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The blue between: children's writing in the margins

Abstract

Author and anthologist Herb Boyd's recollection of Richard Wright's tongue in cheek, 'All you need to compile an anthology is a pair of scissors and a pot of glue' (Boyd 2003: 50), hints more than a little wryly at the trials and tribulations of anthologists' struggle for recognition. It is also a struggle for affirmation that I have experienced in my own journey as children's author, editor and anthologist and member of the broader children's writing community - a struggle that gnaws at the creative heart of many involved in children's writing and book creation, precipitating artistic and creative tension for children's writing, picture books and anthologies as niche genres. In this paper I contend that writing courses within the Australian and globalised higher education sector, along with governments and funding bodies have a responsibility to the broader community to more actively recognise and support creators of children's books as these books contribute to our literary lore.

Keywords: children's literature; insecurity; writing.

The blue between

Richard Wright's tongue-in-cheek provocation is an anathema for the writer anthologist. It echoes disparaging statements such as 'I could write that', or 'my child could do better than that', made at the expense of writers, poets, book creators and artists in many genres, including children's writers. It could also be argued that it provides evidence of a lack of appreciation that can lead to feelings of artistic insecurity. Alongside such potential insecurity also runs a strong sense of self-belief and purpose, something delightfully captured in the first stanza of Kristine O'Connell George's delightful poem, 'The Blue Between' (cited in Janeczko 2002: 37):

Everyone watches clouds,
Naming creatures they've seen.
I see the sky differently,
I see the blue between -

This poem aptly describes the poetic aesthetic embedded in children's literature and book making. George's wordsmithing clearly articulates the confident wonder of artistic imaginings; I suggest that it also hints at children's writers' feelings of insecurity and desire for affirmation for their 'ways of seeing'. Throughout this essay I explore the reasons why the creative endeavour involved in the making of children's books deserves the same attention and regard from media, policy makers and higher education institutions as any other genre. This desire for affirmation and regard has a global resonance, for as Professor Kate Chedgezoy from the University of Newcastle notes in the 2003 Arts Council England *A Strategy for Children's Literature* report:

In valuing and promoting all aspects of children's literature as a cultural space entered and inhabited by child and adult readers and writers, sharing books in a variety of material contexts, Arts Council England can do much to challenge some of the negative perceptions of the field that currently affect its academic standing. (cited, Arts Council England 2003: 9)

Edward Lear's enigmatic *Owl and Pussycat* (1876), adrift in their beautiful pea green boat, might be seen as an allegory for the ever-hopeful, yet vulnerable state of children's books and

their creators adrift in an ocean of writing. Lear's work is of course iconic for its contribution to the field of poetry, providing evidence of the valued status of children's writing as a genre attracting societal esteem - as are the *Heidi* books in Switzerland and tens of thousands of other children's books and writers across different countries. Hunt takes this further when he comments on the fact 'that these writers have chosen to write for children means they are joining a long literary tradition' (Hunt 2009: 5) and are practising in a genre he contests is both 'more difficult than writing for adults' and is 'extremely useful for developing writing techniques' (2009: 4).

Value adding and specialisation

In writing, like other disciplines, value is recognised for insight into real life practice. This value is evident at my own university in Australia, where the Swinburne University higher education direction is encapsulated by a professional learning model philosophy that '*combines teaching, research and industry expertise, within a supportive real world learning environment which produces great professional outcomes for its graduates*' (Mazzolini 2009: 19). This raises a question of into what areas higher education providers could or should be expanding. Writing courses have some unique characteristics, in that their students generally bring a bias towards certain genres: i.e. they are keen to practice and hone their craft and pursue their interest in particular genres. Nicola Boyd's census of Australian creative writing doctorates (2009) highlights the increasing diversity of PhD artefacts, demonstrating the intersection between published and publishable artefacts in popular genres. However Boyd's study also concludes that, 'Popular genres remain the second class citizens of creative writing doctorates, sometimes reviled or dismissed as inferior to literary genres; but this stance can no longer be supported by the very criteria with which they are assessed - publishability' (Boyd 2009: 22). The congruence between publishability and artefact / thesis choice is reinforced by the ex-head of writing programs at RMIT University, Malcolm King, who in a recent article published in *The Australian* (King 2009) makes the point that there is a trend and desire for specialisation.

