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The Politics of Children's History

Nadia Wheatley

I feel today as I often feel at a funeral. I mean that it is lovely to see everyone, but I lament the circumstances that have brought us together.

As the events which caused this forum are so painful — both to me and to many of my colleagues — I would prefer to ignore the past. However, I have been asked to speak about 'The Politics of Children's History', and I feel that *politically* it is my duty to try to grapple with what I see as a number of misconceptions that were reflected in the controversy that provoked today's forum. I hope that, by facing these, we may be able to prevent such a situation from arising again.

Before I begin, I would like to say that I was one of the judges for the New South Wales Premier's History Award in the inaugural year of this prize, and I have also been a judge for the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards. On the other side of the process, my work has been judged in over a hundred awards during the last nineteen years. As a professional writer, I am comfortable with the fact that a book of mine missed out on being shortlisted for the 2001 New South Wales Premier's History Awards. However, as someone trying to make a living out of writing for children in this country, and as a longterm supporter of Australian youth literature, I was dismayed at the way in which the judges' decision to make no shortlist in the children's category was publicly reported.

I believe that this happened, not through ill will, but because of the naivety of the judges and other commentators. As the judging panel does not include anyone from the world of Australian children's literature, I don't expect the judges to know that, by and large, the media will not run stories on Australian children's literature. I don't expect the judges to know that the kind of cultural cringe that once used to operate in regard to

all Australian literature has now shifted to youth literature. If Australian youth literature is mentioned at all in the media, the coverage is usually an attack on authors for dealing with issues that confront young people — issues such as homelessness, drugs, sexual choices, death or suicide. This local perception of our literature is rather strange, because overseas — in Canada, Britain and Europe — Australian youth literature is seen as being at the cutting edge in terms both of subject matter and literary form. But here, it is apparently received wisdom that Australian children's authors aren't any good at their job; and anyway, what we should be doing is trying to write like J. K. Rowling.

This was the context in which I, like many others in my industry, opened the *Sydney Morning Herald* on a Monday morning last August, on the day after Children's Book Week had ended, and saw a large photograph of kids celebrating books at the Children's Book Council's Fabulous Family Fun Day. I thought: *Great! Some good coverage for a change!* Then I read the headline:

**CHILDREN'S HISTORY BOOKS SO DULL
JUDGES LEAVE THEM ON THE SHELF.¹**

The article was not about the event depicted in the photo, but was concerned with the fact that the judges for the 2001 New South Wales Premier's History Awards had failed to shortlist any books in the area of Children's History. "The books submitted in the category were just dull," said one of the judges.'

Mercifully I missed hearing the discussion of this that evidently occurred on talkback radio that day, in which children's authors were evidently slammed again. On the Wednesday, however, I opened the *Herald* to find an even larger article explaining (according to the headline) **'WHY THE PREMIER SAID "'NO" TO CHILDREN'S HISTORY'**.² In this longer piece, a judge from a previous year was quoted as saying that 'many of the works were "mired in a monocultural vision of Australia"'. It was noted that 'successive judges have blamed poor standards' in writing children's history 'on everything from a collective failure of imagination and lack of rigorous scholarship and research to a narrow "bush and billycan" approach to history'. Meanwhile, the Chair of the 2001 judging panel, Dr Barry Dyster, was reported as saying:

There needs to be a shift in the publishing climate so that authors who specialise in the [history] genre are adequately supported and rewarded. At present, those in the best position to write history for children — university academics — have no financial incentive to do so, while those who attempt the task — mainly school teachers and lay authors — lack the resources or the clout to override the commercial demands of publishers who largely view the genre as unprofitable.

He was further reported as believing that 'good writing of history for children should mirror [...] works like J.K. Rowling's best-selling *Harry Potter* series'.

In neither article, was anyone with a positive view of Australian children's books asked to give an opinion. Overall, in an intellectual climate in which Australian youth literature receives very bad press, it was most unfortunate to have all Australian's children history branded as dull, monocultural, intellectually shoddy, unimaginative, and failing some sort of benchmark supposedly set by the *Harry Potter* books.

Since these two articles were published, I have spoken to a number of authors and publishers about the judges' comments, as reported. Overall, the reaction is one of confusion in regard to a number of the expectations and misconceptions that the judging panel appear to have about a great deal of the business of writing and publishing for young people. Some of the misconceptions also appear in the official judges' report, while the award guidelines seem to set up some unachievable targets. I propose to run through a few of these areas.

The first misconception I would like to raise concerns the way in which books are published, and the relationship between authors and illustrators on the one hand, and publishers on the other. The judges' report refers to 'creating conditions and expectations so that publishers and authors produce outstanding and imaginative books'. As we have seen, the Chair of the judging panel also urges 'a shift in the publishing climate'.

