

1983  Kelleher, V *Master of the Grove*,
       Kestrel, London.

1984  Wrightson, P *A Little Fear*,
       Hutchinson of Australia, Richmond, Vic.

1985  Aldridge, J *The True Story of Lilli Stubeck*,
       Hyland House, Melbourne.

1986  Fowler, T *The Green Wind*,
       Rigby, Dee Why, NSW.

1987  French, S *All We Know*,
       Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, NSW.

1988  Marsden, J *So Much to Tell You*,
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1989  Rubinstein, G *Beyond the Labyrinth*,
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1990  Klein, R *Came Back to Show You I Could Fly*,
       Viking Kestrel, Ringwood, Vic.

1991  Crew, G *Strange Objects*,
       Heinemann, Port Melbourne, Vic.
1992  Nilsson, E *The House Guest*,
Viking, Ringwood, Vic.

1993  Marchetta, M *Looking for Alibrandi*,
Puffin Books, Ringwood, Vic.

1994  Carmody, I *The Gathering*,
Puffin, Ringwood, Vic.
&
Crew, G *Angel's Gate*,
Heinemann, Port Melbourne, Vic.

1995  Rubinstein, G *Foxspell*,
Hyland House, South Yarra, Vic.

1996  Jinks, C *Pagan’s Vows*,
Omnibus Books, Norwood, SA.

1997  Moloney, J *A Bridge to Wiseman’s Cove*,
UQP, St Lucia, Qld.

1998  Jinks, C *Eye to Eye*,
Puffin, Ringwood, Vic.

1999  Gwynne, P *Deadly, Unna?*
Penguin, Ringwood, Vic.

2000  Earls, N *48 Shades of Brown*,
Penguin, Ringwood, Vic.

2001  Clarke, J *Wolf on the Fold*,
Silverfish, Duffy & Snellgrove, Sydney.

2002  Hartnett, S *Forest*,
Viking, Ringwood, Vic.

2003  Zusak, M *The Messenger*,
Pan Macmillan Australia, Sydney.

2004  Marchetta, M *Saving Francesca*,
Viking, Camberwell, Vic.

2005  Bauer, MG *The Running Man*,
Omnibus Books, Malvern, SA.

2006  Burke, JC *The Story of Tom Brennan*,
Random House Australia, Milsons Point, NSW.

2007  Lanagan, M *Red Spikes*,
Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest.
2008 Hartnett, S *The Ghost’s Child*,
Viking, Camberwell, Vic.

2009 Tan, S *Tales from Outer Suburbia*,
Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest.
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