If specialisation is required and diversity increasingly assumed, encouraged and propagated, students should rightly expect to access a range of possibilities within writing courses, research and practice - and this includes children's writing. However this raises the question of why anyone should feel a need to justify the 'specialised' literary cultural capital of children's writing and its research value. Kroll articulates this in a broader context when she asks: 'Why should we have to *prove* the value of what Australian writer-academics and their students produce?' (Kroll 2002: 1). David Wright in his article on *Cultural Capital and the Literary Field* explores this question further, noting that even at the level of policy, notions of "high" and "low" accounts of literary hierarchy are contested categories' (Wright 2006: 125).

The answer to Kroll's question resides somewhere in the feelings of insecurity creators experience if they perceive their practice as a lesser 'art' or lesser literary form; feelings that are formed in response to societal, academic judgment and hierarchical subjugation. Such a proposition is supported by Verboord's contention that 'an author's prestige is dependent on how s/he is perceived by significant others' (Verboord 2003: 262). Certainly the topic of canonical hierarchy and artistic status was seen as strong enough subject matter to be the focus of a major conference on children's writers, biography and the canon in Switzerland in 2010; where the call for papers stated:

Canonically speaking, it is no exaggeration to state that children's books belong to the lower ranks of literature, with books for girls arguably on the lowest step of the ladder. The status of an author of children's books can be measured according to this canonical hierarchy. (Zimmermann & Soeting 2009)

The sound of one hand clapping?

Debates about hierarchical positioning and value attribution aside, psychological studies by Probst, Stewart, Gruys and Tierney have investigated links between insecurity, productivity and certainty. Their study provides evidence to support the view that there is a 'decline in

creativity among individuals with a high sense of job insecurity' (Probst et al. 2007: 492). Outside the context of this paper, it is relevant to note Brian Castro's reflection on his early writing career, 'Someone who was out of work seemed suspicious' (2010: 9). If we assume that writing is regarded as a job for many writers, then it would seem logical that individuals suffering insecurity or feelings of 'lesser value' might experience a blocking of creativity. I raise this potential hypothesis to highlight the impact that the body corporate of arts creators, critics, institutions and shape shifters (media, award judges, booksellers, publishers and distributors) have on an author's self-perception. Van der Eerden, in her sociological study on literary reputation, status and prestige states, 'Literature, like other art forms, knows no objective measurable criteria of quality. Therefore signs of recognition from other actors in the field are inevitable to build a reputation' (van der Eerden 2007).

Institutional imperatives

As a member of a number of writing- and literature-based professional associations such as the Australian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL), the Australian Society of Authors (ASA), the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA), the Australasian Children's Literature Association for Research (ACLAR) and the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA), it is clear to me that these organisations and others like them have similar base philosophies regarding the promotion of authors, creators and appreciation of literature. Many university lecturers and academics are members of these national and international literary organisations, and university infrastructures can provide access to financial support and funding regimes for strategic projects that are out of the range of smaller organisations, therefore providing opportunity for scholarly and pragmatic union. Arguably these infrastructures also provide a litmus test for the range of areas comprising literature. While it is outside the scope of this paper to construct a comparative study, it would seem reasonable to state that some university courses have been associated with traditional notions of literature - ideas that have arguably aligned English literature with a type of writing centred in adult genres. In a possible sign of changing understandings of literature in contemporary contexts, Monash University (one of Australia's esteemed research universities) is currently re-examining its English and creative writing course structures, and it will be most interesting to see to what extent evolving ideas of multiliteracies and 'literatures' - including children's literature - feature in such courses.

