Classic and/or popular?
Australian children’s books
in a global market

By Jeri Kroll

What is a classic?

Children’s literature is ... one of the roots of western culture ... its characters – Cinderella, Pooh Bear, the Wizard of Oz, Mowgli, Biggles, the Famous Five, Peter Rabbit – are part of most people’s psyche, and they link us not simply to childhood and storytelling, but to basic myths and archetypes (Hunt 1994, p. 1).

In this description of the complex nature of children’s books, Peter Hunt refers to what we might call classics to illustrate his case. In the post-modern era, however, our understanding of what makes a book a classic has altered. For one thing, a book has to stay in print long enough to gain a dedicated audience; for another, its adult enthusiasts need to convince a new generation of readers of its value.

This paper considers the challenges faced by Australian writers who function in a global market conditioned by the Harry Potter phenomenon, celebrity authors and multinational corporations, where the need to sell product is reflected in the shrinking shelf life of their books. In this volatile context, what do the terms classic and popular mean? Are these terms necessarily opposed? What forces determine whether the next generation will be left a particularly Australian legacy?

First, let me define classic in both narrow and broad senses. Narrowly, classics are books that are the best embodiment of a type. Abrams says the term is applied to work ‘considered to have achieved excellence and to have set a standard in its kind’ (1993, p. 126). The term can be used in a broader manner, however, signifying books that have remained favourites – popular for more than one generation. This paper will also investigate various meanings of popular. Popularity might be one reason a book stays in print long enough to become a classic.

An example of a children’s classic is Robert Louis Stevenson’s Treasure Island. First serialised from 1881–82 in the magazine Young folks, Treasure Island was not initially successful in attracting a following (Letley 1985). Stevenson revised it for book publication in 1883, mindful of his young readers (Letley 1985), and it has remained in print since, a quintessential boy’s adventure enriched by the complexity of Long John Silver’s character and a vivid style. Critics have agreed that it has literary merit as well as popular appeal, although in Stevenson’s day there were debates about its moral suitability and its status as serious fiction (James 1966).

University students have mixed reactions when they are first introduced to Treasure Island. Some find Stevenson’s vocabulary challenging and cannot imagine today’s average 12-year-old reading the novel easily (or looking forward to the next serialised instalment). Obviously the novel has not changed, but its audience and context has. In fact, not only might the same readers have different responses to any book over time, but the culture as a whole might have altered, causing a revaluation of the text by parents, educators and critics. The problematic status of children’s literature in general also complicates our understanding of the term classic.

For example, in 2000, when Harry Potter and the prisoner of Azkaban nearly won the prestigious Whitbread Award in the United Kingdom, Philip Hensher ... denounced the ... near-win ... as “the infantilisation of adult culture, the loss of a sense of what a classic really is” (Sullivan 2002, p. 10). This outrage, shared by others, was caused by the fact that the novel was for children, ipso facto it could not be the best book published in that year. Yet a children’s book, Philip Pullman’s The amber spyglass (the final volume of the trilogy, His dark materials), won the Whitbread in 2002. The unstable nature of the terms classic and popular are highlighted here, given that both Rowling’s and Pullman’s books are popular bestsellers and various critics have dubbed them classics. Whether their texts will appeal to the next generation of readers, however, is another issue.

continued next page
What does it mean to be popular in a global market?

I think the most important idea that publishers need to consider is how complex and cluttered our world is becoming. ... I don’t think it is any coincidence, given this clutter, that mega publishing companies are merging. It isn’t any coincidence that the children’s book business seems to be on a collision course with the larger media world.’ (Rick Richter, Simon and Schuster Children’s Publishing, as cited in Sheahan-Brigit 1999a, p. 11)

The next generation of Australian readers is growing up in a country that is irrevocably part of a global market. The term global can be used in various ways and contexts. Broadly, globalisation can be understood as a set of economic, social, technological, political and cultural structures and processes arising from the changing character of the production, consumption and trade of goods and assets that comprise the base of the international political economy’ (UNESCO 2004, home page). For the purposes of this discussion, global refers to the worldwide economic structures that influence local markets where both multinational corporations and wholly owned Australian companies operate. In the interview cited above, Richter goes on to argue: ‘If we have to co-exist in this media world, we have to acknowledge the strategy of other media – television, film and magazines. They are cutting through the clutter by being more shocking and more obvious’ (p. 11).

Therefore, octopus-like multinationals have tentacles in most forms of entertainment: publishing (including book chains); film; TV; new media; even food production (Twitchell 1992, Sheahan-Brigit 1999a, 2003). This reach can determine what becomes popular and what stays in print or before the public eye. The bottom line, of course, will affect a book’s longevity as well. Some classics might still be in print not only because educators and critics value them but because, being out of copyright, they do not necessitate royalty payments.

Let us consider now what our culture means by popular, a term with both positive and negative connotations. Each state offers children’s choice awards; winning one proves that a book is popular. Paul Jennings has received all of them more than once. It is worth noting that until his collection Unseen, published in 1998 (Queensland Premier’s Literary Award for Best Children’s Book 1999), Jennings had not won any state literary or Children’s Book Council of Australia awards for his story collections (Ricketson 2000, pp. 194–195). In other words, he had not received an adult imprimatur. As Garrett says: ‘Let’s face it: the adjective “good” is conferred upon children’s books by adults. Children, on the other hand, can never make a book good, only popular’ (1995–96, p. 2).