From this, I get the impression that the judges are unaware that there are two types of publishing companies, operating in totally different ways, targeting different markets, and paying their authors by different methods. On the one hand, there are educational publishers, who produce text books for sale into schools. Alternatively, there are trade publishers, who produce books for sale to the general public. While

these trade books are also often used as classroom or library resources, they are not geared to specific curriculum or syllabus areas.

Like most authors who live full time from writing, I publish my books with trade publishers. With a trade book, I come up with the idea for a book and research it at my own cost. Writing the text can take between two and ten years. When I am happy with it, I offer it for sale through my literary agent, who negotiates the standard royalty of 10% of recommended retail price for a hardcover or 7½ % for a paperback. When I sign the contract, I receive an advance payment — usually a few thousand dollars — which will later be deducted from my royalties. I usually choose my own editor and illustrator, and I always work very closely with the editor, designer and illustrator. I stick my nose into everything, ranging from the design of the cover to the choice of food at the book launch. Despite being what Dr Dyster calls a 'lay author', I do not 'lack clout'; neither does my literary agent. And so I always end up with the book that I want. After that, my work is tested in bookshops. If kids and parents like it, they buy it, and I get paid. If it is no good, I don't get any return on the labour time I have invested. I have managed to survive off my writing income for nineteen years.

The most recent book on which I have worked — *Papunya School Book of Country and History* — is a good example of a trade publication. This was a little bit different in origination, because the author is Papunya School and the royalties will go to the school. The school employed me as a consultant to do the research and provide the written text in collaboration with Anangu staff and students, and my partner, Ken Searle, was employed by the school to do the design and oversee the artwork, which was produced by about forty illustrators, aged between twelve and seventy. However, this is typical of a trade book in that the publishers, Allen & Unwin, allowed the author and its consultants to have editorial and design control. That is, the book was not driven by commercial demands, but was simply the story that the school wanted to tell. It is nevertheless a highly saleable product.

So — going back to the judges' comments — it sounds great to say that the economic rewards for writing Australian children's history should be increased. But how is that be done? Perhaps we could lobby the government to bring in some sort of

law increasing the royalty rate on children's history books to, say, 20%. However, I am afraid that this would mean that publishers would prefer to publish books on subjects other than history. Or perhaps we could increase the recommended retail price of children's history books from \$29.95 to \$49.95. However, this would mean that buyers would prefer to buy books on subjects other than history. Overall, the only solution would seem to be to abolish the capitalist system, so that bookshops and multinational publishing companies are not allowed to make profits. As that option seems unlikely to happen in the near future, I wonder how the judges would propose to implement their incentive scheme.

(I also find my mind boggling at the way it seems to be taken for granted that university academics would not undertake writing for children unless the pay were increased. I would have thought that a commitment to education and history should have been enough incentive, especially as these people — unlike 'lay authors' — already have regular incomes and superannuation. As for the suggestion that academics are 'in the best position' to write children's history, a quick glance at the prose styles of many contributors to historical journals is enough to demolish that notion.)

Let's jump now to the guidelines for the New South Wales Premier's History Awards, and look at the difficulty of the task that is set for authors of history for young people. According to these guidelines, works of fiction as well as non-fiction may be entered in this category but they must be 'based on sound original research'. 'Educational texts will be considered' (the guidelines continue) 'only if they evidence an original historiographical approach'.

I find it fascinating that the guidelines for all the adult award categories — the Premier's Australian History Prize, the Premier's General History Prize, the Premier's Community and Regional History Prize et cetera — do not mention any need for original research or original historiography. The sole requirement in the adult areas is that the work be 'significant'. Yet in the category where authors may have only thirty-two pages in which to present their material, they have to show evidence of original historiography. Surely this is a case of double standards.

In the fiction area, there is an additional problem with this requirement, because it completely misunderstands the difference in genre between historical fiction and straight history. In regard to the former, it is only necessary in most cases for the writer (whether for children or adults) to make a thorough study of other people's research material in the relevant area. (Indeed, in an article about writing historical novels, Kate Grenville was recently quoted as saying : 'I'll research only until I find something juicy, and then I'll run off with it and turn it into something else.'³ And no one has claimed that Peter Carey had to unearth new material in order to write *The True History of the Kelly Gang*.) Further, if a fiction writer *were* to do 'sound original research' for a novel, the novel would fail as *fiction* if there were any overt evidence of such research in the text.

For example, a number of years before I began writing fiction, I was the first historian to discover the records of the Newtown anti-eviction battle of 1931. I was also the first person to publish an account of this battle.⁴ In 1984, I found my historical knowledge of this battle transforming itself into a novel, which I titled *The House That Was Eureka*. A couple of years ago, I did some new original research on the battle and produced a new academic article about the events.⁵ In the light of this new information, I found myself completely revising and expanding the novel. Now, it may sound immodest to say this, but I probably happen to be the world expert on the Newtown anti-eviction battle. Yet in neither version of the novel is it at all evident that I have done years of research on the area.