At a broader level, it can certainly be argued that lobby and interest groups are well aware that coordinated, collaborative advocacy enhances the ability to effect change in policy or funding. In Australia we have recently seen an important example of this combined voice strategy via the combined efforts of the Australian Publishers Association (APA), Australian Booksellers Association (ABA), Australian Society of Authors (ASA), the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) and the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) in their opposition against the proposed lifting of restrictions regarding parallel importation. While the quest for funding and infrastructure support exists across all creative arts at a macro level, the struggle of specific genres such as children's writing was highlighted recently by CBCA National President Marj Kirkland's pathos-filled announcement cancelling this year's 2010 biennial conference:

It is with the deepest regret that we announce that the CBCA conference in 2010 will no longer be held. Following advice re the current economic climate, we are taking action now to avoid the risk of a great financial burden to the CBCA. (Kirkland 2009)

If ever an argument existed for re-evaluating the structure and the role of the Australia Council in supporting such peak arts institutions and funding in the arts, now is the time. Would other countries allow their peak children's body to flounder in such a way? Certainly comparable struggles for children's writers and writing in the UK have been documented. The Arts Council England identified similar issues its 2003 report *A Strategy for Children's Literature*, which 'revealed a dynamic, occasionally "overheated" literary climate, populated by individuals and organisations working hard though not necessarily together' (Arts Council England 2003: 3).

In this context I suspect that we could gain a great deal from looking at the structure of the UK's National Association for Writers in Education (NAWE), which is founded on the

benefits of coordinating and integrating academic endeavour with research and active practice in writing, literature and education across all sectors, including the children's sector. Interestingly, the establishment of the recent journal *Write4Children: The International Journal for the Practice and Theories of Writing for Children and Children's Literature* (2010) with an editorial board including Cardiff University's Professor Emeritus Peter Hunt, former UK children's laureate Michael Rosen and various internationally respected scholars, points to an increasing appreciation and awareness of children's literature as a valid and valuable course of study at tertiary level.

Fortunately, there are also positive signs for a more coordinated approach across Australia, and evidence of a developing strategic literary voice for children's literature. Melbourne's recent designation as a UNESCO City of Literature (United Nations Educational 2008) in combination with the establishment of the Wheeler Centre: Books, Writing, Ideas (2009) and site integration at the Victorian State Library, the Victorian Writers Centre and the Australian Poetry Centre (APC), are positive signs for the future. The recent formation of the Australian Children's Literature Alliance with well-known children's literature advocate Bronwen Bennett as the chair and a committee with a broad representation of people from industry and practice, is another sign of the desire for a coordinated approach:

The Australian Children's Literature Alliance (ACLA) will focus on creating a national children's laureate and a website to profile writing for young people. The ACLA board has been formed, drawing on representatives from publishers, booksellers, creators and major national children's literature organizations. (Australia Council for the Arts 2009)

The Children's Laureate, modelled on the UK model with popular children's author and illustrator Anthony Browne currently in the role (Booktrust 2008), will be a most useful step in raising awareness about the importance of children's literature and indeed literature in general, and echoes the 2008 USA appointment of high-profile children's author Jon Scieszka as literary ambassador.

Perceptions of value

While these initiatives are optimistic signs for improving awareness and regard for the children's writing genre, there still exists a sense of frustration and indeed insecurity, among my children's writer and illustrator colleagues.

Reports of decreasing publisher acquisitions and rights activity at the recent Bologna and Frankfurt Book Fairs, as well as decreasing remuneration based on high discount contractual and distribution arrangements, combine to create an uncertainty about the tenure of practice within the children's writing genre. However, it's not all gloom and doom. Data recently published in the three-year University of Melbourne Book Study Project indicates that children's texts were the leading fiction category for books published in Australia, coming in at 12% of titles, 3% ahead of adult fiction and literature at 9% (Thompson 2009: 13). This publishing trend for increased production of children's books is also evident in Korea where, in 2008, children's books accounted for 20% of all new books published, and in their translation market, where the largest number of books translated was children's, at 42% (Korean Publishers Association 2009a). As reported by Page:

statistics from the annual library survey conducted by the UK's Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) for 2008-9 - the National Year of Reading - show a marked rise in issues for children's books across the year, corresponding with increases in children's book buying, while the adult market declined ... Lending of children's fiction rose by 6.1% ...and non-fiction showed a smaller rise of 0.7%. Meanwhile the number of children's books bought was up by 8.8%' (Page 2010)

While these industry statistics indicate attribution of commercial value, universities and writing courses also have an opportunity to support genre awareness, research connections and active practitioner research in children's literature - all contributors to broader measures and perceptions of esteem. Stephen Muecke, inaugural Professor of Writing at University of NSW and pioneer in the field of fictocriticism and arts autoethnography, recently summed it up succinctly: 'Historians will look back on this period in Australia's literary life as the time

universities had their chance. This is a time not to domesticate writing but to create partnerships with the industry and book loving public' (Muecke 2009).

