

Brief address by James Moloney upon receiving the Dame Annabelle Rankin Award 2018

I'm very grateful to the Qld Branch of the CBCA and honoured to be named this year's recipient.

I am also old enough to recall the name of Dame Annabelle – she was one of those lofty people who ran the country and I'm pleased to be able to say that I found nothing unusual about one such leader being a woman. Of course, had no idea that Dame Annabelle played such a prominent role in the CBCA, as Qld branch president and later patron. It's only fitting that this award commemorates her hard work in a cause that we all hold close to our hearts.

I'm pleased also to have my name added to a list of people who have served children's literature so well in Queensland, foremost among them the tireless Jenny Stubbs and not the least of whom is Leonie Tyle who was my editor at UQP for books such as *A Bridge to Wiseman's Cove* and *Touch Me*.

Giving me this award tonight and in the past to fine Queensland writers and illustrators such as Jill Morris and David Cox is recognition that to maintain the strength of children's and YA literature in Australia we need two kinds of people first and foremost – those who create the books and those who work to ensure those books reach the widest possible audience.

In that regard, I'm feeling a little pessimistic these days. Everywhere I look and everyone in the business I speak to, adds a tale of reduced hours, bare-bones budgets and unsympathetic principals. For 15 years, until 1998, I was the full time TL at a well-known boys' primary school. These days, no one does the job I did – instead one of the secondary librarians 'keeps an eye on things.' The story is the same for Kate, my wife. When she retired as teacher-librarian two years ago, having already dropped to four days a week, she was not replaced. The situation is even worse in government schools. I hear

stories of school principals asking why we need school libraries at all when everything is on-line. Get rid of the books, put in computers, seems to be cry. I was told today, at an earlier function, that the school day is so crowded now that teachers cannot read to their classes any more, in the time honoured. For kids, boys especially, who are not much inclined to read books themselves, this snuffs out the only expose to narrative they might have had. It cuts especially close to the bone for me because I was one of those boys, long ago, and I doubt I would be a novelist today if teachers hadn't read to the class.

More than likely, in fifteen years time, a Senate enquiry will be dismayed to find literacy skills have declined to alarming levels. They will gasp when told that teenagers can't concentrate on written text for more than three sentences at a time. They will hear evidence that many children have never held a book in their hands and that an entire generation is entirely ignorant of the rich and unique literary culture that makes Australians the people we are. In their report, these Senators will suggest that it was a mistake to take out of schools the very people who could have stopped this from happening. And what of the decision makers who did let it happen, the cost-cutting bean counters and the principals who diverted what little funds remained towards whatever curriculum trend fired their blood at the time – they'll be retired, leaving others to turn things around.

I hope I'm overstating the case. – but organisations like the CBCA and the School Library Association need to fight our corner as best we can and perhaps it's no bad thing to be reminded of this at a gathering such as tonight.

James Moloney

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