

The Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland

Acceptance Speech 19/8/11 by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

My thanks to the CBCA (Qld Branch) and to President Tina Cavanough and Vice-President Mia Macrossan for this extraordinary honour. I feel very humbled to be conferred this award in the name of one of Queensland's great women, Dame Annabelle Rankin, and to be included in the company of the other recipients David Cox, Jenny Stubbs, Jill Morris, Kerry Mallan and Lyn Linning, I am truly more than honoured.

I've been involved in children's literature for around 30 years in one way or another: first, working as Toowoomba City Library's inaugural children's librarian in the 1980s, organising a program which included weekly Puffin Club meetings. ('There is Nuffin' like a Puffin!' is a sort of catchcry in our house, still.) Narelle Oliver was creating her first book *Leaf Tail* then and there, and we had a few chats about her work, which has gone on to become so very important in Australian publishing. I began to review and write about books, there, too, and I also formed an affiliation with the CBCA by organising CBW author visits, events and displays improvised from little more than chart paper cut into artful shapes in keeping with each theme, and which now in the photos look awfully amateurish! It's hard to imagine now that author visits were a relatively new concept then, and certainly payment for authors was as well! We had some great authors visit us including Margaret Mahy, Aidan Chambers, Christobel Mattingley, Doug Macleod, and David Cox. Later, when I returned to Brisbane, as president of the Qld Branch in the early 90s, I was also inaugural director of the QWC, and we created the three touring cover art and *The Bunyip and the Night* exhibitions which I still consider to be highlights in my career: Gregory Rogers, David Mackintosh, Armin Greder, Pamela Whitlock, Noreen Grahame and Mark Svendsen had a big part in all that. And Leonie Tyle and I had a few very important years together, too, developing a publishing imprint called Jam Roll Press, the memory of which we both hold very dear. Since 1997, and establishing my freelance business justified text, I've been a speaker at a range of CBCA events, and as a member have been greatly impressed with the work being done by this branch to pioneer so many nationally regarded programs.

During all this time I've been privileged to have worked with so many committed people, dedicated to the belief in the very best in writing for young people. Many have become friends and have supported me in many ways. I'd particularly like to acknowledge teacher librarians Jenny Stubbs, Beth Green and Judith Russell for their collegiality and tireless advocacy; to Peter Miller for offering me that opportunity in Toowoomba; author Mark Svendsen for his passionate work as writer and mentor to so many, and as my dear friend; bookseller John Moffatt for his amazing zeal, friendship and years of unflinching support; another friend Gary Crew for his innovation, enthusiasm and ground-breaking work; Nick Earls for his kind words at various times when I really needed them; Nigel Krauth for his guidance in completing what he still says is the longest PhD he's ever read; and illustrator Gregory Rogers for his inspiration, close friendship and for always being so much fun! Finally, to the many members of my wonderful family, and particularly to my husband John for enticing me to live in Gladstone and thereby forcing me to enter the exciting world of the freelancer.

Many changes have occurred in publishing and today we confront a new world in which digital media is changing the way in which publishing is done, and also the way in which writers and illustrators work; exciting changes which we need to take into account as we develop future literacy projects for young people. But some things remain the same. One of my favourite texts is Jerry Griswold's *Feeling Like a Kid: Childhood and Children's Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006). In it, he quotes Maurice Sendak who challenges those who ask how he writes for children when he has none of his own, with the rejoinder: 'I was a child.' (p 3) We've all been children; that's the one thing which binds us. And the ability to remember what that was like, infuses all the works which we strive so hard to promote. Griswold also outlines the five themes which recur in children's literature: 'Snugness, Scarieness, Smallness, Lightness and Aliveness.' May we all continue to celebrate those special qualities which children love to find in their books: the pleasure of feeling snug and safe in a world of the imagination; the exciting and cathartic pleasure of being frightened; the enjoyment of the miniature; the feeling of light-heartedness which we often forget as we grow older; and the capacity of feeling truly 'alive'. For these are the things which we hope we offer children when we invite them into the delicious world of reading.

Thank-you again for acknowledging the great joy I've had in reading, in writing about books, and the importance of sharing this pleasure with all the many people involved in the wonderful world of writing for young people.