Creative Arts PhD Roundtables in Sydney and Melbourne (Australian Learning and Teaching Council 2008) also noted the need for universities and their respective staff to involve themselves actively in the opportunities to affirm the alignment between research and practice in the arts; a point also made in the UK's 2003 *A Strategy for Children's Literature* report, which stated that, 'Historic underfunding, related in part to the low status accorded to children's literature in much of higher education, was felt to have inhibited the development of ambitious research and substantial collaborative projects' (Arts Council England 2003).

Anecdotal evidence at least suggests that children's and young adult genres in creative writing courses are of significant interest to a growing body of students and active practitioners - aspiring, emerging and experienced. In the Australian context, it seems reasonable to suggest that this demonstrates an increasing awareness of the 12% new publication market share. However, while there is evidence of significant publishing activity in the genre, children's and young adult writing would appear underrepresented in the streams of academic writing conferences and journals - a subject Verboord (2003) suggests is worthy of further consideration when analysing esteem measures of literary value.

My own experience indicates that a significant number of Swinburne University's Masters of Arts (writing) students show a demonstrable enthusiasm for children's and young adult genres. Australia is also home to some of the world's notable children's writers and illustrators. Our distinguished children's book creators include Graeme Base, Mem Fox, Shaun Tan, Gary Crew, Leigh Hobbs, Bob Graham, Ursula Dubosarsky, Ann Spudvilas, Greg Rogers, Jackie French, Morris Gleitzman, Paul Jennings, Ann James and International Board on Books for Young People Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award winning author, Sonya Hartnett, just to name a few. Sonya Hartnett's winning of this award in 2008 acknowledges Australia's standing in the field, and has been followed by the 2010 nominations of Shaun Tan, Morris Gleitzman, Hazel Edwards, along with New Zealand's Margaret Mahy, winner of last year's Hans Christian Andersen Award (Dempsey 2009). Why then in Victoria, the home of so many awardwinning and talented children's writers and illustrators, is there no children's category in the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards? Is it any wonder that some children's writers experience feelings of insecurity?

It would be easy to sympathise with a view that this is, in part, evidence of systemic literary elitism and hierarchal exclusivity. In this context, the previous non-representation of children's categories in Australia's Prime Minister's Literary Awards noted in my 2009 AAWP conference paper (Carthew 2009) provided grounds for children's writers to feel marginalised. However it is heartening to see that two new categories for children's and young adult writers were recently announced by the Australian Arts Minister, the Honourable Peter Garrett (2010), who said, 'The new award categories are an opportunity to celebrate the clever and engaging books written by authors for younger audiences. With the introduction of the new categories, these Awards truly celebrate the breadth, quality and uniqueness of Australian literature'. This point was also made by the then Prime Minister in his blog, where he stated that the reason for deciding to redress this disparity was to give children's and young adult writers due recognition for their 'important part of our literary landscape' (Rudd 2010). Both categories will receive the same \$100,000 prize as the mainstream literature category.

