

## 2019 CBCA Nan Chancy Award

### Acceptance Speech by James Moloney

I would like to begin by thanking the Children's Book Council of Australia for the honour they have bestowed upon me today. When I think of the many names among both writers and advocates for Australia's youth literature whose work deserves to be recognised, I feel both humble and especially proud to have been singled out. Those dual roles that the CBCA takes on, on the one hand celebrating the best of Australia's writing and secondly, projecting and infusing that literature into the lives of young Australians is something I will return to in a moment.

First, though, I could not have succeeded as a writer without the help of three industry insiders: Barbara Ker Wilson who gave me my start with *Dougy* and *Gracey*, Leonie Tyle who got the best out of my with *A Bridge to Wiseman's Cove* and Lisa Berryman who gave me free rein when it was time to explore more widely with *The Book of Lies*, *Black Taxi* and, most recently, *The Love That I Have*. Nor could I have got anywhere at all without Kate, who I'm pleased to have here with me today. *A Bridge to Wiseman's Cove* is dedicated to her with the words: Manager, Critic, Wife and Best Friend, which, I think, says it all.

Kate and I have lived our lives in Brisbane, but her Mum grew up in Hobart.

Aged eleven, Kate was sent south to spend a week with her Tasmanian grandmother and during that time they drove half an hour out of Hobart to visit one of her grandmother's friends. The three of them walked through nearby bushland until they came across a cave amid the gum trees at which point the friend remarked, 'This cave inspired my first children's book.' That book was *They Found a Cave* and Kate's grandmother's friend was Nan Chauncy. So not quite a personal connection, but a delightful connection by marriage, you might say.

My own mother was English and simply wasn't aware of the growing body of Australian children's stories of which Nan Chauncy's novels were a pre-eminent feature. She encouraged me to read Enid Blyton, of whom I was inherently suspicious. I mean, the Famous Five walked on the beach fully clothed and in their shoes and socks, for God's sake. I could spot a bunch of losers when I saw them.

This is a shame because there was bushland at the end of my street where I spent long boyhood hours engaged in adventures like many of Nan's protagonists. Had I been given her books instead of Blyton's I might have recognised myself in them and begun reading for myself at an earlier age. Fortunately, my Year 6 teacher, Mr Cornish, loved the boyish humour of Paterson and Lawson and in choosing a book to read aloud he stuck to his love of all things Australian by selecting *The Silver Brumby's Daughter*. For the first time I discovered the pleasure of becoming totally absorbed in story. So, it was Evelyn Mitchell rather than Nan Chauncy who set me on the path to being a writer, because I trace the beginnings of making up stories in my head to those afternoons after lunch when Mr Cornish read to us and I would build on those stories afterwards, in my back yard, acting out parts and inventing extra adventures of my own.

Which brings me to the point where I snap out of warm and fuzzy nostalgia and ask more seriously, who reads Australian stories to children now? Or any stories at all! In some

schools, a teacher like my Mr Cornish might have his Principal on the doorstep wanting to know which of the KLAs forever being added to the curriculum was being ignored while he partook of this indulgence. Both Kate and I were Teacher Librarians, but in both our former schools, no one now performs that role. It is the same everywhere. The Teacher Librarian will soon disappear altogether. I'm told the tale is similar for children's specialists in Public Libraries. If a mother like my own asked for books, specifically Australian books, suitable for her children, what advice might be offered beyond Mem Fox, Andy Griffiths and John Marsden.

The ramifications run deeper than simply which books children read, as well. To become fully literate, children need to practise their reading the way Steve Smith practices his cover drive and someone has to take a pro-active role in seeing that they do, regularly and happily. At a similar function a year ago, I suggested that in fifteen or twenty years a Senate Inquiry will want to know why Australian children are lagging behind in literacy and they will trace the beginnings of this stagnation to the disappearance of the Teacher Librarian, the specialist children's librarian and the dislocation of students away from sustained reading altogether.

With this gloomy outlook in mind, I return to the twin roles that the CBCA has set itself. What a travesty it will be in the years ahead if the fine literature celebrated today has no one to help connect it with its audience, is never read to them, never read by them, remaining instead a rich and valuable resource that few ever make use of. So, yes, I'm delighted that in a few minutes I'll be presenting certificates to the best of our current children's authors and illustrators, yet I can't help thinking it is in the other role that the Children's Book Council of Australia has the greatest task ahead of it.