

# introduction

## History, Nation, and My Place

### Rosemary Ross Johnston

This volume – *CREArTA 6* 2006 – represents a refereed selection of papers which were originally delivered at the Biennial Conference of the Australasian Children's Literature Association for Research (ACLAR), held July 16-17 2004 at the University of Technology Sydney. The conference was attended by national and international scholars, and featured two keynote addresses, one by Professor Perry Nodelman, noted Canadian critic and scholar, and one by Australian writer and illustrator, Shaun Tan.

The theme of the conference was 'Imaging Childhood.' It opened with a performance piece, 'Images and Reflections', adapted from Margaret Atwood's *Unpopular Girls*, and presented by storyteller Victoria Campbell, a postgraduate student from the University of Technology Sydney. The papers explored a diversity of ways of considering images of childhood, from a diversity of perspectives and theoretical positions. Words and illustrations – verbal and visual images – were discussed in terms of their aesthetics, their representation of subjective and intersubjective relationships (parenting, desire), and of masculinity, adolescence, place and displacement. Other papers focussed on invented and alternative childhoods, and on the ways in which 'being human' is constructed in a post-human world. The latter was the focus of a panel discussion, part of which is represented in the second paper in this volume.

A second panel discussion related to the sub-theme 'Narrating childhood: history and nation.' This was led by a group of Canadian academics, Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer, both from the University of Winnipeg, and Louise Saldhana, from Grand Prairie College, Alberta, who are collaborating, with others, on a research project titled 'In Their Places: The Discourse of Home and the Study of Canadian Children's Literature'. This is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

This discussion engaged with ideas about how imaging childhood may express nation and/or national identity. This is a potentially problematical area; there is clearly no one way of representing nation. However it is a significant aspect of identity structures and offers one social frame of belonging; the right to travel the world and participate in life in other countries depends on the word that is stamped on a passport as 'Nationality'. In this sense, nation is a version of the being and belonging that is 'home'.

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The concept of 'home' is freighted with overlapping and contradictory psychological, ideological, social, historical, material, technological, and narrative meanings. The ACLAR panelists discussed ways of looking at specific Canadian texts in terms of some of these contexts: how children's books by aboriginal writers enter into mainstream multicultural paradigms about the nature of the Canadian home that are powerfully shaped by specific understandings of the place of non-whiteness; how a number of novels for young adults that focus on relationships between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians share the conviction that whites who appropriate aboriginality have a legitimate claim to ownership of the Canadian homeland; and how several narratives for young readers published in Canada in recent years appear to challenge the conventional homemaking project of so much children's literature, specifically in terms of their depictions of homelessness.

These ideas also have resonance in the Australian context. At the rim of home is nation; at the heart of home is identity and subjectivity; at the location of home is place – physical concept, class concept, social concept, geographic concept. The Canadian exploration of home overtly juxtaposes three emotive and striated ideas – that of *place*, *home* and *nation*. *Place* extends into home and thence into nationhood (although nationhood in turn impacts upon concepts of place and home). I have noted elsewhere the many obvious similarities – geographical, historical and literary – between Australia and Canada (2003, pp. 87-104). Both are challenged by their geographical position, though for opposite reasons: Australia's concerns relate to its 'farawayness' from traditional friends and allies (part of what Blainey calls the 'tyranny of distance'); Canada's on the other hand pertain to the proximity of a large and powerful neighbour. Historically, both nations share a colonial past and largely unresolved relationships between their European and indigenous people. In a literary sense, both countries (though perhaps more so Canada) appear to be continually and even anxiously engaged in self-consciously examining texts for reflections and confirmations of their own identity.

Images of home in the literatures of these (and other) countries are increasingly depicted in contentious contexts – those who choose to be unhomed (or perhaps more correctly *unhoused*); those who feel a sense of awayness because of skin colour which even as it is being overtly celebrated is in effect being constructed as still more 'different'; and those for whom sacred concepts of home have been subtly assimilated by others into what may be seen as a culturally arrogant inclusivity. But there is a ferocious connection at the heart of these notions, a connection that relates to another idea of what home intrinsically is. Ideas of home – belonging and not belonging – all point to conceptions of home not actually in terms of place, but in terms of community. In other words, home is essentially relational. It may be off centre and on the margins, but if it is a locus shared with understanding or like-minded others, it becomes a viewing place – a place for looking outward – with an authentic integrity operating within itself and its own relationships. It can however be argued that when the configuration of place and home becomes an idea of nation as home,

and imposes a national paradigm, a majority centre is created that exacerbates differences and makes the edges more precarious.