In other states greater balance has been and is evident. For example, the NSW Premier's Awards for Literature has two young adult and children's literature prizes, and the Queensland Premiers Awards also has two dedicated children's and young adult sections, as does the Western Australian Premier's Literary Awards. However, a quick scan of the review columns in one of Australia's leading newspapers, the Melbourne *Age*, often regarded as a paper for the literary informed, reveals no regular section for children's book reviews and only sporadic forays into substantive exposure for the genre or its practitioners. Advocates of *The Age* and other publications, such as *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Australian Book Review*, may protest that they and other newspapers do indeed have 'regular' children's reviews; however I would argue that there is nowhere near the same level of profile or space allocated to children's books or writing when compared with other genres such as adult fiction. This is certainly in stark contrast to *The New York Times* which does have regular weekly children's reviews both online and in hard copy. *The Sydney Morning Herald's* own blog feedback site features vigorous feedback on this perceived lack of attention, and contains the following comment by

well known author Melina Marchetta who says, in regard to the scant media coverage of the 2007 CBCA awards:

Aside from charting the Harry Potter phenomenon, the Herald pays scant attention to children's and young adults' literature. The Miles Franklin Awards, for example, always command space in the paper, and rightly so; the Australian Children's Book Council Awards, however, are slighted. This disregard cannot be attributed to low sales volume, because young people are buying and reading books written by Australian writers in great numbers. Is it elitism? Or is the Herald suggesting children and teenagers are irrelevant? (Marchetta 2007)

However, while lack of media attention is a source of frustration for some, fortunately there are other outlets, including a growing number of writers festivals, arts events and awards that do provide positive exposure for children's and young adult genres. It is also of significant interest to children's book creators and researchers to see the emergence of connections between art, design, writing and other disciplines, evidenced by Swinburne University's recent *Art.Media.Design: Writing Intersections* conference (2009) and in the themes of similar international conferences. Muecke draws attention to this developing interest and convergence when he comments that 'Student numbers between 2002 and 2006 in the key creative arts disciplines such as dance, graphic design, written communication (including creative writing) fashion design and music were boosted by 50 per cent' (Muecke 2009: 28) This also serves to highlight the potential for developing cross discipline studies related to children's books, illustrated texts, multimedia and multiliteracies – all areas of research and practice that fit with the imperatives of The New London Group's vision of recognising practice 'welcoming of multiple and divergent collaborations' (1996: 89).

The future of the (children's) book

So what can we do about this maelstrom of insecurity and potential? In Australia, Melbourne's newly crowned and privileged status as a UNESCO City of Literature together with the establishment of the Wheeler Centre: Books, Writing, Ideas provide unique opportunities for exposure to all genres in literature to make inroads into our cultural psyche and funding structures.

Other state initiatives such as the establishment of the Australian Institute for the Future of the Book or 'if: book Australia' in Queensland, are exciting platforms from which to develop connections between the arts and education sectors and to expand recognition of Australia's capacity for producing quality children's and adult literature.

In a telephone conversation on 3 October 2009, one of the directors of Books Illustrated, Ann James, indicated that Australia could be a future guest of honour at Italy's Bologna Children's Book Fair, 'one of the world's leading publishing fairs covering all genres for infants, children and young adults' (Robson 2009). It is most interesting that Bologna's 2010 guest of honour, Korea, notes on the official Bologna website that their participation in the book fair is recognition of the importance of the children's genre 'marking a turning point in the history of Korean publishing' (Korean Publishers Association 2009b). If we assume that one of the aims of higher education writing courses is to connect students and courses with relevant literary and publishing industry trends and linkages, then Korea's recognition of the children's market could be seen as indicative of increasing globalised value associated with the genre in terms of both business imperatives and cultural status.

In conclusion

The notion of 'high' and 'low' literature as noted by Verboord (2003) is a complex and contested concept intimately entwined with notions of artistic purpose, historical context and peer acknowledgment. The contribution of children's book creation to literary and cultural lore is deserving of greater attention within academic discourse as its practice and artefacts provide a unique area for exploration. The challenge for higher education writing courses is to provide opportunities to explore the contribution of children's writing to practice, theoretical discourse and research. By placing children's writing within a 'valued space', higher

education providers and academics also have a role in developing a greater appreciation of the value of the genre and a pivotal role in supporting our publishing industry, creative voice, active practice and research output.

The challenge for children's writers and advocates of children's literature in an increasingly globalised community is to work towards a more unified voice and rise above artistic insecurity to ensure active and vibrant practice in that space - in so doing, affirming to themselves and others the value and joy of seeing the blue between.

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