I ask the judges to explain: how is a fiction writer meant to 'evidence' her research? In both *The House That was Eureka* and in my other historical novel, *A Banner Bold*, I have a Historical Note at the end in which I give some additional context for the story. However, that is as much as I can do. I cannot put footnotes and a bibliography into a novel. An even more problematic situation is raised by another historical fiction of mine, *My Place* (illustrated by Donna Rawlins). With only forty-eight pages in which to offer twenty windows into 60,000 years of Australian history — and with the use of the first person narrative written from a child's point of view — where should I acknowledge my sources?

Now let's come to something that's a bit controversial. This is the issue of cultural politics. Although it was actually one of the judges from another year who declared that many Australian children's history books were mired 'in a monocultural vision of Australia', in the context of the newspaper reports this criticism appeared to apply to all of this year's crop of books as well. Of course, in personal terms, this was the thing that really hurt. I can't live with myself if my writing comes across as racist. And — let us make no bones about it — monocultural history is racist history.

I am concerned about the amount of history, written both for children and for adults, which still reflects what could be called a pre-Mabo mindset. For example, it is appalling that we continue to see books in which white explorers are depicted simply as heroes conquering an empty (or 'virgin') land. However, at least a few writers, illustrators and publishers in the children's area are trying to rewrite Australian history in the light of recent political and legal developments, and I find it disappointing that these good efforts receive no encouragement. Reading one of the *Sydney Morning Herald* reports, for example, I was sad to see Alan Tucker dismissively described as having 'dabbled in the genre' with his book *Homelands and Frontiers*.⁶ Meanwhile other commentators often accuse Australian children's authors of being slaves to political correctness. It seems we can never get it right.

On this subject of cultural politics, I was totally confused by the statement of the chair of the judging panel that those writing Australian history for children should attempt to 'mirror' the *Harry Potter* series, for the world presented by J.K. Rowling is monocultural as well as being conservative in other ways. Indeed, a great deal of the appeal of the series for adults is the fact that it reminds these readers of the books they read when they were young, when English-speaking kids were not forced on a daily basis to think about issues such as dysfunctional families, homelessness, drugs, suicide, ecological disaster, and the effects of globalisation. But should Australian authors of the twenty first century really be writing as if we were living in a British boarding school in the 1950s? (Certainly, it would make the Prime Minister happy if we did not encourage our children's imaginations to wander outside the white picket fence.)

However, while it is vital that children's history should represent the contributions made by Indigenous Australians, non-Anglo Australians, female Australians and indeed young Australians themselves as well as those made by the usual cast of dead white ruling class males, a problem can arise if we apply the standards of non-fiction to fiction. In a famous statement, Helen Garner once said that 'A novelist must be allowed her material.' I would add that one of the prime differences between history and fiction is that whereas the former should present a *comprehensive* view, the latter aims to present a *selective* view. Indeed, if the historical novelist were to seek to be culturally inclusive in the way that a non-fiction writer should be, she could distort the whole meaning of history.

In *A Banner Bold*, I attempt to tell the story of the political events leading up to the Eureka Stockade from the point of view of a girl aged about eight or nine. The story began for me one day when I was standing in the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, looking at the tiny stitches in the Eureka flag, and I suddenly had a sense of a sewing circle of women and girls, secretly making the banner. This was the hypothetical or fictional idea that set me off. However, as I began reading both primary and secondary sources, I realised that, by writing about Eureka, I could write a modern story, because I could engage with the issue of the republic. Another attraction was the fact that Ballarat in 1854 was a multicultural town. In addition, women on the goldfields had a comparative degree of freedom. Without distorting history, I could have a German Jewish Communist atheist female narrator with an Irish Catholic best friend, and the main adults could include real people such as the Italian Raffaello Carboni, the Prussian Edward Thonen, the Canadian Captain Ross, the Irish Peter Lalor and the black American John Joseph, as well as fictional adults who were Chinese, Spanish and French.

Of course, because this was historical fiction, rather than pure fiction, I had to write within the boundaries of the available evidence. I worked some Indigenous people into a Melbourne scene, but I couldn't include any in Ballarat because I found no accounts of the traditional owners still being there in 1854. I did mention the Kulin's ownership of the land in the Historical Note. But if I had put Indigenous characters into

the story, I would have given a false picture of the effects of the genocide in rural Victoria.

This novel — which incidentally was reprinted twice in the first twelve months after publication and has been reproduced by the Louis Braille audio library — was obviously found by the judges to be too monocultural or not full of enough evidence or perhaps too full of 'bush and billycans'. (As to the latter complaint against Australian children's history, I shudder to think what the judges would have said about Russell Ward's *The Australian Legend*.) Or maybe my story was just dull. Against this last criticism, I cannot complain, for finding a book dull is a matter of personal taste. We are all entitled to that. Indeed, one of the virtues of the literary judging system is that panels are composed of human beings — of individuals who like some things and dislike others. A problem only arises when the dislikes are used to damn the whole genre.

