Reading for enjoyment and Australian fiction

By Edwina West

Snapshot

Edwina West describes her *Reading Australia Fellowship for Teachers of English And Literacy* project that engaged with why, and how, teachers and teacher librarians can work to improve reading for enjoyment, and the reading of Australian fiction, amongst young people.

This project was supported by the Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund

COPYRIGHTAGENCY CULTURAL FUND

As an English Teacher I deeply value regular visits to the library with my classes. I have been lucky enough to work in schools where the library is the centre of the school, and the teacher librarians are champions of reading and literature. The reality of life in a busy school is that it can be very challenging to find the time to take students to the library to simply enjoy the act of reading. As students move through secondary school and assessment demands increase, it becomes even more difficult. Despite this, before each term break, I always try to take my classes to the library to find a book to borrow for the holidays. These visits are based, in part, on an idealism that one day they will be so bored of gaming and backyard cricket that they might eventually pick up (and enjoy!) what they have borrowed. On one such visit to the library with a high ability Year 10 English class (our first for the year, despite my best intentions), the seeds were planted for my *Reading Australia Fellowship for Teachers Of English And Literacy* project.

During a typical trip to the library, one might spy the 'loiterers' - those students who hang around bookshelf peripherals, possibly scanning book spines and almost certainly picking at their fingernails. This particular class, notwithstanding their high ability and usually very good English marks, still had their own population of wide-reading loiterers. Despite their best efforts to make themselves invisible, these students had no luck - books were promptly recommended to them and they were sent off to read in one of the 'comfy chairs'.

In one of these chairs I spotted a student, henceforth known as Red (pun intended), reading *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller. Having studied this novel at university, I asked Red about his text choice. He told me that he had no idea why he had chosen the novel, and that he found it confusing having read the same paragraph five times. He confessed that he didn't know what book to choose, and that every visit to the library was the same - he never knew what to read and each time he selected something that was too difficult or (in his words) something 'boring and random'.

...every visit to the library was the same - he never knew what to read and each time he selected something that was too difficult or (in his words) something 'boring and random'.

something 'boring and random'. Red went on to tell me how he really wanted to be a reader. He had the intention to pick up a book and be interested but lacked an understanding of what he even liked. He believed he lacked the attention span. He did not see himself as a reader. This difficulty in the seemingly basic task of selecting reading material had clearly led to a trajectory of uncertainty, despondency and encroaching disinterest.

I realised that I expected these conversations in a class of students who might not be easily achieving an 'A' in English, but not as much with a student who routinely achieved good grades. It was with this conversation that my curiosity was piqued. I wanted to know more about the 'non-reading' phenomenon I had seen developing before my eyes.

Why read?

Throughout my career I have always spruiked the advantages of reading: every parent-teacher interview, library lesson, 'drop everything and read' moment. I have not just been a reading supporter and enthusiast, but an advocate. I knew the relationship between reading for enjoyment and success in the classroom because I had seen it with my own eyes. Of course, I believed in the many other advantages of reading such as building attention span, and knowledge and empathy building. I also saw the pleasure of reading as absolutely key to our sense of humanity. While I believed all of this to be the case, the truth of the matter was that I had not ever investigated whether this was represented in any research. To be very honest, the benefits of reading felt so obvious to me that I never even thought to go searching, until that fateful day in the library. One of the many benefits I personally garnered from the fellowship project was the gift of time to research the benefits of reading, therefore confirming that my beliefs are in fact 'true'! And although I know I am preaching to the choir, I hope what I have collated here is as affirming for you as it was for me.

I knew the relationship between reading for enjoyment and success in the classroom because I had seen it with my own eyes.

