The National Centre for Australian Children’s Literature: A “Unique and Significant Collection”

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Laying the Foundation

The story of the National Centre for Australian Children’s Literature (formerly the Lu Rees Archives) began with the vision and enthusiasm of one woman. As early as 1973, Lu Rees had established the basis for what the Centre has become today. Her passion for the task was fuelled by her belief that the creative work of authors, illustrators, publishers, and others engaged in producing Australian children’s books formed an important part of the nation’s cultural heritage and must be preserved. In 1974, the Australian Government provided a grant of $500 to each branch of The Children’s Book Council of Australia (CBCA). Lu Rees, the President of the ACT Branch, proposed to all branches that a national collection of children’s literature be established with files about the authors and illustrators and their books.

Viewing translations as an essential part of an author’s works, Lu Rees wrote to authors, illustrators, and publishers in 1979 asking them to donate their translations. Our largest collection of translations is the works of Emily Rodda with 1,200 editions.

In 1981, again writing to authors, illustrators, and publishers, Lu Rees asked them to donate copies of all their books. Today thirty-four publishers and their imprints routinely donate copies of their children’s books, and most have been doing so since 1981.

When a permanent home needed to be found for the growing collection, an informal agreement between the CBCA and the Canberra College of Advanced Education, now the University of Canberra (UC), saw the collection moved to the College in 1980. At that time, the collection held 2,900 books and 170 research files. Today, there are almost 29,000 books in 53 languages and 450 research files.

In 1988, the Lu Rees Archives achieved deductible gift recipient status enabling it to collect authors’ papers and manuscripts, illustrators’ artworks, two publishers’ archives, audio recordings, photographs, theses, reference material, and ephemera.

In 2012, the Lu Rees Archives became an incorporated body in the ACT and in 2015 changed its name to the National Centre for Australian Children’s Literature Inc. These steps were taken in order to focus its aims, enhance its strength, and pursue a more strategic role in the field of Australian children’s literature.

Over all this time, the work of the Centre has been completed by a loyal band of volunteers. Today volunteers contribute the equivalent of hav-
ing 2.5 full-time staff. Many come with high levels of expertise; others develop expertise for the Centre. This invaluable group offers a loyal, highly skilled, and richly diverse pool of talent.

**Building the Collection**

A modest idea can achieve extraordinary results where there is vision and resolve. Although the collection has developed in so many ways, Lu Rees’ vision is still recognizable within the Centre’s activities today. She knew that for Australian children’s literature to be accepted as a discipline of study in its own right, it needed a diverse and strong collection which would lay the foundation for knowledge building and sharing. No other organization in Australia has accepted this challenge to the same degree as the National Centre for Australian Children’s Literature. Today, the collection is valued at over eight million dollars, and each year it enhances in value.

In 2011, an external expert assessed the significance of the collection. He reported that “it has established a firm reputation among researchers, students, bibliographers, librarians and the general public as one of the most important collections of children’s literature in Australia” (Powell I). He described the collection as “significant” and “unique.” In benchmarking the collection against national holdings, he demonstrated that the collection, specifically for its post-1960 items, equaled those at the National Library and several state libraries. Frequently, the Lu Rees Archives held the only copy of a particular translation.

Since we aim to collect all Australian children’s books over time, we have discovered two invaluable sources for filling gaps in the collection, particularly of pre-1960 editions. Canberra’s Lifeline Book Fair has provided many gems. So, too, have our “wish lists,” published on our website. We have completed several important collections in this way, and the strategy is very satisfying for both the Centre and the donor.

In 1988, the Lu Rees Archives gained deductible gift recipient status. This has enabled us to develop major collections of works created by authors, illustrators and publishers. Through the Cultural Gifts Program, sponsored by the Australian Government, donors can claim a tax benefit based on the market value of their donation. We have accepted forty-five such collections with several more in the pipeline.

Each collection differs in scope and content and can include manuscripts, papers, books, artwork, correspondence, media, and ephemera. These are particularly important for researchers as they reveal the creative process. There are examples of the staged development of manuscripts, preliminary artwork and correspondence between creators and their book designers, editors, and publishers.

The Centre holds the manuscripts and papers of some of Australia’s most respected authors including Emily Rodda, Gillian Rubinstein, Gary Crew, Margaret Wild, and Jackie French and artists such as Bob Graham, Graeme Base, and Shaun Tan. Their collections are a rich resource for researchers (Milne and Alderman 57). Detailed finding aids, guides, and artwork frameworks prepared by Centre staff and available on the website provide entry points to the collections for researchers.