This matter of literary taste brings me to my final point, which is to do with the thing that — in the world of children's literature — goes by the name of 'child appeal'. Although this term was not actually used in the two *Sydney Morning Herald* articles, they include a great deal of reference to the perceived absence of this quality in the books which the judges didn't like. While I would agree that Australian children's history books are not always as appealing to children as they should be, I am worried about the indicators of child appeal that the judges and critics seem to be using.

On two occasions, the chair refers to young readers being raised on what he calls 'instant media'. The implication is that kids would rather be engaging with television or a computer, so writers should somehow write books that are fast and not like books. On this line, someone recently informed me that if I had done *My Place* as a computer game rather than a book, I would have 'been able to fit so much more in'. Of course, the whole point of my exercise was to compress a vast history into a forty-eight-page microcosm. I did not want or need more room. Indeed, if I had wanted more space, I would have written a different book.

On this matter of what sort of books appeal to young readers, one of the previous winners is quoted as agreeing that Australian children's authors lack 'flair and imagination'. She says that 'Many books on offer fail to deliver what this market wants — good quirky interpretations of the past [...] Crucial qualities required to sell the past to children include a sense of irreverence and humour.'

Well, that's fine for some, but I am worried that instant, quirky, and funny seem to be seen as the only alternative to dullness. In regard to my own writing, I am unable to find anything quirky or funny in the history of the Newtown anti-eviction battle, in which eighty police shot and bashed sixteen unemployed workers. I am unable to find anything quirky or funny in the battle of the Eureka Stockade, in which twenty-two diggers and five soldiers died. And when I was working with the people of Papunya on the book of their country and history, they did not tell me a single quirky or funny story about dispossession and genocide.

As for irreverence, I can only say that when I am dealing with real people and real events — whether in a non-fiction text or in a historical novel — I can show only reverence. I try to write in the spirit of E.P. Thompson, who in the Preface to *The Making of the English Working Class* declared that he sought to rescue lost causes and even people who seem 'foolhardy' or 'deluded' from what he termed 'the enormous condescension of posterity'.⁷ It seems to me that the kind of irreverence being promoted as a model for those who write history for Australian children smacks of exactly the kind of condescension that Thompson was warning against.

Overall, therefore, I believe that the commentators who weighed into this controversy have a limited understanding of the business of writing and publishing children's books. They also don't seem to know much about the qualities that constitute child appeal in a book. To get around this problem in future, I believe that the panel of judges for the New South Wales Premier's History Award always needs to include someone with experience in children's literature, with experience in evaluating what makes a good children's book.

Further, I believe that the guidelines for the awards need re-writing. You cannot expect to find evidence of rigorous original scholarship and historiography in a thirty-two-page illustrated non-fiction book, or in a novel of any length. Surely it should be enough that the children's histories, like the adult histories, make a 'significant contribution'.

And if you want to create a climate that will nurture the writing and publishing of Australian children's history, then do not publicly attack us when we are already on the ropes. Some writers and publishers feel that the constant criticism of Australian YA fiction is severely hurting the market. If critics keep talking down Australian children's history, the tiny market for this genre will contract even further. If this happens, trade publishers will have no incentive to produce history books and writers will not be able to afford to write them. The attacks are particularly hard at a time when the Australian book industry is struggling with buyer resistance to the 10% price rise in books caused by the GST and at a time when professional writers live under the threat that the current government may open the market by legalising the parallel importation of books. Both these factors have a particularly strong impact on the children's area.

As an author, I can earn more money more easily by writing fiction for children. Alternatively, I can get far more respect by writing non-fiction for adults. The only reason I write history — including historical fiction — for children is political. I want to get a message across. But if, after my best efforts, I am made to feel that I am a dull, unfunny, unquirky, unimaginative, slipshod racist — then I don't feel like writing anything at all.

¹ Angela Bennie, 'Children's history books so dull judges leave them on the shelf' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 2001

² Sharon Verghis, 'Why the Premier said "no" to children's history', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 August 2001

³ Malcolm Knox, 'Stories in the Wrong Tense', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 December 2001

⁴ Nadia Wheatley, 'Meeting Them at the Door: radicalism, militancy and the Sydney anti-eviction campaign of 1931', Jill Roe ed., *Twentieth Century Sydney*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1980

⁵ Nadia Wheatley and Drew Cottle, 'Sydney's Anti-eviction Movement: Community or Conspiracy?', ed. Raymond Markey, *Labour and Community*, University of Wollongong Press, Wollongong, 2001

⁶ Sharon Verghis, *op. cit.*

⁷ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, Middlesex, 1968, p. 13