Renowned reading academic Dr Margaret K. Merga (2019) highlights how the benefits of reading go beyond literacy, noting how reading helps us develop a sense of empathy when we form relationships with the characters in fiction texts. She also explores how reading is an 'intensely immersive experience' (p. 14) which can help us learn, change our minds, foster social skills and understand values - our own, those that others hold, and those that we share as a community. Pamela Paul and Maria Russo (2019), editors of *The New York Times Book Review* explain that:

> *The latest research shows that children who read at home are … better at self-regulation and executive function - those life skills that make us happier and well adjusted: controlling impulses, paying attention, setting goals and figuring out how to achieve them. Think of this as 'life readiness'.* (p. viii)

One neuroscience study even found that reading novels improved the neurological connectivity in the areas of the brain responsible for perspective-taking and story comprehension, indicating that habitual readers may be better able to empathise with the stories of others (Berns, Blaine,

Prietula & Pye, 2013). Time and time again, reading is shown to improve an individual's social and civic responsibility as it 'correlates with almost every measurement of positive personal and social behaviour' (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007).

Reading is also a learning tool - and not just academically. At the 2022 *Sydney Writers' Festival* session entitled 'There's no Place Like Home', Australian authors Jared Thomas (*Calypso Summer*, 2014; *Songs that Sound Like Blood*, 2016; *My Spare Heart*, 2022) and Zach Jones (*Growing up in Flames*, 2022) both identified fiction as a place for young people to learn. Jones communicated how he sees his own writing as 'cautionary' for his audience, referring to his own characters as learning through trial and error. Thomas sees the arts in a more general sense as the 'impetus for transformation', where reading allows young people to see themselves in characters and stories and consequently assess risk. This sentiment was corroborated by teenaged youth curator, Maya Le Her, who in another session, said it is comforting to have characters face similar issues to her (Sydney Writers Festival, 2022).

Reading also makes us better thinkers. Krashen's (2004) well-respected work *The Power of Reading* highlights the many benefits of reading, one in particular being that divergent, creative and critical thinkers were far more likely to also be readers - and voracious readers at that.

Krashen's (2004) well-respected work *The Power of Reading* highlights the many benefits of reading, one in particular being that divergent, creative and critical thinkers were far more likely to also be readers...

In a comment that perfectly encompasses all of the above insights into reading and the benefits of reading, celebrated Australian artist, illustrator, author, scholar and activist Bronwyn Bancroft stated that it is 'the imaginative world which informs the real world' (Foundation for Learning and Literacy, 2022). Reading is important as it is a matter of cultural literacy - it both shapes and is shaped from the world in which we live. But even though the 'human reasons' for reading are clear, the benefits substantiated and the importance well vocalised, still reading for enjoyment is diminishing before our eyes.

The decline of reading for enjoyment

Reading for enjoyment is a rapidly declining pastime. As a consequence, we live in a world that is, sadly, becoming more and more aliterate by the day. Aliteracy, a term first used by Daniel Boorstin, the US Librarian of Congress in 1984, is defined as the state in which the skill to read has been acquired, but not the will. He referred to illiteracy and aliteracy as the 'twin menaces' for society as a whole (Weeks, 2001).

Just as teachers and teacher librarians know the implicit relationship between reading enjoyment and increased educational outcomes, they also observe that the reading efficacy of their students has declined over time. Again, these trends are represented in the data where the 2019 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) indicates that reading performance in Australia has been steadily declining since 2000 - a trend also observed worldwide (OECD, 2019).

Merga (2014) also found that infrequent engagement with reading was related to deficiencies in holding attention for a sustained period.

The decline in reading efficacy is no doubt linked to declining reading for enjoyment. Manuel and Carter (2015) found in their research that only 19.5% of surveyed students identified reading as their most preferred leisure activity, while 30% indicated that it was their least favourite leisure activity. It is increasingly evident that the attention of young people is captured elsewhere. By comparison, 61% of the young people in Manuel and Carter's study indicated that using digital devices was the preferred leisure activity. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) also corroborates that reading for pleasure diminishes as children age, finding that children between the ages of 5 and 8 more frequently read for enjoyment than their 12 to 14 year old counterparts.

