

RONALD JOBE
AUSTRALIAN BOOKS IN THE WORLD
THE CANADIAN EXPERIENCE

Theme: Kinship, Delight, Admiration, and Challenge

‘Oh, you are so lucky to be going to Australia . . . I wish I was going too . . . !’

Canadians have a long-lasting kinship with Australia and Australians. It was evident from the email responses I received from teachers, teacher-librarians and public librarians when I requested them to share the names of Australian writers and illustrators they found were popular in Vancouver. Before we refer to their comments, let us consider what is actually happening in Canada in the area of literature for children and young people. Although publishing appears to be developing with more titles and small presses each year, both in English and French, there are still many ongoing challenges. Cutbacks in school and library budgets as well as the removal of teacher-librarians have had a negative impact both on the awareness of resources and the actual purchase of them. Furthermore, because of the competition by the huge Chapters/Indigo chain, we simply do not have a sufficient number of independent bookstores with a commitment to sell quality literature for children.

Existing as we do next to the United States, we are literally swamped with American books and their accompanying publicity. Unfortunately, Canadians appear at times to know more about American titles than they do about their own. Could it be that our publishers are a little conservative in book promotion? An important realisation is that Canadian publishers for children survive by taking advantage of the free trade agreement with the U.S., literally making the majority of their book sales south of the border (50-75%). A side effect of this is that frequently Canadian cultural markers are left out of the books to accommodate the perceived American market. Thankfully, courageous writers and illustrators, increasingly aware of this dilemma for Canadian youngsters, are covertly inserting visual and textual references in the works.

What Type of Books are Selling in Canada?

Interviews with Phyllis Simon and staff members of Vancouver Kidsbooks, considered the leading bookstore for children in Canada, as well as with leading Canadian and American publishers reveal:

- Early chapter books are really BIG. Sales are way up because the kids keep growing and reading. Many of these are designed as part of a series and child readers look forward to the next episode.
- Fiction for 9 – 12 year-olds is huge. In the post-Harry years, more attention is being paid to boy readers, and as such adventure, mystery and fantasy are popular. *Harry Potter* has become a template for success and there continues to be a seemingly endless arrival of thick-volume fantasy trilogies and action series focusing on the intrigue of mystery and horror. OR — gross me out with a laugh — high flying fiction that boys devour has to be funny, scary and gross, and much of it comes from Australia!
- Teen fiction is very successful. The big trend is toward chicklit! The number of authors with flashy covers attracting gossipy light reads amongst girl readers is driving the market.
- Teen plus or young adult/adult fiction for older readers is being published with greater frequency, and offer a more edgy read for older teens. These feature a greater complexity of characterisation and plot, deeper intensity of emotion as well as more challenging subject matter. Some of these titles appeal to adult readers, who appreciate not only the impact of the story but the fine quality of writing and plot structure.
- Graphic novels are big YA and pre-teen sellers, and many now have a code on the books to distinguish the appropriate age level. Some adults don't gravitate to graphic novels because of their reputation for extreme violence, woman bashing and sex. Fortunately publishers are now also producing squeaky-clean titles. An intriguing phenomenon is that translated Japanese Mangas are flooding in from the U.S.

- Poetry is selling well, but remains adult driven. What proves most successful is a beautifully illustrated book that has poetry in it. The campaign for April being Poetry Month in the States has had a major impact in Canada.
- Facts are IN! Information books have become big sellers. Boys want facts and are enticed by ever-changing physical formats. Mere mention that the title is internet linked, as DK & Osborne, and it will be popular. Reference books are IN . . . including atlases, encyclopedia approach types, as well as specific updates for the 'shark' or 'dino' kids. The prevailing attitude is that these are books for kids to grow with. The visual appeal of information books splendidly suits the interest of Info-Kids. Try looking at one while enjoying your Guinness!
- Picture book sales have dramatically slowed down. It is very difficult to get a new writer published because of the trend to reprint back lists and recycle famous books, for example making picture books out of parts of the Little House series. Sadly, the quality of picture books raises concern, the text seems to be missing the story half of the time. So why are these published? Another trend is a gradual increase in the number of picture books for older/sophisticated readers. We as Canadians look to other sources for these; many are imported from Australia.

How do Australian books get to Canada?

What is quite remarkable is that technically Canadians have access to a great many Australian titles via British, American and Canadian publishers, depending on who has the rights. Who has the 'Canadian rights' for a foreign title? That is the question! We have a confusing rights situation because there is always uncertainty if a publisher has US and Canada rights or UK and Canada rights or just Canada rights. In recent years small publishers have picked up select titles to supplement their lists and small American book distributors have sprung to import titles directly.

