A Formidable History

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Maurice Saxby

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ALTHOUGH HE ATTRIBUTES it to Walter McVitty’s Innocence and Experience (1981) and Brenda Niall’s Australia through the Looking Glass (1984), there is no doubt that Maurice Saxby’s pioneering A History of Australian Children’s Literature (1969, 1971), along with Marcie Muir’s Bibliography of Australian Children’s Books (1970, 1976), established the canon of Australian children’s literature. Images of Australia, along with his The Proof of the Puddin’: Australian Children’s Literature 1970–1990 (1993) and Offered to Children: A History of Australian Children’s Literature 1841–1941 (1998), completes Saxby’s rewriting of these histories and is, without doubt, the finest volume. Saxby meticulously documents the development of a literature whose study now flourishes in academic institutions. Such documentation allows other writers, such as Clare Bradford in her excellent Reading Race (2001), to take up particular aspects. It is no overstatement to say that there isn’t a current researcher in the field who doesn’t owe a debt to Saxby.

Images of Australia is both similar to, yet different from, his previous works. Familiar evaluations are informed by the body of critical theory that now surrounds children’s literature, and there is close attention to positioning books in their socio-historical contexts. Of the influential group of mainly female, postwar writers, especially Nan Chauncy, Eleanor Spence and Patricia Wrightson, Saxby writes: ‘[they] were to form an Australian establishment … [reflecting] the society and values of their day: the sense of sureness, rightness and certainty … but were to point to changes in social environment … challenging some of the prevailing stereotypes of family solidarity, gender roles and expectations of race and class.’ This book ‘looks at the shaped and shaping nature of fiction in national identity’, and the landscape ‘across which Australian children were invited to travel in the period following WWII’. In this context, it is germane to consider that Wrightson, Ivan Southall, Hesba Brinsmead, Joan Phipson and Colin Thiele were likely to have been the childhood reading of the current writers for young people.

This volume makes for fascinating reading, not only for scholars of children’s literature, but also for those who remember the excitement of Ash Road, the evocative backdrop of Longtime, and the magical worlds of Peg Maltby. The depth and breadth of Saxby’s knowledge allow for revealing links between eras, authors, titles, themes, approaches and characters. For example, he says of the fates of two characters created thirty-six years apart — Raylene in Brinsmead’s Beat of the City (1966) and Louise in Sonya Hartnett’s All My Dangerous Friends (1998), which treats a similar subject — ‘But [Raylene] was created in the sixties when closure was more important than truth’, revealing much about the respective eras.

The rôle of school and public libraries, the Children’s Book Council, educational practices, visionary personalities such as Marjorie Cotton (do I detect a New South Wales bias?), publishers and editors, children’s bookshops, specialist collections, reviewing journals, and non-fiction and educational publishing are carefully acknowledged and weighted.

More than 800 pages permit leisurely explorations of books, authors and genres, and the inclusion of carefully chosen textual excerpts that resonate with contemporary attitudes, venues and language. Each chapter presents a critical, contextual lens through which the books are viewed. The essays on individual authors contained within each section include autobiographical writings alongside Saxby’s and other critics’ contemporaneous assessments. The focus is outward-looking rather than inward, with reviews from British and American journals providing sometimes salutary and surprising evaluations, and insights into how Australia and Australian writing was perceived. The Australian reviews, many of which come from ABR — inadvertently documenting its long and steady contribution to children’s literature — are revealing social records of how children and their books were perceived during the mid-twentieth century.

Serendipitous surprises abound, such as the detailed discussion of Sylvia Chew and Jean Elder’s delightful and significant Little Chiu (1947), ‘that broke completely the tradition of Australiana … the Chinese setting and detail … most unusual in period when characters and settings of picture books were predominantly Anglo-Celtic’; specific cities and regions that have inspired writers; events such as the Cold War and the Vietnam War; personalities such as the Flying Doctor; the characters Ginger Meggs, Skippy and Smiley; idiosyncratic ephemera published by commercial companies such as The White Guard by Kolynos; and neglected areas of writing such as religious fiction.

Pivotal texts are identified: Southall’s Hill’s End (1962), a ‘turning point in Australian writing for children’, with its ‘internal as well as external action and an exposure of flawed adults and less than perfect families’; Frank Kellaway’s The Quest for the Golden Dan (1962) ‘is postmodern in its intertextuality … a new note in our children’s literature’; Mavis Thorpe Clark’s The Min Min (1967), ‘an epoch-making novel in that for the first time in Australian writing for children a parent is being shown … as a bully’; and J.M. Couper’s
The Thundering Good Today (1970), ‘the most overtly political young adult novel ever to have been published in this country’, which deals with opposition to conscription and the Vietnam War.

Assessments of writers are not all positive (see Mavis Thorpe Clark) and unfashionable opinions are expressed (see James Vance Marshall). While Saxby states that a discussion of children’s literature must take into account the tenets of contemporary literary criticism — ideology, feminism, psychoanalytic criticism, the notion of the implied reader, linguistics and stylistics — the books are largely assessed in terms of a formalistic approach. The winning of international awards is seen as a significant marker of worthiness and quality.

As for the canon, it is very much unchallenged. There is some welcome restoration of non-canonical authors such as Dale Collins, Allan Aldous, Margaret Paice, Lydia Elliott, Mary Elwyn Patchett and Phyllis Power, and the inclusion of popular titles such as Frank Crisp’s Dirk Rogers series, R.G. Campbell’s Colossal Corcoran books, and the little-known Ruth Trant Fischer and her evocatively titled The Hog’s Back (1970), about Broken Hill. However, the ‘mass market’ oeuvres of writers and illustrators such as Connie Christie and Kay Druce are still treated dismissively (undeservedly, in this reviewer’s opinion), while, curiously, the equally ‘mass market’ ‘John Mystery’ (Lester Sinclair), whose market impact and wide readership are similar, is better served in coverage and evaluation.

Ultimately, these are small quibbles about a fine, accessible history of one of the most interesting periods of publishing for children in Australia, and one that covers everything from picture books to the emergence of the young adult novel. It is a social as well as a literary history that traverses a familiar landscape down new paths, chances upon the undiscovered and the neglected, and identifies surprising and revealing commonalities and dissonances. That it is one person’s extraordinary synthesis of Australian children’s books and just about everything that has ever been written about them, here and overseas, makes it an especially remarkable achievement. It is hard to think of anyone else with the requisite knowledge and length of experience in the field who could have written such a work. Gratitude is due and given.