There is no single reason why reading for enjoyment has declined so much, however there are likely to be several explanations. Firstly, the rapid rise in digital technology and social media certainly impacts upon the amount of reading that all people do - even adults. Rutherford, Merga and Singleton (2018) reference the common argument that digitisation has required that young people engage in more incidental reading than ever before, however they are right to point out that this reading is not the 'sustained, long-form reading' (p.45) that has been shown to have the noted positive effects. Green (2022) laments the habit of bite-size reading, where 'viewers very speedily bounce, flick, and skitter across the surface of web pages, looking rather than finding and snatching only snippets of information' (p.70), warning that a movement away from longer, involved, deep reading prevents young people from envisioning worlds and plots through the reading of larger texts. In a similar vein, Merga (2019) points out that reading does not provide the immediate dopamine hit that young people gain from the ever more popular pastime of gaming.

...the decline in the amount of reading that young people do makes it more difficult for them to engage in reading in a sustained manner.

The old adage 'practice makes perfect' is also true when it comes to reading for enjoyment, where the decline in the amount of reading that young people do makes it more difficult for them to engage in reading in a sustained manner. Kucirkova and Cremin (2020) make the useful comparison to sport:

> *No young footballer will improve their skills without practice, without taking the space and time to kick a ball around with friends. Many will spend hours informally practising on the playground, after school and in the community... Reading for Pleasure has some similarities: intrinsically motivated young readers make the space and time to read alone and with others.* (p.73)

So there exists a vicious cycle where those who do not read for pleasure actually need to spend more time reading in order to gain the intrinsic motivation to read more and gain pleasure from it.

Reading more: Choose Australian

In addition to the decline in reading for enjoyment, my main research focus was around Australian fiction and how access to contemporary Australian literature may foster an engagement with reading. It is easy enough to advocate for reading Australian literature, but why is it important, and why Australian youth literature in particular?

For one, it is about representing the Australia that existed, exists, and will exist. In an examination of Ethel Turner's Australian classic *Seven Little Australians*, Jan Keane (2013) argues that 'literature…is not only capable of capturing and preserving for public record the ethos and mores of society at a given time but [also that]… literature written for children provides a vehicle for spreading these values and passing them down through generations' (p. 137). It is important for Australian children to know and understand the place they call home because it is a part of them, and they of it. In this way, reading Australian texts can be incredibly affirming for young people.

It is important for Australian children to know and understand the place they call home because it is a part of them, and they of it.

It is also about diversity. If we wish to see a diverse publishing industry with strong voices which meaningfully and authentically represent the people and places of our land, then we must support this industry by engaging with the fruits of its labour. This is cyclical - when we make space for voices we inevitably hear more of them, building a sense of belonging and inclusion. As Judith Graham (2001) puts it, 'the ways in which children's books reflect the nation's tenets and aspirations for itself are inevitably linked to the extent to which writers and illustrators feel part of and imbued with the sense of their country' (p. 106). Pleasingly, conversations about the importance of representation in stories seem to be occurring more and more as people are actively seeking out Australian stories which represent the Australia of today.

This is not about erasing the stories of the past! In the name of tradition and historical preservation, canonical Australian stories arguably still have their place in the classrooms and bookshelves of today, however, increasingly, people are beginning to recognise that the relevance of these stories has waned somewhat. While nodding to our past is incredibly important for understanding our present, it is essential that we temper this with an understanding of who has been silenced and promote the voices of those who are now afforded an opportunity to speak. As Rosemary Ross Johnston (2017) explains, literature allows

> *'a wide range of opportunities to develop inclusive understandings… [and a] respect for the past and for the lived pasts of others, overcoming separations of time and space to give generational and historical equity to those who have gone (and written) before' (p. 147).*

The implications of this are far-reaching. In the Literature Symposiums curated by Professor Emerita Robyn Ewing AM and Jo Padgham at the Foundation for Learning and Literacy, Bronwyn

Bancroft highlighted the incredible importance of representation in stories for Australian society at large:

> *I can't see me, I can't be me… it not only goes towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, but it is about women, it is about people with disabilities, so when we frame our societal recognition around healthy Anglo people doing great things and we don't recognize all the different elements that make up this rich tapestry that is now called 'Australian society' we are the worse for it… we are not the cohesive and wonderfully rich society that we should be, and be aspirational for…*
> (Foundation for Learning and Literacy, 2022)