Publishing archives in public institutions anywhere in the world are extremely rare. Only a handful of them are held in Australia. Of these, two are the archives of children’s publishers, and both are held in the Centre. The Walter McVitty Books archive was acquired in 1992 and the Omnibus Books archive in 2004. These archives provide unique perspectives from publisher, author, and illustrator. They reveal how manuscripts are selected, how books are marketed, the publishing philosophy of a particular company, how international editions are negotiated, a comparison of practices with similar publishers worldwide, and the financial side of publishing.
While individual parts of the Centre’s collections are themselves significant, the great strength of the collection overall lies in the relationships and interconnections between the various parts. Here is the detailed story of the creators’ journey, their relationships with illustrators and publishers, the progress from the first draft, and sometimes, the many iterations along the way.

**Encouraging Life-long Learning**

It is these relationships and interconnections that draw people, young and old, to learn from the Centre.

Our collections offer endless possibilities for life-long learning. Using original artworks and manuscripts, we, as educators, explore the inspiration and artistry of creators with young children in primary schools.

Secondary school students delve more deeply into the creators’ art through exploring examples of authors and illustrators working together and singly as they create various jacket covers and alternative illustrations and work through various drafts searching for that perfect sentence or word.

We support learning experiences for emerging professionals through internships and individual learning experiences at university level. We know that linking theory and practice deepens the learning experience and produces experienced professionals. Students studying Museum Practice, Cultural Heritage, Literary Studies, Creative Writing, Teacher Librarianship, and Information Studies come from around Australia. Some of the learning experiences have included students of graphic designers and creative writers creating picture books for the Get Real! Project.

Other projects have included creating guides to an author’s papers, researching rare books, documenting original artwork, researching Australian children’s publishers, and developing teaching and learning materials based on the Centre’s resources. Over three years, students studying Museum Studies at the Canberra Institute of Technology have worked in small groups to curate public exhibitions using our collection.

In 2016, the UC’s Cultural Heritage Collective students worked with the Centre, academics, University art curator, and educators to produce the exhibition *Seeing Stories* featuring forty-eight framed original artworks from Australian children’s books. Students were involved over four months in all aspects of this exhibition, including the planning phase. They were involved from the moment the artwork was delivered by a specialist art courier, through the unpacking and inventorying, to the moment of guests arriving on the opening night.
coincided with the Canberra Theatre's production of *Storm Boy* in 2015. Colin Thiele: His Work and Legacy, featured family, publisher, theatre director, and scholar, each giving a unique perspective on Colin Thiele's life and work. There is a permanent record of these talks on YouTube. A month-long exhibition at the Civic Library featured Colin Thiele's translations, original artwork, realia, and family memorabilia along with children's activities on our website.

Family, friends, and others shared the art of Pixie O'Harris (1903-1991) through talks and an exhibition. Hazel Edwards, spoke about her memoir surrounded by her papers she had previously donated to the Centre. Our events with Emily Rodda reached diverse audiences. Over five hundred school children were thrilled to hear her speak and answer their questions. Many later filled the National Library foyer queuing as she patiently signed their books. Some two hundred people attended an event to celebrate the cataloguing of over 470 Rodda translations and the formal acceptance of her papers and manuscripts and to hear her talk Children's Books Unite the World.

With an ACT Government grant, we developed a program for residents in two retirement villages. *Story: Mental Stimulation, Self-reflection and Reminiscence, Social Interaction and Wellbeing* offered residents a unique experience which they enjoyed and valued. With our current multicultural grant-funded project, *Sharing Story and Culture*, we are working with the Chinese community to provide Australian children's books translated into Simplified Chinese. The collection will rotate among their schools and be available for the children to borrow and share with their family at home.

This year, we are planning two small-scale exhibitions. One features May Gibbs (1877-1969), an iconic illustrator for children, to be held at the Canberra Museum Gallery and in concert with the Canberra Theatre's production of May Gibbs' work. We are also celebrating the centennial of *The School Magazine*, Australia's oldest magazine for children. We will be exhibiting selections from our full run of this journal. People across Australia have shared their memories of this magazine, some of whom say it inspired them to become writers and illustrators. This exhibition in the Civic Public Library will feature original artwork from creators who appeared in this magazine over the years.

