

Reading CHANGES LIVES

Since 2011, highly respected Australian authors or illustrators have been awarded the prestigious honour of Children's Laureate in recognition of an outstanding contribution to children's literature. Children's Laureates act as national and international ambassadors for reading. Australia's second Children's Laureate is Jackie French. ANGUS DALTON, spoke to her to find out what she hopes to achieve in her two-year term.

'A book can change a child's life. A book can change the world,' Jackie French proclaimed upon being announced as the Senior Australian of the Year for 2015. 'Every book a child reads creates new neurons in that child's brain. If you want intelligent children, give them books. If you want more intelligent children, give them more books!'

The announcement that Jackie would be the Senior Australian of the Year came as a huge shock to the 61-year-old author, who would prefer to think of her seniority as 'the afternoon tea of life'. On top of grappling with the inundation of media requests and congratulatory emails invading her quiet valley home as a result of the announcement, Jackie has been working hard as the Children's Laureate for 2014–2015, having being tasked with the mission of enriching the lives of young Australians through the power of story. Luckily for Jackie, this is familiar territory; with her tales of wombats and wallabies from the bush, stories of Nazi Germany and tales from the hidden corners of history, she's been inspiring a love of reading in young people for generations.

The mantra of the Australian Children's Laureate program is 'Reading Changes Lives'. As a patron for many reading programs, Jackie has seen this phrase proven countless times.

'I remember one kid with foetal alcohol syndrome who has been couch surfing since he was three years old,' she says. 'Forget about having your own desk, this kid has never had a bed of his own. He was Indigenous, so they looked at getting him adopted into an Indigenous community, but none could take him. So he was tossed from person to person, getting increasingly violent. In the middle of literacy tutoring he stabbed the headmaster, who had to go to hospital for a few days. He was a pretty good headmaster – he didn't expel the



kid. The kid's ambition, at 14, when he came into the reading program, was to stack shelves at Woolworths, because that's where all the food was – there's the hot chicken bar, the deli... He regarded Woolworths as a paradise and he really wanted to work there. But you can't stack shelves if you can't read.'

As a result of the reading program, which provided a sorely needed stability for the troubled teen, he was rehabilitated, scored a job at Woolworths, and has now been living independently for three years.

'Anyone can learn to read, no matter how much life has damaged you. It's hardwired into the human brain,' says Jackie.

Jackie's theme for her two-year laureateship is 'Share a Story'. With over 140 books published, she's quite the expert on sharing stories herself. That impressive output is not bolstered by the quick turnaround of her many picture books. Jackie says it often takes years to create a picture book, which is perhaps why hers are so incredibly memorable. Particularly famous are her collaborations with illustrator Bruce Whately, beginning with *Diary of a Wombat* in 2002. Like all her books, her most celebrated picture book carries an important message.

'*Diary of a Wombat* appears to be a sweet, simple book, but it took three years to write and is in fact a very insidious piece of propaganda. It's an incredibly powerful tool to raise consciousness about wombats and wildlife, and they need protection.'



Jackie French reading to her resident wombat

Both Jackie and Bruce are zealous about spreading a passion for their respective crafts. As Jackie believes everyone can read, Bruce believes everyone can be taught to draw – but with Jackie he had to admit that he was wrong.

'I've got the artistic ability of a cane toad,' she admits. Because Jackie suffers from dyslexia, the visual parts of her brain don't work nearly as well as they should.

'I don't think it's a coincidence that Bruce and I are both dyslexic. We've both got very different forms of dyslexia – he is profoundly visual, I'm profoundly verbal. We both severely lack certain areas in our brains and are both very good in the others ones, so we match!'

Because of her experiences with a severe learning difficulty, Jackie is determined to make sure that no child is left behind during her laureateship. One in 11 kids have some form of dyslexia or learning difficulty, and 40 per cent of Australian children are below the international reading standard. That's why Jackie regards her position as Australian Children's Laureate to be so crucial – to work through the challenges of disabilities, and to reiterate how essential reading is in encouraging innovation and ambition in the upcoming generations of Australia.

'Reading itself teaches creativity. It's just one of the reasons it's so desperately vital for kids. It teaches empathy, which we're not born with, because every book you read you experience the life of different characters. It's incredible mental bodybuilding that helps us create. By fostering the ability to create we're not just making new writers, musicians and artists, we're making Albert Einsteins.'

Jackie estimates she's visited over 30,000 kids in her career, and has listened to the opinions and wisdom of each and every one. In addition to encouraging kids to dream up and share their own stories, as part of her laureateship Jackie is intent on revolutionising the way schools are run. She believes that the ideas of the students are mostly simple, effective, and easy to implement, such as having the students and teachers swap places for one afternoon a week. Another revelation Jackie uncovered is that most kids actually wouldn't mind more school hours – as long as they're allowed to use that time for creativity.

She's also on a committee to establish an innovative school for Indigenous kids that will cater to their customs and cultural responsibilities. For example, if someone in the community dies, the school will close for a number of weeks to allow for the traditional mourning period to take place.

'We need a school that is flexible enough to allow for traditional duties, knowledge and learning. If it's successful, it could become a paradigm for remote and Indigenous learning.'

It's these kinds of innovations that are benefitting immensely from Jackie's ambition and position as Children's Laureate. She knows first-hand how much reading and a love of story can change your life. It wasn't all that long ago, after all, that she was bankrupt and sitting on the floor of a tin shed that she



The Australian Children's Laureates Alison, Jackie, Boori



Boori Monty Pryor & Alison Lester

shared with a black snake and a wombat called Smudge as she tapped away on a ramshackle typewriter. The result would be her first fiction manuscript for a book called *Rainstones*. Despite it being the most shambolic, horrifically spelt, wombat-poo-stained manuscript ever submitted, it was accepted and published. Since then Jackie has been on an unstoppable mission to change the lives of kids through her stories.

'This is my job now. Giving kids the tools to change the world and the confidence to know that yes, they can do it.'