While children's literature has a history of being concerned with the marginalized – the orphan, the abused stepchild, the Lyddies, the Annes, the helpless mothers and unwise fathers – it also has a history of comforting resolution, of the unwanted becoming wanted, and indeed finding a place, finding a home. In some contemporary texts, however, there is no such comfort; the problems being confronted are addressed as real world problems for which there are no easy solutions. So the resolution that does come is not that of miraculous circumstantial change but of a more mysterious transformation, a sense of inner determination/resilience/action, of being at home within oneself, even of being 'human' not only in different circumstances but in other ways.

In Australia there has been an enduring theme that 'unhomes' children and pits them against some sort of wilderness – a long lineage of stories where children have to battle the natural world, and find ways of surviving in it without adult help, because of floods and bushfires and droughts and plane crashes. Early Australia was far from being a safe place for children; a common motif in both its literature and art is that of the lost child. Some of the papers in this volume extrapolate that motif into urban and mechanized settings.

Similarly, the idea of 'homeland' was – and because of continued migration, remains – complex and problematical. In the collision of new and old, it becomes fraught with conflicting loyalties, expectations and relationships, with the sometimes fragile reconstruction of 'home here' traced over an equally fragile and nostalgic reconstruction of 'home away'. 'The homeland is the place of the grandmother's stories', writes Beth Yahp, 'it is the place where the many stories meet' (1991, p. 215). 'Is homeland just a way of naming memory perhaps?' ponders George Papaellinas. 'A compendium of memories ... Is it an arrangement of the past, like a parcel wrapped?' (1991, pp. 223, x). This conception of the interaction of homeland and memory highlights the significance of four factors: organization ('arrangement'), testimony ('story'), and what Ricoeur refers to as 'the fundamental transitional structure between memory and history'), the ways in which memory is tied to the ambition to be faithful to the past (Ricoeur 2004, p. 21), and, implicitly, the friction between memory and forgetting.

Australia continues to engage with these tensions. It has struggled – and struggles – to conceive and arrange its identity in such a way as to reconcile its history (a telling collective singular which more and more encompasses multiplicities and pluralities) with its geographic location. This has influenced its relationships to other countries in its region. Jenny Wagner and Ron Brooks's picture book *John Brown, Rose and the Midnight Cat* (1977), a tale of possession and possessiveness, lends itself to many possible readings; one such is as a parable about this dichotomy of national identity – about exclusivity and inclusivity, boundaries and bounty, empty spaces and guarded borders, invitation and rejection. In the end, nevertheless, John Brown (a

very British English sheepdog) has to let the Midnight (black) Cat in to share the comfortable interior of Rose's cosy home.

Australia has also struggled to conceive its identity in such a way as to reconcile its history with the visual and verbal testimonies of its indigenous population, which for many years were forgotten or perhaps more accurately ignored. Traditional indigenous relationship to country is intimate, familial, totemic, and sacred. In *The Papunya School Book of Country and History* (2001), produced by the children and staff of Papunya School in Central Australia, we read: 'At Papunya School, *ngurra* – country – is at the centre of our learning. It is part of everything we need to know....' Aboriginal narratives, visual and verbal, tell their children that individuals are connected to land – country – through 'systems that organise all aspects of life and perceptions; and indeed, by which the universe is ordered' (Caruana 1996:15); that the Dreaming or Dreamtime, 'provides the ideological framework by which human society retains a harmonious equilibrium with the universe' (10); and that art and song express a sacred connection with country. This may be one of the reasons for the growing tendency of Aboriginal writers to use the words and images of the picture book genre as a medium for life-writing. (Examples include Elaine Russell's *A is for Aunty*, Daisy Utemorrhah and Pat Torres's *Do Not Go Around the Edges*, Ian Abdullah's *As I Grew Older*, and Edna Tantjingu Williams and Eileen Wani Wingfield's *Down the Hole, Up the Tree, Across the Sandhills*). In these indigenous texts, home-place is country, land and landscape deeply mixed into memories of childhood. In white texts there is also a familiar tradition of relationship to surroundings, but such home space is generally more physical and constructed, and may be a house, as in *Norah of Billabong* (Bruce 1913), a bedroom, as in *Callie's Castle* (Park 1974), even a bed, as in *Henry's Bed* (Perversi and Brooks 1997).

In another way, Australia has also had to reconcile its relatively modern advent as a nation with its geological age. In a study of representations of the Australian desert in literature, art and film, Haynes writes:

'In our collective imagination the site of ancient myth, of spiritual dimension and cultural rebirth is peculiarly the desert, a landscape that for more centuries than European civilisation can lay claim to has symbolised the land's endurance, provoking creative reappraisals of our place in Nature and the meaning of our existence. When we read of progressively older geological and archaeological finds setting the age of the continent at more than 800 million years, the River Finke in Central Australia at 350 million years, and Aboriginal habitation nudging 50,000 years, we are scarcely surprised.'

(1998, pp.1-2).