Every opportunity is taken for sharing and promoting our national heritage of Australian children’s literature. It is the primary reason for everything we do. Through sharing of stories we deepen our understanding of who we are, where we have come from, and where we are headed.

We realize that our ongoing program of events, festivals, and exhibitions must be promoted, and so our move into social media. We began our Facebook, Twitter, and quarterly e-newsletter a year and a half ago. By mid-year 2016, we have 700 friends who receive our e-newsletter, 929 Friends on Facebook, and 2,237 Followers on Twitter. Recently, we traveled across Australia to share our vision and seek comments and support from our inner circle of stakeholders—including authors, illustrators, publishers, and children's literature organizations. We are enormously encouraged by the level of support and enthusiasm for what we are striving to achieve.

**Achieving the Vision**

Much has been achieved with limited resources. The Centre is the pre-eminent institution where Australian children’s literature and related artworks are the
Such interactions between experienced professionals and university students produce enthusiastic, committed, and knowledgeable professionals. We know, too, that the future of any country’s heritage lies with the current and future generations.

**Inspiring Researchers**
The Centre holds unique materials enabling researchers to produce original material, thereby laying the foundation for future research. Such was the case with a researcher comparing children’s and adults’ views on Australian award-winning books. The Centre holds Australia’s only full run of fifty-seven issues of *Ripper Reading*, a magazine produced by a teenager with young people writing all the reviews. The researcher compared these reviews to adults’ reviews appearing in our full runs of all Australian children’s literature journals. A researcher from Canada appreciated our unique background material about an award for culturally diverse material. She compared government support of culturally diverse material in Canada, Africa, and Australia.

Researchers appreciate the Centre’s unique and comprehensive research files on authors, illustrators, publishers, and critics. These date from the 1930s, before the flourishing development of Australian children’s literature began in the 1970s. Such material is categorized into thirty different types of material, thus facilitating comprehensive research. Most recently, the Centre completed documenting the publishing archive of Omnibus Books Publisher, Australia’s first independent children’s publisher, which began in 1982. This archive reveals unique insights into publishing. Digitized audiotapes with accompanying digitized photographs of Australia’s authors, illustrators, publishers, and critics discussing the field of Australian children’s literature from 1975 to 1998 are, as yet, undiscovered gems.

**Engaging Communities**
It is our goal not only to collect, preserve, and document our collections but to share these widely with diverse groups. We run exhibitions, festivals, programs for special groups, and smaller events celebrating particular creators.

Our exhibitions are often ambitious as we collaborate with expert partners. With Ann James and Ann Haddon from Books Illustrated (Melbourne), their colleague Nicky Lo Bianco, and the Canberra Museum and Gallery, we celebrated the thirty-year career of Bob Graham, picture book writer and illustrator, whose body of work we hold in the Centre. Our exhibition, *A Bird in the Hand: Bob Graham: A Retrospective*, ran for four months in 2014 with over 12,000 people attending.

A goal of the Centre is to encourage and inspire current and future authors and illustrators. Our programs assist in their recognition and promote their contribution to children’s literature around the world. Our recent festivals, *Boundless in 2012* and *Showcase in 2013*, together featured over twenty events, twenty speakers, and one large and six mini-exhibitions across Canberra with a wide range of collaborating partners. During these festivals, over 2,800 people gathered together to celebrate Australian children’s literature.
source of joy, learned review, and celebration by the young, researchers, educators, and families. It documents and shares the creative process and inspires the next generation of readers with research collections and outreach activities. We are guided by our vision:

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

The Centre is now poised for a new stage in its development as it takes its place alongside the other national institutions. The Board has accepted this challenge and is launching a major fundraising campaign this year. What do we need? We need operational funds, staff, and space to accomplish our goals. We cannot achieve this by the Centre working alone. We are inviting others to share our vision and play a part in seeing it achieved.

The Centre is already acknowledged as a nationally significant and unique collection. It is successful on a small scale. There is no similar institution in Australia. Like all countries, we must preserve, promote, and share our cultural heritage. It expresses who we are, fosters our common interests, and enables us to appreciate our differences. We are on course to be Australia’s next National Centre in a field of endeavor that is the basis of who we are.

FURTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION
Website: http://www.canberra.edu.au/national-centre-for-australian-childrens-literature
Facebook: National Centre for Australian Children’s Literature Inc.
Twitter: @NatCentAusChLit
YouTube recording of event Colin Thiele: His Work and Legacy on 2 June 2015: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1oy4WhxW6k

WORKS CITED

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