

Keynote SPEECH FOR THE SOCIETY OF WOMEN WRITERS

2023 NANCE DONKIN AWARD

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The Fickle Nature Of Legacy, The Greatest Prize In Children's Literature

By Jane Cafarella

Many years ago, while fossicking in a rambling second-hand bookshop in Guildford, near Castlemaine, I came across a children's book called *A Peep Behind the Scenes* by Mrs O. F. Walton.

Seeing this book was like greeting an old friend. When I was about 10, my sister and cousin and I had spent one particular wet September holiday together, reading and weeping over it.

I immediately bought it to read with my daughter, who was eight at the time.

A Peep Behind the Scenes is about poor little Rosalie, forced to travel from fair to fair in England with her cruel father and dying mother in a travelling theatre.

One day, a visiting preacher hands her a picture of the Good Shepherd holding a lamb, with the text underneath: "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost. There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that Repenteth".

By the time Rosalie had converted her fifth sinner, my daughter was asking "When are we were going to get the fourth Harry Potter book?"

Despite this, I persevered the next night, but when we came to the sermon about how only the spotlessly white can enter heaven, my daughter said, "This is a load of bull, isn't?"

I later discovered that the book was first published in 1877 as part of the 19th Century Lamplighter Rare Collector's Series, Christian books often given as Sunday School prizes.

The book was said to be an excellent tool for teaching discernment.

But it didn't work for my daughter, as she and her brother are now both in show business.

I make this point because amazingly, *A Peep Behind the Scenes* is still in print – and is available on Kindle.

It's been made into a film and there's a Wikipedia page about it, and another one about the author, Amy Catherine Deck, a preacher's daughter, born in 1849 and who died in 1939 and who wrote under her married name of Mrs O. F. Walton and specialised in Christian books.

A Peep Behind the Scenes is also immortalised on Project Gutenberg and Mrs O. F. Walton has 21 books on Goodreads, with an average rating of 4.19 out of five stars, 1,830 ratings in total, 211 reviews and has been shelved 4,003 times. So far.

Nance Donkin, who was born in 1915 and died in 2008, who received an Order of Australia in 1986 and this society's prestigious Alice award in 1990, also has a Wikipedia page and 21 books on Goodreads.

Average rating 3.38 out of five stars, 16 ratings · 2 reviews · shelved 53 times

One reason for this disappointing comparison is that the works of Amy Catherine Walton live on, while those of Nance Donkin do not, as all are out of print, although some are available on Amazon second hand.

It's easy to assume that works that don't live on are undeserving – just as it's easy to assume that work that doesn't find a publisher is undeserving.

But the question of who gets published and who doesn't is as complex as it is interesting.

On January 5 1951, in her Bookworm Corner Column published in The Argus Weekend Magazine, Nance Donkin offered her own definition of a "good children's book".

"One of the real tests of a good children's book," she writes "...is that adults should be able to read it right through and find it holds their interest."

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If the opinion of Dr John Hughes, retired Senior Lecturer in Education at Deakin University is any indication, Nance Donkin's books do more than just hold interest.

In his paper titled *Convicts and Settlers: Nance Donkin's Novels of early Sydney and More*, published on Academia, Dr Hughes describes Donkin as "a popular and prolific author" in her day, whose work has fallen into "unwarranted neglect".

To examine why, Hughes analyses the plots and characters of Donkin's main works, comparing them to her contemporaries and the popular children's authors who came after her, and concludes:

"Nance Donkin is not a children's author with the power, or range, for example, of Ivan Southall (arguably Australia's greatest children's novelist), or Patricia Wrightson, Morris Gleitzman, Nan Chauncey, Christabel Mattingley, or John Marsden.

"But Donkin presents interesting characters and intriguing narratives, and deserves to be read."

Hughes suggests a new audience might be found by those interested in our national past.

"Deserves to be read" is an interesting phrase. It implies a right to legacy.

In Ancient Greece, as exemplified in Homer's Iliad, legacy is defined as "time", spelled like our word time – which is honour, and as "kleos", which is glory.

And, of course, "kudos", which was the physical manifestation of glory – the prizes and goodies you amass throughout life – such as the Nance Donkin Award for Children's Literature.

The "time" or honor is the fame we collect during our lifetime and the glory is what we leave so that the "esomino" - those who live after us – are going to know about us, because that is the way we continue to live.

These days, thanks to social media, the esomino are going know about us whether they like it or not.

Historically, it's been much harder for women to achieve this "time", "kudos" and "kleos" - firstly because women were mostly denied education and status – are still denied these in many countries today.

And secondly because children's literature has historically been undervalued.

I recently heard a story about a children's author who was dating a paediatrician.

One day, as they were driving, he turned to her and said, "When are you going to write a book for grown-ups".

It was at that moment she knew the relationship was doomed.

Later when she thought about it, she regretted not saying "When are you going to start treating grown-ups?"

I don't think anyone ever said that to Alan Marshall after he wrote *I Can Jump Puddles*, now considered a "Australian Children's Classic" although he did later also write for adults.

Interestingly, *I Can Jump Puddles*, first published in 1955, is still in print, published as a Popular Penguin and an audio book.

My own experience as a reader, suggests the reason for this.

I was 12 when I first read *I Can Jump Puddles* and like Alan Marshall, who was crippled with polio as a child, I had a leg problem.

I was born with Milroy's Disease, a form of lymphoedema - a progressive swelling disease that meant my right leg was twice the size of my left.