Australian Books from Britain

In the past British publishers have traditionally wanted to 'dump' titles on us, especially the less successful ones, but today their reps are more cautious in what they import. Unfortunately, bookstores may have to carry the British edition, with fiction titles being

less desirable than American because the cheaper off-white paper allows print to bleed through the pages.

I was personally surprised to learn that Canada gets most Australian titles from British publishers provided they have the rights. This is a result of a very strong traditional relationship amongst British and Australian houses, especially those that are/were owned by UK firms. Such is the case for Penguin, HarperCollins, Scholastic, Macmillan, and Hodder. Frequently they will feature a section of their catalogue with Australian titles. As wonderful as this seems, Canadian distributors are hesitant to bring in too many copies, other than big names such as Gleitzman or Jennings, preferring an 'import-to-order' approach. This has three distinct drawbacks: the books do not get promoted; the potential of each title is not realised or shared; and delivery takes at least eight weeks. Unfortunately too many OZ books fall between the cracks.

Australian Books from the U.S.

The American market has always been a challenging one for Australian titles because of the reluctance of publishers there to go beyond their 'borders.' Titles that do arrive are usually recommendations from overseas publishing colleagues particularly in Britain, and are selected to fill in the gaps of the current year's list. It should be noted that some publishing houses do not carry any Australian titles, believing that they simply do not fit into their American publishing program.

Who makes it? Obviously the blockbuster sellers with the major publishers. Harcourt courts Mem Fox with great success, with the board book *Time for Bed* (2001) and also *Koala Lou* (1989) being major sellers. Mem insists on Australian illustrators. Scholastic gives massive promotional attention to Garth Nix, Emily Rodda, Andy Griffiths and John Marsden. Rodda's series came from Scholastic Australia, but Nix's *Keys to the Kingdom* series was initiated in New York. Clarion has had success with Jackie French's *Diary of a Wombat* (2004) and *Pete the Sheep-Sheep* (2005), both illustrated by Bruce Whatley. HarperCollins promotes Garth Nix and Margot Lanagan. Random House is promoting Markus Zusak's latest titles as well as Morris Gleitzman's toad series.

Australian titles are also published by smaller American publishers who select the individual titles very carefully. Holt published Wendy Orr's *Ark in the Park* (2000), Holiday House did Catherine Batesons' *Stranded in Boringsville* (2005), and Peachtree introduced Leigh Hobbs' *Old Tom's Holiday* (2004) and *Old Tom, Man of Mystery* (2005). Kane Miller is a small, specialised publisher with an international focus. They have been very successful in bringing in picture book titles from around the world. Recent Australian titles include: *Fox* (Margaret Wild, Illus. Ron Brooks, 2001), *Are We There Yet?: A Journey Around Australia* (Alison Lester, 2005), *Luke's Way of Looking* (Nadia Wheatley, Illus. Matt Ottley, 2001), *Paul Need Specs* (Bernard Cohen, Illus. Geoff Kelly, 2004), and *Welcome With Love* (Jenni Overend, Illus. Julie Vivas, 2000).

One recent element in the American scene is the existence of small distributors of Australian books, who often make agreements with an Australian publisher to distribute their entire line. One such is the International Specialized Book Services in Portland Oregon, which distributes for the University of Queensland Press, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Magabala Books and the University of Western Australia Press. Primarily academic focused, children's books fortunately come along as part of the package. Sagebrush Education Resources in Minneapolis, Minnesota imports paperbacks and rebinds them into hardcovers. These companies bring the books into the U.S. but are rarely used by Canadian booksellers because of the additional tariff at the border.

Australian Books from Canadian Publishers

Canadian publishers for children perceive of themselves as being international with a national perspective. Direct sales into the US guarantees their survival but also affects the choice of titles. A few publishers actively import titles from other countries. Annick has been successful with a limited number of Australians: Wendy Orr, Errol Broome, Gary Crew and Terry Denton and recently the *It's True!* series of information books.

Simply Read Books is a small Vancouver based company importing sophisticated Australian picture books for North America. It features such illustrators as Shaun Tan; *The Red Tree*, *The Lost Thing*, *Memorial* (by Gary Crew), *The Rabbits* (by John Marsden); as well as Ann James' *Little Humpty* (by Margaret Wild) and Brian Harrison-Lever's *In Flanders Fields* (by Norman Jorgenson). It should be noted that all major

British and American Companies have sales agents and distribution companies across Canada.