Jeannie Baker's picture book *The Story of Rosy Dock* creates its own version of this disjunction between ancient desert landscape and the comparative brevity but enormous impact of the coming of the Europeans. *The Story of Rosy Dock* artistically prosecutes not only the introduction of the noxious weed (rosy dock) which spreads so rapidly across the desert, but also the people who brought the weed with them, the colonizers, who, in trying to set up home in a new land and seeking to 'tame' its

landscape into something more familiar, irrevocably changed it. Baker's spectacular collage images, at once depicting and compellingly interrogating the very concept of making home, hinge on the temporal contrast that Haynes describes. They also represent geological and archaeological age as strangely vulnerable to the homemaking activities of the newcomers.

Another story of how the activities of colonizers either wittingly or unwittingly affect to its detriment the natural landscape is John Marsden's *The Rabbits*, illustrated by Shaun Tan. This picture book visually and verbally clashes colonial and indigenous imageries in an overt story of invasion and environmental degradation. It is an historical retelling about home and not-home – home and away; in fact, at a fundamental level *The Rabbits* tells many Australians that they do not belong – they, like the rabbits, are an introduced species. They are not home, unhomed. My place is not my place. What does this mean? Do we say then, that they are home-less? The text presents but does not pretend to resolve the issue.

*The Rabbits* works visually by superimposing clever images of the tall ships and naval tricorns of the First Fleet of 1788 across artistic renditions of natural landscapes. It tells a story of ongoing invasion from across the sea. The significance of the sea, and the image of Australia as a place surrounded by ocean and endless coastlines, permeates the idea of the modern nation, but its beginnings can be seen in the first book specifically written for the children of the colony, *A Mother's Offering to her Children*, by 'A Lady Long Resident in New South Wales' (1841), which among other things has several chapters describing marine life, sea adventures and shipwrecks. *A Mother's Offering* is a book about homemaking in a strange land – learning about place and learning how to relate to place. It reflects a focus on educating children to 'home-make' (and by implication 'nation-make') in their own immediate context – almost in spite of a 'superior' (British) place and culture 'away'. If Edward Said can attribute part of the ascendancy of the Empire to the rise of the great English novel in the middle to late nineteenth century (1993/1994, pp. xxiv, 85), perhaps we can attribute something of Australian ideas about home and nation to books such as *A Mother's Offering*.

However, it is the visual images of Aboriginal Australia (and the associated imageries of Dreaming, totemic relationships, dots and circles and desert colours) that Australia's European settlers have increasingly adopted to signify nation. (Current Qantas uniforms are one of many examples). Such images have been appropriated to badge 'Australia' despite the fact that, with their many layers of meaning and strict rules of reading ownership, they can never be fully 'read' by non-indigenous eyes. Indeed, it is only relatively recently that white Australians have even begun to understand the sacredness of the Dreaming, or Dreamtime, the deepest and most profound image of indigenous Australia. The Dreaming, Altjeringa, is the eternal time of being called into being, in a sense the eternal home. In *Do Not Go Around the Edges*, home is represented not only in terms of country but as a sacred Dreaming Space – a place of

connection to past, present and future conceived in the present continuous. Daisy Utemorrhah's yearning (or resigned, or angry) cry – 'And the dreamtime gone' – is a clear expression of loss of place, loss of home – of another sort of homelessness.

The significance of the Dreaming and the special relationship of indigenous peoples to land has become a political and moral issue. Its increasing representation in story has helped to rearrange Australian history and problematise earlier Empire macrohistory. One hundred and thirty seven years after the publication of *A Mother's Offering*, at the time of the Bicentennial, what was to become a very popular picture book proclaimed its own account of history and nation, correlating indigenous experience and memory as part of the living frame of national story, instead of as a sort of introductory chapter. *My Place* (Wheatley and Rawlins 1988) is a narrative set over a two hundred year period (1788-1988). It was published between two milestones in Australia's growth as a nation – the symbolic return by then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam of a portion of the Gurindji land to its people in 1975, and the Mabo decision of 1992, which rejected the idea of *terra nullius*, or 'land belonging to no-one', and recognised a form of native title.

