

How to Exorcise Unquiet Spirits

Jan Ormerod was artist in residence at the Fremantle Children's Literature Centre in Western Australia in 2007/2008, and shares her experience with Carousel readers.

The Old Prison at Fremantle, Western Australia, was built by convicts in the very early days of the settlement, and continued to house prisoners in inhumane conditions until the recent past. The prison itself is now a tourist attraction, and was nominated last year for World Heritage listing. Thanks to the vision, passion and energy of director Lesley Reece, the Fremantle Children's Literature Centre is now housed in the former Prison Hospital. Stories of malevolent ghosts are gleefully told by locals to all newcomers, and visiting authors and artists deal with the legendary unquiet spirits in their individual fashions. Yet I have come to believe that the place has been thoroughly exorcised, using the magical formula of mixing art and illustration, books and story, children, teachers and creators in a bubbling brew of fun, inquiry and activity. The Fremantle Children's Literature Centre is one of a kind. The building comprises five galleries, workshops, offices, archives and a self-contained three bedroom residence for visiting authors and artists. The Centre supports the teaching of literacy and the writing and illustration of children's literature and it brings these things together in its provision of innovative workshops for school groups, secondary and tertiary students, teachers, adults and aspiring authors and illustrators.

The Centre provides a place for authors and illustrators to loan or gift their original artworks so that children, teachers and other authors can see the process of a book coming to life, from concept drawings to completed artworks. Successful authors and illustrators such as Shaun Tan, Marc McBride, Coral Tulloch and Markus Zusak have all worked with the Centre to deliver workshops for students and educators. The Centre exhibits original manuscripts, preliminary drawings and original artwork from four Australian picture books each school term. As often as possible the author and/or artist are in residence for a period to work with school children and students from pre primary to tertiary level. Over the months I was in residence Mark Greenwood, Frane Lessac, Coral

Tulloch, Jackie French, Kim Michelle Toft, Matt Ottley, Boori Monty Pryor and I all worked with schoolchildren and adults at the Centre alongside exhibitions of our work. The Centre also provides

a home for the Fremantle Collection, ensuring the preservation of pre-publication manuscripts and enabling the setting up of full exhibitions on metropolitan, rural, interstate and international residences.

The Fremantle Children's Literature Centre was set up in 1993 by the Australian Federal Government as a project of national significance with a view to establishing similar

centres around the country. To date there is no other centre in Australia that provides the special range of functions that the Centre provides. The Centre is located in Fremantle but it works with travelling exhibitions and workshops across all of Western Australia, including regional and rural areas and remote Aboriginal communities. In 2009 the Fremantle Children's Literature Centre is planning to host a summit of key people in the world of children's literacy and literature to discuss the establishment of a network of children's literature centres around Australia. Because of its uniqueness the Centre's expertise is in great demand, and it also conducts workshops outside of Western Australia, including in the Northern Territory, Adelaide, Christmas Island and even Bangkok.



Photo: Children working in pairs to discuss the exhibition.



Photos: Mark Greenwood (above) and children at a remote community.

I travelled to Darwin in the Northern Territory with author illustrators Matt Ottley (winner of the Australian Picture Book of the Year 2008, *Requiem for a Beast*) and Kim Michelle Toft to visit schools and libraries in the area, talking to school children, adult groups and conducting Sharing Your Craft workshops with aspiring and emerging writers and illustrators.



Photo: Jimmy Murphy water divining with a student with an overlay from the *Water Witcher* cover.

an octogenarian water diviner was a great attraction at the Open Day during the exhibition of my book *Water Witcher*.

Youth Literacy days for promising young writers are held each term. The writing produced by these young people is very impressive. It was a joy to see the absorbed concentration of students writing and hear peals of appreciative laughter or cries of sympathy and bursts of applause as the work was shared.



Photos: Young writers busy at the Youth Literature Day 2008.



The experience of being artist-in-residence is one I shall treasure always, and my enduring memory of that time is of laughter. Gusts of giggles from the office where Lesley and her team work from early morning until late into the evening. Guffaws from the residence as visiting authors and artists cook, share a meal and jokes after long days visiting schools or working at the Centre.

Hoots of laughter from children or adults being enchanted by indigenous storyteller, poet and musician Boori Monty Pryor. The hilarity of groups of children and of teachers, moving and sounding like Antarctic penguins in a session with Coral Tulloch. The quiet chat and laughter of teachers gathering to share afternoon tea before a Professional Development session after a long day of teaching.

Photo: Frane Lessac, Jan Ormerod and Boori Monty Pryor.



Lesley Reece and her talented team have continued working passionately and tirelessly for fifteen years creating opportunities for young people to become excited about reading, writing and art through children's literature. They are equally committed to supporting the creators of those books – the authors and illustrators.

And HEY PRESTO, no more haunted prison hospital, but a rich, happy and stimulating environment, bringing together children, students, teachers, parents, authors, illustrators and specialists to nurture and celebrate books for children and young people.