Australian Books as Tourist Souvenirs

I never cease to be amazed how frequently I hear tales of literary travellers (teachers & librarians) bringing back books from Australia to share with their classes and friends. The positive result is that by their enthusiastic sharing, booksellers hear of the titles and start to order them. It is proof once again that promotion at the grass roots level can have amazing results. It happened for Harry!

What Australian books work in Canada?

I undertook an initial survey of 25 teachers, teacher-librarians and public-librarians, all members of our Vancouver Children's Literature Roundtable to determine the awareness and popularity of Australian illustrators and writers. Respondents to the survey mentioned 8 illustrators, 38 writers and 1 information book writer.

It can be no surprise, at least to a North American, that Mem Fox was mentioned most frequently. This is doubtlessly because she has made hundreds of dynamic appearances all over the continent, particularly for the International Reading Association. In these, she charms, tantalises and empowers teachers to realise the importance of sharing books aloud with their classes. As she reads her books and relates the background to each, they are hooked. The survey participants delighted in such familiar titles as *Koala Lou* (Illus. Pamela Lofts, Harcourt, 1989), *Possum Magic* (Illus. Julie Vivas, Harcourt, 1990), and *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge* (Illus. Julie Vivas, Kane Miller, 1985) as well as recent titles; *Hunwick's Egg* (Illus. Pamela Lofts, Harcourt, 2005) and *Where is the Green Sheep?* (Illus. Judy Horacek, Harcourt, 2004).

Australian illustrators have indeed made a major impact. Librarians' eyes light up when they mention Jeannie Baker, Graham Base, Shaun Tan, Julie Vivas, and Bruce Whatley. Most mentioned for her artwork was Jeannie Baker, who with her detailed collages made with natural objects has inspired many art discussions and projects; *Where The Forest Meets the Sea* (Greenwillow, 1987), *Window* (Greenwillow, 1991) and *Home* (Greenwillow, 2004).

If asked for one book, which received almost immediate recognition as being Australian, it was Graham Base's *Animalia* (Abrams, 1987). Although not particularly distinctive in an Australian-ness sense, the dramatic animal alphabet illustrations are filled with an abundance of details to delight the eye. This was followed by recognition of *The Eleventh Hour* (Abrams, 1989) and *My Grandma Lived in Gooligulch* (Abrams, 1990). Julie Vivas is recognised for her distinctive characterisations and Australian flavour in her illustrations for *Possum Magic* by Mem Fox (Harcourt, 1990), *The Nativity* (Vivas, Harcourt, 2002), *The Very Best of Friends* (Harcourt, 1990) and *Let the Celebrations Begin!* by Margaret Wild (Orchard, 1996).

Recently, because of increased availability, the works of Shaun Tan have caught the eye of adults for their sophistication: *Memorial* by Gary Crew (Simply Read, 2004), *The Rabbits* by John Marsden (Simply Read, 2003), and *The Red Tree* (Simply Read, 2002). Bruce Whatley is recognised for his exuberant humour in *The Ugliest Dog in the World* (HarperCollins, 1995 o/p), and recent titles such as *The Night Before Christmas* by Clement Clarke Moore (HarperCollins, 2004) and *Pete the Sheep-Sheep* by Jackie French (Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

Australian writers have been admired and respected for many years. Those receiving the most mention include Gary Crew, Jackie French, Morris Gleitzman, Andy Griffiths, Paul Jennings, Melina Marchetta, John Marsden, Garth Nix. and Gillian Rubenstein. With over 2.5 million copies sold worldwide, it is not surprising that John Marsden received most mentioned, yet in a way it is. Macmillan unexpectedly stopped his *Tomorrow When the War Began* series and for several years the only way it could be bought in Canada was by direct import from Australia. This year, Scholastic US will publish the first three books, and as they have Canadian rights, it will once again be available. He is also admired for the sophisticated picture book *The Rabbits* (Illus. Shaun Tan, Simply Read, 2003).