It is also important to consider the powerful role that adults play in this exposure to, and construction of national identity and self-identity through stories. Bradford (2001) explains:

> *Books are necessarily informed by the cultures in which they are produced. But children's books do not merely mirror what exists; rather, they formulate and produce concepts and ideologies, always within the context of adult views about what children should know and value.* (p.5)

The idea that young people's books should reflect the Australia we see around us is not new. In a 1997 article entitled *Goodbye Australia Fair?*, Adelaide reviewer Katharine England asked 'what sort of contemporary Australia do contemporary books for young people reflect?'. She called for less texts which rely on cultural stereotyping and more which 'explore with sensitivity and depth, and from a child's point of view, what it was to live a particular little bit of multicultural Australia… with an assortment of characters whose names at least read like the class lists at our schools' (p.11-12).

Truly meaningful representation of course stretches beyond multiculturalism…

Truly meaningful representation of course stretches beyond multiculturalism, and the force for change is spearheaded by 'We Need Diverse Books' - a US not-for-profit that advocates for diversity in the publishing industry 'to produce and promote literature that reflects and honours the lives of all young people'. According to WNDB, diversity includes

> *'all diverse experiences, including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA, Native, people of color [sic.], gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities' (WNDB, 2022). This movement is vital because 'every child has a right to see themselves and their lifestyle reflected in at least some of the books they read' (England, p. 11-12).*

Representation in books for young people may be important, but will it actually make them read more? Studies from outside Australia have shown the power of representation in literature.

Flowers and Berry (2019) propose that the reason behind growing aliteracy rates in Black girls in the US is a lack of access to quality materials that are culturally relevant and suggest a series of measures to empower them through both reading and writing. There are also many examples of

'identity-affirming' literacy spaces and programs that have an enormous impact upon the literacy of students, as well as encourage them to read for pleasure (Jones, 2009).

Consequently, we must consider if young people are being exposed to a wide array of texts from diverse Australian voices through both leisure reading and required reading. Dr Alexander Bacalja (2020) from the University of Melbourne shared the findings of his research with Dr Lauren Bliss in an article for the publication, *Pursuit*. They found that over a ten-year period up until 2019, less than two per cent of texts from the VCE curriculum were by Indigenous writers. Both their work, and the work of other researchers has shown that featured Australian texts are usually colonialist in nature and fail to reflect the growing diversity of Australian society and classrooms. Despite this, Bacalja warns against the complete removal of the texts which 'silence' other voices, suggesting that 'removing these works from classrooms makes it even harder for our students to critique the stories they tell about Australia's past'.

It is very often said that children need to 'see themselves' in books. Although young people can certainly identify with characters and stories from outside Australia, and a good writer will be able to create a character with a universality of appeal no matter where they are from, it can be argued that one (of the many) avenues to increasing the reading that Australian children do is through making good quality, contemporary Australian texts available to them. The relationship between reading and young people is crumbling before our eyes, and the reality is, no single approach will fix this problem. However, ensuring students have access to engaging, interesting and quality collections of literature is *essential* if we are to make any difference in the reading that young people do. By making sure that youth collections in our libraries are stocked full of contemporary, authentic and Australian stories, we might just capture the attention of young readers, rouse their curiosity, and affirm their lived experience at the same time. This can only happen if Australian publishers continue to make great strides ensuring that they seek out authors who represent the Australia we see today.

ensuring students have access to engaging, interesting and quality collections of literature is *essential*...

Other ways to increase reading for enjoyment

There are many other things that concerned teachers and teacher librarians can do to help encourage young readers. Many schools are working hard at encouraging their students to read, and the library is central to these pushes.