Nothing was known about lymphoedema then, so it was ignored.

Besides I had other more pressing problems, including petit mal, a form of childhood epilepsy.

Despite this, I was very "well adjusted" - my mother saw to that.

But in Alan's story, I saw a kindred spirit - someone who understood my daily struggles that were keenly felt but were never articulated.

Seeing my interest, my mother encouraged me to write to him and I became one of the many children with whom he corresponded.

When I was fourteen, I visited him in his home in Blackburn and when I eventually became a journalist, I interviewed him several times.

As Philip Nel, the author of *Was the Cat in the Hat Black? – The Hidden Racism of Children’s Literature*, says “*Children’s books shape us more profoundly than almost anything else we read...because we encounter these when we are very much in the process of becoming...*”

Children’s books, he says, tell us whose stories matter and whose don’t.

I Can Jump Puddles told me that people like me mattered.

But children don’t get to decide what matters.

Today in the USA, 19 states have banned children’s books that still matter to millions of readers.

Dr Suess’s picture book *Hop on Pop* is banned because it encourages disrespect for fathers.

Charlotte’s Webb because talking animals are disrespectful to God.

And Anne Frank’s diary because it’s too sad, although we may guess at the real reasons.

It’s clear that these bans have nothing to do with literary merit, but are a battle of ideologies.

Australia isn’t banning books, but it is changing them – deleting content that’s considered outdated, offensive or inappropriate - and rewriting it in more acceptable language.

In the Guardian in February this year, in the debate about Roald Dahl’s books, Rosemary Johnston, Professor of Education at the University of Technology Sydney, noted that racist depictions of Aboriginal people, and Chinese and Irish immigrants had been deleted from the Billabong books by Mary Grant Bruce.

“It’s really nuanced,” she said. “We want that freedom of expression and to maintain the integrity, but we don’t want to publish anything dangerous that would impact a child’s life.”

I wish they’d thought of that when I was 13 and was given a book with a story about a boy called Jacob whose jealous brothers plotted to murder him, and who eventually threw him in a pit to rot.

That story came from the Children’s Bible, the scariest book I ever read.

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Don't get me wrong. My family wasn't the least bit religious – otherwise they would have known what was in that book.

The trouble with changing books is that the world is constantly changing culturally and socially.

What are we going to do - keep changing every book with outdated and inappropriate language.?

The Iliad does not fit with contemporary sensibilities, with its horrifying depictions of battle and its treatment of women as war prizes. But should we rewrite it?

Personally, I think books should be left alone, as cultural and historical icons of their time. Rather than being banned or changed, they should be used for discussion and learning.

There is also an inherent assumption here that children approach books in the same way as adults.

As award-winning UK children's author Gillian Cross was once quoted as saying, children read in a different way from adults - "*a very immersed way*".

Daniel Hahn, editor of the Oxford Companion to Children's Literature added that the books you read as a child "*shape your mental furniture in a way that books we read as adults seldom do*".

This point is exemplified in 2011 Goodreads review of Nance Donkin's book *Johnny Neptune* by Australian poet Janelle Bailey.

Bailey writes: "*I first read Johnny Neptune as a child, and with it falling into obscurity since, I thought I would never be able to read it again. But thanks to the blessing of an interlibrary loan, I have at last been able to revisit this story after all these years.*"

At first, based on her recollections of reading it as a child, she'd given Johnny Neptune three-stars.

After rereading it as an adult, she gave it five stars for historical detail and three stars for plot and character, because Johnny was a bit unrealistic.

But, more interestingly, she adds:

"I can't honestly remember what impact these issues had on me when I read this as a ten or eleven year old.

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For this reason I would still recommend Johnny Neptune to any young reader who is interested in the history of Colonial Australia.”

In other words, as a child, she didn't read it with the critical eye of an adult, but in the immersive way that Gillian Cross suggested.

This doesn't mean that children aren't discerning.

I was eight when I read *The Toy Princess* a story by Mary De Morgan , in a collection called *A Book of Princesses*, selected by Sally Patrick Johnson published by Puffin Books in 1965.

I still have this book, and its description on the front page is strangely apt for our times

It begins “There is a time to read stories about people like yourself and a time to read about people who are different.”

The Toy Princess is about a princess who is different. Born into a kingdom where it was frowned upon to say anything more necessary – boiled down to four phrases: Just so, Yes, indeed, Thank you and If you please - the joyous and expressive young Princess Ursula is always transgressing.

Eventually, her fairy godmother removes her to the home of a kindly fisherman and his family– leaving a Toy Princess in her place.

When Ursula turns 18, Ursula is reunited her with her father, the King, only to discover that the King and his subjects prefer the Toy Princess.

Princess Ursula gladly returns home to the fisherman's cottage, and marries his son, living happily ever after.

I wish Lady Diana Spencer had read this book.

Not surprisingly, the author, Mary De Morgan, was writing in the time of Queen Victoria and the story was a response to the Victorian requirement for extreme politeness.

The message I took away from this book, and which stayed with me, was not to be less polite to my parents, as the book banners might fear.

The message I took away was to value freedom over status – especially as a girl – a lesson that has stayed with me.

As you see, legacy isn't always the result of prizes, although prizes are still very nice.

In closing, I would like to congratulate all nominees for this year's Nance Donkin Award, for your courage and talent, and remind you that "legacy" – often fickle and elusive - comes from the moment a child picks up your book and finds something that she can use to "furnish her mind", or perhaps even change her life.

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