Paul Jennings is remembered for his out-of-print 'Un' series, *Unbearable!*, *Uncanny!*, *Uncovered!*, *Undone!*, *Unmentionable!*, and *Unreal!* Gary Crew is known by librarians overseas for his sophisticated picture books: *First Light* (Illus. Peter Gouldthorpe, Gareth Stevens, 1996), *The Viewer* (Illus. Shaun Tan, Simply Read, 2003), *Memorial* (Illus. Shaun Tan, Simply Read, 2004) and *The Watertower* (Illus. Steven

Woolman). Garth Nix, with the promotional backing of Scholastic US is huge for young adult readers. His *Seventh Tower* series, *Old Kingdom* Trilogy and continuing *Keys to the Kingdom* series are enormously popular. Morris Gleitzman, who established his humorous reputation with *Blabber Mouth & Sticky Beak* (Harcourt, 1995), as well as *Puppy Fat* (Harcourt, 1996) has erupted onto the current interest scene with his cane toad books; *Toad Rage* (Random House, 2004) and *Toad Heaven* (Random House, 2005).

Andy Griffiths has the boys in stitches with his irreverent, gross humour, *The Day My Butt Went Psycho!* (Scholastic, 2001) and *Zombie Butts from Uranus!* (Scholastic, 2003). They fill a niche and not just for gaseous fumes! Melina Marchetta is noted for her two young adult novels *Looking for Alibrandi* (Orchard, 1999) and *Saving Francesca*. (Knopf, 2004). Gillian Rubenstein is still remembered for her young adult novels *Foxspell* (Simon & Schuster, 1996) and *Galaxy Arena* (Simon & Schuster, 1997).

Recent picture book titles such as *Diary of a Wombat* (Illus. Bruce Whatley, Clarion, 2004) and *Pete the Sheep-Sheep* (Illus. Bruce Whatley, Clarion, 2005) have endeared Jackie French to Canadian readers.

Other writers mentioned included: Pamela Allen, Allan Baillie, Peter Carey, Isobel Carmody, Libby Gleeson, Jonathan Harlen, Sonya Hartnett, Odo Hirsch, Elizabeth Honey, Margo Lanagan, David Legge, Alison Lester, James Maloney, Wendy Orr, Ruth Park, Emily Rodda, Ivan Southall, Colin Thiele, Colin Thompson, Marcia Vaughan, Sue Williams, Tim Winton, Patricia Wrightson and Marcus Zusak.

Australian Books in the North American Marketplace

I was so intrigued to find out specifically which titles had been published, that I initiated a further study of the availability of OZ titles on this continent. Together with Linda Dunbar, an Education librarian from the UBC Education Library, a search was undertaken for published titles of 169 internationally recognised writers and 50 illustrators. The bibliographic search focused on Books in Print, World Cat as well as the Australian National Library for references to their publications.

A first analysis indicates that in the eleven-year period from 1995 to 2005, 237 Australian picture books, and 203 novels were published. One might have expected significantly more picture books but this was not the case. A pattern emerges from the

analysis of the data: four distinct periods of importation were evident during this decade. At the start, an initial banner strand (1995/1996) shows that in 1995, 23 picture books and 18 novels were imported, with 1996 being very good for picture books (28) and slow for novels (8). A slump occurred between 1997 and 2000, averaging only 14 picture books and 9 novels. Then a revival period started in 2002 and 2003. It was evident that there was more success in selling picture books (25 & 18) as well as novels (14 & 26).

One intriguing finding that emerges is the dramatic increase in the number of Australian novels (142) published in North America in the past five years. What event occurred to make this possible? Certainly it was the arrival of *Harry Potter* in 1999, and the resulting surge of interest for fantasy and thick tomes. Publishers were keen to find titles which reflected the same winning format 'formula' for Harry's success. Ready to oblige this interest were Australian writers with well-written trilogies and series; Emily Rodda, Garth Nix, Andy Griffiths, and Natalie Prior.

The final period, perhaps the 'orbit' phase, occurred during 2004 & 2005. Exciting gains in the number of publications of Australian titles were made — 64 picture books and 82 novels. It is evident that Australian books have established a remarkable presence in the North American market. The success of these well-written, challenging titles can only lead to greater awareness and admiration and more titles being enjoyed by Canadian children and young people.

Why Australian?

In the 1980's Australian picture books rode the crest of a wave of popularity and delight. They brought with them a sense of freshness, much as Canadian titles did to the US at the time. Why this delight? Many of these texts, particularly those by Mem Fox, sing when read aloud, garnering a special flavour from their unique use of language. Combine this with the visual interpretation by a talented artist and the cultural 'charm' of Australia is conveyed. Granted, it was a type of romantic Australian-ness designed to feature the exotic nature of landscape, animals and culture, but under the glitz was a warmth of human spirit, a ruggedness of landscape and life even if minimally depicted, an intriguing strangeness of flora and fauna, accompanied by an exaggerated sense of humorous facial expressions, dress, and body portions of the characters.

