

ADDRESS BY  
HER EXCELLENCY MS QUENTIN BRYCE AC  
**GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA**  
ON THE OCCASION OF  
**ADDRESS AT THE CHILDREN'S BOOK COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA (CBCA) BOOK OF  
THE YEAR AWARDS**  
CUSTOMS HOUSE, BRISBANE  
20 AUGUST 2010

Judges, award recipients

And all of us who are happy to agree with CS Lewis that

a children's story that can only be enjoyed by children isn't a good children's story in the slightest!

and, no book is really worth reading at the age of ten which isn't equally - and often far more - worth reading at the age of fifty and beyond!

Ladies and gentlemen,

it really is a treat,

as national patron of the Children's Book Council,

to join you here for this great event in another year of children's book publishing in Australia.

Today is the start of Book Week 2010 carrying that wonderful theme "Across the Story Bridge", which of course evokes some special memories and connections here in Brisbane.

How many hundreds of thousands of stories have been raced out by children over the years as they've driven with their parents from one end of the Story Bridge to another?

In fact, that tradition started only five years before the Children's Book Council did, and I guess the storytellers had longer to ponder their plots then!

So, this year, with a favourite bridge turning 70, we're also celebrating 65 years of infectious enthusiasm and commitment by the Children's Book Council:

in their encouragement, development, support and recognition

of Australian children's book authors and illustrators, advocates, educators and readers.

I heard an interview not long ago with publisher Neil Porter of Roaring Books, a US children's publishing house that has a number of Australian authors on its books.

He said that he is swept away by the vitality of Australian writing for children.

'Audacious' was the word he used for our approach to writing, language and pictures.

He praised our willingness to deal with complex, difficult, and risky issues such as homelessness and death in visceral ways.

And he said that at the annual Bologna Children's Book Fair,  
it's the Australian writers who are the most interesting and engaging.

Well, you can imagine, by that stage, the ABC journalist was almost hyperventilating with national pride!

As I was too, though certainly not surprised to hear it given the quality of the work being awarded today, and the books available to us all in our bookshops, libraries and schools.

Every so often Gleebooks in Sydney emails out its calendar of events with a little reflection at the start.

This week, the sender's message went like this:

My wife is reading *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to our young son.

Our daughters can recite long passages from it with little prompting.

At present we have a diorama complete with various Narnians, and snow made from soap flakes in the hallway of our home.

I read the book as a child, as a teenager and as an adult.

It appeared as the influence or reference point often in the work of my undergraduate students when I taught creative writing.

Its charm has never diminished and when I hear my wife reading of wardrobes and Turkish delight I want to leave my work desk and enter into its world again as if for the first time.

There's no doubt that CS Lewis had the knack of holding a reader for a lifetime.

That's a tough test for any writer, and a rare thing to make it over the line.

But there was something else about that reflection that's worth a mention here.

There is no time in our lives quite like childhood when the wells of our imaginations, memories and hopeful hearts are deeper and more open,

no matter what else may seek to clutter or torment our days and nights.

And if those wells are filled to brimming in our early years somehow they buffer us from the narrowing, diluting influences of adulthood.

There's a passage I'll never forget in Gail Jones's book, *Sorry*, when the character, Perdita, a lonely child of troubled parents, growing up in remote outback Western Australia, explains her relationship with her mother and books following her father's death:

Because we were stranded together, and because I stuttered, we read.

There is no refuge so private,

no asylum more sane.

There is no facility of voices captured elsewhere so entire and so marvellous.

My tongue was lumpish and fixed,

but in reading, silent reading, there was a release, a flight, a wheeling off into the blue spaces of exclamatory experience, diffuse and improbable, gloriously homeless.

All that was solid, melted into air,

all that was air reshaped, and gained plausibility.

My friends, that's why we're here today.

To honour and cherish Australian writers and illustrators who, with their extraordinary literary and artistic talents, do these things for our children.

And those other Australians who do their very best to make sure that every child in their community is given the resources and the opportunity to wheel off into blue spaces of exclamatory experience.

I think most of us would have to own up to having entertained the notion of writing a children's book.

I wonder whether it's more about our wanting to escape from our day jobs through wardrobes to devour Turkish delight

than any genuine belief in our storytelling abilities.

Though I'm sure we've all done a bit of fantasising about that too.

Clearly, it's no easy business, and it is a business too, with all the market and financial pressures that accompany the writing, publishing and selling of books.

But rarely do we get an inkling of that when we hear our children's authors and illustrators talk about their work, and, even more so,

when they are talking with children about their work.

Earlier this year, during the Sydney Writers' Festival, we were fortunate to have children's authors,

Deborah Abela,

Kate Forsyth

and Belinda Murrell,

come to Admiralty House and run some workshops with young people on the evolution of a story.

The authors utterly immersed themselves in every moment.

They were beguiling yet thoroughly honest and direct.

The children were enraptured.

And those of us peeking around doorways were too!

It was a beautiful insight into what it takes

and it takes a special and subtle something that I can't even begin to articulate

to engage a young person in words and stories

and to keeping engaging them

until they're hooked.

Ladies and gentlemen, I feel enormously proud and privileged to present these awards today.

Recipients, on behalf of all Australians, thank you for your outstanding contribution to the lives and futures of our children and our nation.