

The last word

A word from Australia's first Children's Laureates

This month our cover features two very special people from the world of children's books, author Boori Monty Pryor, from North Queensland and author and illustrator, Alison Lester, from Victoria.

Alison's picture book, *Are we there yet?* is an essential item in any children's library collection. Through her books, Alison loves to encourage children to believe in themselves and celebrate the differences that make them special. Much of each year finds Alison travelling to remote areas to work with and help school children and adults alike to draw and write about their own lives.

Boori Monty Pryor won the 2011 Prime Minister's Literary Award for his book *Shake a leg*, written in collaboration with Jan Ormerod and draws on his varied background of writing, performing, dancing and poetry to tell tales of indigenous culture, especially around the importance of story and dance.

Between the two of them, they have more awards and book sales than you can shake a stick at and, together, they share the honour of being Australia's first Children's Laureates. INCITE gathered a few of their thoughts on writing, reading and the Australian Children's Laureate program.

Where do the ideas come from?

Alison says her ideas come from everywhere.

"I once got an idea for a book from the label on a jumper," she says.

"The label was called 'Kissed by the moon', and I thought, 'Wow, what a lovely title for a children's book'. So I came up with this sort of a ballad to a newborn baby, kissed by the moon and warmed by the sun and washed in the river. My ideas do really come from all over the place."

Boori's stories are "about finding strength within to deal with the challenges without" and presenting a positive view of the future for all Australians. He says he is most inspired by his parents, his family and the children he works with.

"I like books where kids are being adventurous and doing exciting things and somehow forcing themselves to do stuff that they might be a bit scared of, but winning." – Alison Lester

Tell us about your Children's Laureate projects.

As Children's Laureates, Alison and Boori are charged with the task of promoting the transformational power of reading, creativity and story in the lives of young Australians. This has taken the pair on the road to every state, workshopping and sharing tales with hundreds of school children, teachers and librarians across the nation.

Their year as co-Laureates also includes each author working on a special project close to their heart. Boori is currently working on *Storykeepers* as his special Children's Laureate project. It is a documentary film and educational resource package based on his life and work, and his aim to create a nation of 'storykeepers'.

Alison has been helping children turn their stories into books and is collecting children's writing, drawing and photographs. She hopes to combine these with her own memories of her travels into a book. "It will show people the many different ways children in Australia live," she said.

Boori was on the road when INCITE went to press, continuing his stated

mission as a Children's Laureate to promote reading and literacy, having said he would use the opportunity to do everything he could to create a nation of readers in Australia.

"I will ask the most wonderful teachers, librarians, parents and helpers that I've met, and the new ones I'll meet along the way, to hop on board the good ship Laureate," he said when receiving his award.

"We'll pick up new passengers everywhere we go as we travel around Australia to the remotest, the smallest, the richest, the poorest ... pre-schools, high schools, special schools – all schools! And we will spread the *writewords* to make ours a nation of readers!"

What difference has being a Children's Laureate made?

Alison answered for both herself and Boori, saying that, to start with, there was a lot more travel both nationally and internationally.

"We have been to Italy and Ireland to meet other Laureates. It makes a difference to be out and about at the international level and learn what others are doing," she said.

That's included learning how others are using their Laureate profile, including a Swedish author putting his efforts into trying to gain the attention of the media to take children's literature and reading more seriously from the social perspective.

Talking with other Laureates about how to get the message across to politicians and the community, and the increasing number of requests to speak to the media in Australia has also helped Alison refine her media skills.

"I'm a lot better at giving a sound bite," she said. "It's like being a politician. I listen to the question and then talk about what I want to talk about!"

Australian Children's Laureate program: www.childrenslaureate.org.au

All about Alison Lester: www.alisonlester.net

All about Boori Monty Pryor: www.allenandunwin.com/default.aspx?page=312&author=228