However, in the 1990's this showy 'outbackness' went out of favour. Editors had seen it all before. How many kangaroos can you have in a book anyway? There was a lull in such visual cultural presentations in favour of intense writing of novels.

What Australian books are accomplishing today is to fill a niche not well developed by the local market and doing it splendidly. It should be noted that the books by Australian writers and illustrators, which are published in North America, are of exceptional quality and they stand out amongst others. What are these niches?

- Jocular, funny, wacky stories for the 9-12 boy crowd! The Australian sense of humour, once thought too off beat and filled with dialect, is directly hitting the mark with readers who want to be grossed out! Try Andy Griffith's *The Day My Butt Went Psycho!* (Scholastic, 2001) or Morris Gleitzman's *Toad Rage* (Random House, 2004).

- Picture books for sophisticated, or older readers (like you and me!). The artwork of Shaun Tan, Peter Gouldthorpe, Robert Ingpen, and Steven Woolman evokes much artistic attention and comment. Illustrations by Jeannie Baker, Graeme Base, Ron Brooks, Patricia Mullins, Gregory Rogers, Julie Vivas, John Winch and Drahos Zak challenge the reader/viewer to go beyond their own concepts of visual literacy.

- Picture books which offer a uniquely humorous Aussie perspective on people and events of life. Such titles include *Hunwicks's Egg* (Mem Fox with Pamela Lofts, Harcourt, 2005), and *Pete the Sheep-Sheep* (Jackie French with Bruce Whatley, Clarion, 2005).

- Young Adult/Adult Fiction. This is what *Magpies*, the outstanding Australian journal, refers to as 'Books for Extending Readers' or some bookstores designate as 'Teen Plus.' Australian writers are leaders in cutting edge fiction for the 15+ age group; Intense fantasy, mysteries, science fiction and complex relationships hold the awe of older readers.

- Fantasy series full of complexity, challenge, intrigue and unexpectedness: Garth Nix's *Seventh Tower* and *The Keys To the Kingdom* series; John Marsden *The Tomorrow* series, Kate Constable's *The Chanters of Tremaris* series; and Emily Rodda's *Dragons of Deltora* series.

Canadians have access to American books like no other country. What is it like living beside a literary tidal wave?

For one thing, it challenges you to fight to survive! Canadian publishers have learned that they must meet the challenge head on, and consequently use the free trade agreement to sell between 50 and 75% of their books in the States. Sadly, they frequently feel that they must dumb down the content by removing many Canadian cultural markers in order that the books will appeal more to the American market.

A second aspect is that we get swamped with the number of titles available, not that they are always physically north of the border but their influence is felt. This is wonderful for quality books, but too frequently we are subjected and intimidated by the commercial pressures of the American publishing giants — chain bookstores easily fall prey to selling the many peripherals (toys, games, posters) — anything for a profit. Extensive promotional book displays appear in bookstores to attract customers. Series books, early readers, chicklit, mysteries, horror, fantasy . . . all are being promoted extensively, as are a deluge of movie/television tie-ins. The danger is that buyers become more aware of American books than their own Canadian ones.

Obviously, it is beneficial for Canadians to have easy access to quality award-winning picture books, information and fiction. We follow awards such as the Newbery, Caldecott and Printz with great interest as they can serve as models for us. Our publishing is influenced by which genres are receiving promotional efforts — thus after Harry was/is fantasy, mystery, fantasy, poetry, fantasy, early readers and

Not all books cross the border successfully. How to kill sales north of the border.

Place a US flag on the cover of a book! Not another Civil War book? Books with topics that are overly American are not good sellers: American history, geography which cuts off at the 49 parallel of latitude, American Girl, and historical novels which are accounts of American life in the 50s and 60s. We are careful of bias in books and the patronising use of ‘our’ in the view of the world. Culturally, many of the abundant African-American and Latino titles are not particularly relevant to the Canadian experience. One disappointing impact for Canadians is that the ‘U’ has been removed from our spelling system . . . and so there is no ‘honour’ in the ‘harbour’ or ‘neighbourhood!’ There is no

discussion on this issue, our publishers have had to conform to American spelling practices.

The challenge for Canadians is to retain their cultural identity in a sea of American and British imports, while at the same time endeavouring to export their cultural heritage and value. This is without doubt the same for Australians. Yet at the same time, the challenge for us is to strive to share the kinship, delight, and admiration we have for quality Australian titles.

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