The subjective stories of twenty different children, connected by geographical place, constitute the top layer of story; the decade by decade 'snapshots' include family history/heritage as the past tense of current homemaking – the 'home' away, the home before, the home that had to be unhome before a new one could be made. The book layers relationships between past and present and constructs its unity through circularity and repetition in a mix of verbal and visual images, including maps. It is its retelling of national story that gives the book texture and cohesion; *My Place* is a biography of nation that clearly registers ideological concerns, and assimilates them into a palatable mainstream narrative. This relates to what Stephens refers to as moments of 'transparent advocacy' constituting a 'relationship between on the one hand what the writer conceives of as a current and dominant situation or attitude and, on the other hand, a desirable direction of change already taking place within society' (1997, p. 17). There is also an implicit connection to what Ricoeur calls the 'temporalities that are more or less extended, offering in each instance a differing figure of recollection, of eternity in or out of time, and ... of the secret relation between eternity and death' (Ricoeur 1985, p. 101). This 'secret' relationship between eternity and death is internalised in other Australian books (such as Ruth Park's *Playing Beatie Bow*, Allan Baillie's *The Secrets of Walden Rising*, and Brian Caswell and David Phu An Chiem's *Only the Heart*); all of which in different ways are expressions of nation as home. *My Place*, while it explicitly gives voice to individual moment (albeit perhaps sometimes stereotypically), also demonstrates the transience of that moment. It demonstrates how quickly children leave the 'home-ness' of childhood, the home-ness of childhood place.

This text clearly reflects the interconnectedness of geography, location, place, time, culture, family, community, nation. It is an accumulation of past that works retrogressively. Home is stamped as both personal and communal and childhood

home as ephemeral. The central geographical image, the one constant – the tree – is an ideological symbol of ties to the earth and is encoded as a place of play for most of the children but encoded with significance as something rather more for the urban aboriginal child of 1988 (the bicentennial year when the text begins): 'whenever I sit in it, it always makes me feel good .... For my birthday, Mum said we could have tea at McDonalds! We sat in the outside bit, under the tree, and *it felt like home*.' [Italics added]. Complicit in the text is an interrogation of the idea of progress and a concern for the environment, as well as an obvious desire to celebrate Australia's multicultural and indigenous heritages and identify them within a sense of history and becoming nation. This is what *My Place* reveals most strongly: the story of 1988. Set against the concern to express an image of Australia as a place of diverse nationhood is a moral concern to be faithful to its indigenous peoples, expressed in an advocacy for indigenous land rights. This is most overtly spelt out in Dreaming imagery as a different relationship between land and indigenous modes of being; the Aboriginal child of 1788 does not, like all the other children, describe home in the possessive, as 'my place', but rather as the place to which he belongs. 'My name's Barangaroo. I belong to this place.'

I don't think any of us would question the morality of this book or disagree with its ethical purposes. My questions however are these: does it adopt social issues and then assimilate them into a mainstream paradigm; does it stereotype and even trivialise white relationships to land and place? In other words, can white people also feel a deep sense of spiritual commitment, in different ways, to land and place – commitment and connection that similarly transcends ideas of power and ownership? Can a Jew or Christian or Muslim for example feel an equally deep and profound love and attachment to something that they can never own but that they may see as God's creation of the natural world?

A conference provokes questions. You prepare your paper, give it, and come away with your head full of a whole lot of other ideas. Sometimes there is a sense of 'not-at-homeness' – a moving or shifting out from the safe place. Is there a similar sort of not-at-homeness of/in adolescence? What images of home and nation are offered to children through picture books, chapter books, YA novels? In a world where clever advertisers target image and hone in even on the toddler market, and where image – of pop stars, models, sports stars – is celebrated more than reality or substance, how can we best make a viable contribution to a critical reading of what images are and how they are constructed?

The posing – to oneself as much as to others – of provocative questions such as these helps to explain why we continue to arrange and attend conferences (which is a time and resource consuming business), especially in an age of sophisticated electronic communication. Nothing is really as good as actually meeting together – relationally, in the one place.

It's another sort of home.

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## Beneath Aesthetics: The Picture Book Stripped Bare

Perry Nodelman



An artist's impression of the kitten in Chris Raschka's *Giant Steps*

Here is a picture. Even if you gave it only the briefest of glances, I'm betting that you had a response to the picture, an awareness of your own pleasure or lack of pleasure in it, a desire either to look at it more closely or to dismiss it and never see it again.

I'm assuming these things in part because they seem to go with the territory of looking at pictures – at any kind of visual imagery. The theorist of pictorial perception E.H. Gombrich famously suggests 'that the visual image is supreme in its capacity for arousal' – that is, its ability to signal that a response is being called for, that our attention is being requested and that our emotions might be engaged. In the most literal sense of the word, pictures are attractive – they attract attention. If there are pictures in our environment, we find it hard not to look at them. Imagine the relative interest you might have in a painting on a wall and in the monochromatically painted wall surrounding it. Or consider what you look at first when you glance at a



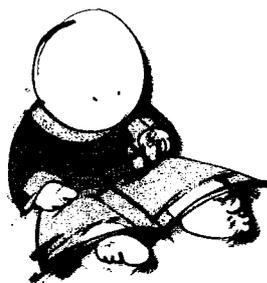
# CREArTA

SPECIAL ISSUE Vol 6 2006

## IMAGING CHILDHOOD

Edited by Rosemary Ross Johnston  
and John Stephens

A selection of Refereed Papers from the  
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