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REACHING THE CHILD READER

by Kirsty Murray

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Thanks in large part to Harry Potter's commercial success, children's authors are no longer considered to be on the fringe of publishing. As an author who has spent the last decade writing for younger readers, this felicitous situation has made it possible for me to write full-time. But despite enthusiasm for children's books, there seems to be a fair amount of confusion as to what exactly is a children's book.

Since 1998, I have had ten books for younger readers published, three works of non-fiction and seven novels and have invested much of my time in learning about my audience. What makes for a successful children's book? Magic? Dragons? Action and adventure? What do kids really want? In a writing workshop with a group of twelve and thirteen year old girls, I asked the students what type of books they preferred to read. A hand shot up – 'I like to read books about death. Especially books where people die from sword wounds. You know, the sort of death that has a lot of blood.' This announcement came from an angelic, chubby-cheeked twelve year old. I don't believe she was particularly interested in gratuitous violence but she was intrigued by the line between the quick and the dead. Children are as preoccupied with mortality as adults, sometimes more so. They want to know how darkness impacts on their lives and they want to know how to come to terms with dark material.

Like the adult readers they will soon become, children read because they seek the same things we do. They want to be entertained, informed, amused and challenged. To condescend to child readers is the worst sin a children's writer can commit. Any child who can sustain reading a work longer than several thousand words in length deserves to be taken seriously as a reader. Children are innocent but that doesn't mean they are stupid. There is much they don't know and other things that they find difficult to understand but they read to solve this dilemma. They want to know the world, and eventually they will – because childhood is, of course, a transient state.

Despite the clear visual disparity between picture books and young adult fiction, children's books are often bundled in one amorphous blob beginning with board books and barely ending with bleak and gruelling stories of teenage sexuality and violence. As writers, it's important to understand when the writing has mysteriously crossed the line. When does your work become totally inappropriate for younger readers and transmogrify into a work for adults? No one seems sure. These days, anything with a child protagonist is at risk of being classified as a children's book. But from the younger reader's point of view, and for many publishers, there is a serious distinction. The gatekeepers of children's literature – teachers, librarians, parents and publishers all have opinions about what is appropriate for particular ages. From the writers point of view, the distinctions can be less clear. Children's writing shouldn't be formulaic. Unfortunately, in the drive to tailor texts to fit certain narrow age groups, the end result can wind up being homogenised and sanitised.

Many contemporary children's books shift uneasily from one category to the next, based on the level of discomfort that they generate in the adult gate-keepers of children's reading. Jack Zipes, editor of the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* contends there is actually no such thing as 'children's literature' as children's books are invariably written by adults, purchased by adults and passed on to children through adult hands. Children have limited control of the market. Despite their economic powerlessness, they have the potential to be the most discerning of readers but only if we give them books that we would be happy to read ourselves. I believe children are the universal audience. Not

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everyone lives to a ripe old age but everyone was once a child and the child inside us never really disappears.

If you're feeling concerned about whether your work is adult, young adult or a work for children, consider the following story outline. A psychologically disturbed orphan girl travels across the world to live with a cold and distant relative. She discovers her guardian has a son who is literally crippled by his father's emotional neglect. Together, the two traumatised young people attempt to heal each other's psychological wounds by becoming active environmentalists. Sound like the synopsis for a bleak contemporary YA title? Possibly, but it's actually a short summary of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *'The Secret Garden'*. First published in 1909, *'The Secret Garden'* is a classic work and few would argue about where it 'fits' in the canon of children's literature.

For the contemporary writer of children's books, how do you decide on your audience? Perhaps it's better to ask yourself 'When do we cease to be the child who we were and become adults?' A Melbourne publisher of children's books once told me he believed all writers for children were suffering from arrested development. The age group that they chose to write for reflected their emotional immaturity. Although this is a glib generalisation, there's also a lot of truth to it. To write well about a character you have to feel compassion for their circumstance and an affinity with them that allows you to enter their experience. Whether your protagonist is nine or ninety years old, the writer has to be willing to see the world through the eyes of their hero and acknowledge the validity of that character's experiences.

For me, writing for children is about listening to silences, for the voices that I never heard during my own childhood. I was an avid reader from an early age. I ploughed my way through the classic works of 19th and 20th Century children's literature with a special fascination for historical fiction. But I found little that reflected my own experience of growing up in suburban Melbourne, and few books that gave me a sense of the history of Australia. By the time I reached adulthood, I knew far more about the history of Rome, London and New York than I did about my own home town. In writing for younger readers, I now write the books I would have liked to have read. I write to please that unsated child reader that is still trapped inside my heart.

Initially, I stumbled into writing non-fiction because I am fascinated by the real world. I came to writing children's fiction along a circuitous path. In the early 1990s, I was unsure of what direction my writing was leading me in and dissatisfied with much of what I wrote. In hindsight, I think I lacked confidence in that inner voice that compels us to write in the first place. It wasn't until I put a proposal to my publisher, Rosalind Price of Allen and Unwin, to write a history of Australian circus that I was given the opportunity to find my true voice. Ros suggested I might be better off writing a novel as there was little call on school curriculums for the study of circus history. And so I wrote my first novel for children, *Zarconi's Magic Flying Fish*, a book with an eleven-year old protagonist who travels around Australia with his grandparents' circus. Published in 1999, it won the 2000 WA Premier's Children's Book Award, has never been out of print and was recently republished with a new cover.

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Having found my writer's voice, and possibly the lost child trapped inside, I felt driven to write the novels I'd always wanted to read. My second novel, *Market Blues*, was a time-slip story set at the Queen Victoria Markets. It gave me the opportunity to explore the rich history of inner Melbourne, to give voice to the ghosts of my city and its forgotten child citizens. *Walking Home with Marie-Claire* gave me the chance to write about my own slice of history, growing up in the seventies in a bayside suburb.

As historical figures, children are silent witnesses to the turmoil and dramas that shape our times. They have traditionally been allowed few avenues of expression and had little economic power, except that granted by the adults in their lives. In 2000, I began expanding an idea to write an epic quartet of novels covering 150 years. Tracking the role of children in Australian history led me to conceive of an epic labour of love, the *Children of the Wind*. With the financial assistance of the Australia Council, I've spent the last six years bringing that idea to fruition.

Interestingly, these books have been variously classified as young adult as often as children's books. Recently, the third book in the series, won the WA Premier's Award for Young Adult Writing. The distinctions don't matter. The books find their readers and sometimes, the readers find the author. Recently I received an email from a young reader, Rebecca Shaw.

She wrote 'I've only read the first three books in the 'Children of the Wind' series, but I loved all of them. I also love that they are all connected...old characters pop up through all the stories. It made me think about all the people I have walked past, and whether or not I will see any of them again. And if I did, would I recognise them?'

It's a great privilege to receive letters like Rebecca's, to know that your writing is making connections. Ultimately, a successful children's novel is one where the writer recognises the integrity of the child reader and the child in turn, looks at the world and recognises the fact that we are all connected.

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