Throughout my Reading Australia Fellowship I have collated and created some resources to help, from the explicit teaching of choosing strategies to school-wide approaches. These resources are freely available, **housed on a website** which I hope teachers and teacher librarians will find useful.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS]. (2012). *Children's Participation in Cultural and Leisure Activities, Australia*. Retrieved from **https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/ people-and-communities/childrens-participation-cultural-and-leisure-activities-australia/latest-release**

Bacalja, A. (2020). AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE'S GREAT SILENCE. *Pursuit*. Retrieved from **https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/australian-literature-s-great-silence**

Berns, G. S., Blaine, K., Prietula, M. J., & Pye, B.E. (2013). Short- and Long-Term Effects of a Novel on Connectivity in the Brain. *Brain connectivity, 3*, 1-11.

Bradford, C. (2001). *Reading Race*. Carlton South: Melbourne University Press.

England, K. (1997). Goodbye Australia Fair? In P. Macintyre (Ed.) *Viewpoint : fourteen years on books for young adults*. University of Melbourne.

Flowers, T. A. & Berry, E. (2019). Black Girls: Encouraging Them to Read through Representation. In G. Kirkland-Holmes (Ed.), *Child, Family, School and Community Relationships*. Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co.

Foundation for Learning and Literacy. (2022). *Literature Symposium - Why is literature so important in our lives and in literacy learning*. Retrieved from **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=12_hwgT3Fmg**

Graham, J. (2001). The Same or Different: Children's books show us the way. In M. Meeks (Ed.), *Children's literature and National Identity*. (pp. 103-110), Trentham Books Limited.

Green, M. (2022). For the love of good stories: a narrative inquiry into a reading for enjoyment pedagogy. [Doctoral dissertation, Australian Catholic University]. ORCID. **https://doi.org/10.14264/63b190c**

Jones, S. M. (2009). Bilingual identities in two UK communities: A study of the languages and literacies of Welsh and British-Asian girls. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Nottingham]. EPrints. **https://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/id/eprint/10836**

Keane, J. (2013). Nation-Building in Australia: The Pre-Federation Children's Novels of Ethel Turner. In C. Kelen & B. Sundmark (Eds.), T*he nation in children's literature: nations of childhood*. (pp. 125-138). Routledge.

Krashen, S. D. (2004). *The Power of Reading*. Heinemann.

Kucirkova, N. & Cremin, T. (2020). *Children Reading for Pleasure in the Digital Age*. SAGE Publications Ltd.

Manuel, J & Carter, D. (2015). Current and historical perspectives on Australian teenagers' reading practices and preferences. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, 38*(2), 115-128.

Merga, M. K. (2014). Western Australian adolescents' reasons for infrequent engagement in recreational book reading. *Literacy Learning: the Middle Years, 22* (2), 60-66.

Merga, M. K. (2019). *Reading Engagement for Tweens and Teens: What Would Make Them Read More?* Libraries Unlimited.

National Endowment for the Arts. (2007). *To Read or Not To Read A Question of National Consequence*. Retrieved from **https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/ToRead.pdf**

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]. (2019). *Australia - Country Note - PISA 2018 Results*. Retrieved from **https://www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/ PISA2018_CN_AUS.pdf**

Paul, P. & Russo, M. (2019). *How to Raise a Reader*. Workman Publishing.

Ross Johnston, R. (2017). *Australian Literature for Young People*. Oxford University Press.

Rutherford, L., Merga, M. K., & Singleton, A. (2018). Influences on Australian adolescents' recreational reading. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, 41*(1), 44-56.

Sydney Writers Festival. (2022, May 21). *The Feminine Critique*. Carriageworks: Sydney.

We Need Diverse Books (WNDB). (2022). *About WNBD*. Retrieved from **https://diversebooks.org/about-wndb/**

Weeks, L. (2001, May 14). The No-Book Report: Skim It and Weep. *Washington Post*. **https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2001/05/14/the-no-book-report-skim-it-and-weep/590f488d-c1fd-498d-81da-55269a967e94/**

Edwina West *is an English teacher at Oakhill College, Castle Hill, NSW. Her work was a Reading Australia Fellowship for Teachers Of English And Literacy project in 2021.*