I have been using the term popular in various ways. In general, it can be applied to beliefs shared by a large group of people, or what we might call ordinary people (Strinati 1995, pp. 2–3; Berger 1995, p. 161), as well as to what they like. In the case of print media, popular often implies lower quality (Adelaide’s Sunday Mail, as opposed to the Melbourne Age). In the case of literature, it suggests airport novels and summer beach reading instead of texts for university classrooms or winners of the Booker Prize; but these definitions overlap. A prize-winning book can be a best-seller, and a book intended for the airport shop racks might never get off the ground. Popularity and quality can go together, but one does not demand the other. Publishers such as Barry Cunningham, the man who famously signed J.K. Rowling to Bloomsbury’ (Rabinovitch 2005, p. 3), have noticed recently that the market is being ‘invaded by pseudo-children’s books – books being produced with an eye to this burgeoning market’ (Rabinovitch 2005, p. 4), where popularity, not quality, is the prime goal. To summarise, the term popular refers to more than one type of text; those that critics and educators deem inferior and those that are merely widely appreciated. Both make money for publishers and can determine how much room a list has left for texts that might not sell as well.

Harry who?

It is time now to confront he who must be named. In any discussion of popular books today, it is futile to avoid the Harry Potter series, which many readers and critics claim has already achieved classic status. Rowling’s wizardry hero is useful in considering what popular means in a globalised world. No sane person would debate that Harry and his friends are popular, meaning wildly liked. Some reviewers have also noted that the novels are popular in the sense of formulaic and predictable – variations on the boarding school genre freshened up by fantasy. No matter how much each plot twists, readers are comforted by knowing that the boy-wonder will escape from his philistine relatives each autumn, complete another year of school and, in the meantime, battle – and triumph over – evil, although the series is becoming darker.

Jack Zipes’s study, Sticks and stones: the troublesome success of children’s literature fromoslavely Peter to Harry Potter (2002), concludes with an incisive analysis of the Harry Potter phenomenon, including the Rowling myth (single mother makes good). Zipes offers statistics about Potter sales from USA Today (Zipes 2002) that suggest it is difficult to draw conclusions about what this phenomenon means; to complicate matters, most books for young people are purchased by adults and often requests can be determined by peer pressure, the wish to belong to the tribe whose members are all reading the same thing. This pressure affects adults as well as children. Zipes reveals that ‘... 43 percent of the Harry Potter books were bought for people over age 14, while 57 percent were bought for people under age 14’ (p. 186). He then comments that these figures ‘do not reveal whether the books were actually read, who did all the buying, and what social classes, ethnic groups and genders are reading the books’ (p. 186).

Stephen Bohme’s UK-based company, Book Marketing Limited, discovered that ‘in 2001, almost two-thirds of the series’ readers were either late teenagers or adults’ (Dow 2002). The Guardian’s recent article postulating a golden age of children’s literature makes this point, too: ‘... young executives with Harry [Potter] propped on their laptops’ (Rabinovitch 2005 p. 3) is an image that suggests that the demographic for many of these bestsellers has widened. Statistics, however, do not tell us why this has happened and whether these fans will go on to read other children’s or adult books.

Zipes claims that several interlinked factors adulterate a young audience’s response to texts in the post-modern era:

Phenomena such as the Harry Potter books are driven by commodity consumption that, at the same time, sets the parameters of reading and aesthetic taste. Today, the experience of reading for the young is mediated through the mass media and marketing so that the pleasure and meaning of a book will often be prescribed or dictated by convention. (Zipes 2002, p. 172)
The cogency of Zipes's analysis is borne out by the accelerating frenzy that accompanies each new Potter book, a type not possible before the mass media developed. J K Rowling herself is now part of the product. Neill Denny, editor-in-chief of Bookseller magazine, explains: 'In order to make the sale, you need to tell a tale people will buy into. There's the story of the author, the films, the merchandising. They all complement each other' (Cronin 2005, p. 2). To date, the Harry Potter global story that comprises 'books, films and games is estimated to have made the Harry Potter brand worth $1 billion' (Cronin 2005, p. 2).

Events orchestrated by publishers and booksellers before a new release include giveaways, costume parties and interviews with expectant readers (Broadfoot 2005). In 2003, there was media coverage about a theft in Britain of a truckload of Harry Potter and the order of the phoenix days before it went on sale (Associated Press 2003). In 2005, the marketers placed Rowling herself at the forefront of the launch of the new title, Harry Potter and the half-blood prince, with an international competition that allowed 70 young people, aged eight to sixteen, to be chosen as 'cub reporters and question Rowling, in what the author promised [would] be the book's only news conference' (BBC 2005a). The launch on 16 July 2005 was held at Edinburgh Castle, 'transformed into fictional magic academy Hogwarts (BBC 2005b, p. 1). The lucky 70 listened to Rowling read from chapter six, but also, '2000 local schoolchildren and their families ... had won entry to the castle esplanade' (BBC 2005b).

The stage-managed encounter with the author, along with all the other media hype, makes the astonishing sales figures almost predictable: 'The new Harry Potter book has broken sales records on both sides of the Atlantic, selling almost nine million copies in its first 24 hours' (BBC 2005b, p. 1). This type of excess might not be exactly what Richter had in mind when he talked about marketing the shocking and obvious, but it does explain why publishers are engaged in 'a massive search for the next Harry Potter' (Cronin 2005 p. 2) to reproduce this global popularity.

**Australian writers in a global market**

Finally, I want to consider how this type of market impacts on Australian publishers and authors, especially the latter, who want to maintain a backlist – the only chance of their books becoming favourites or, indeed, classics. Can Australian writers – from a population-poor nation at the bottom of the world – maintain their cultural identity as well as connect with international audiences? To be more specific, can they exploit the landscape, language and lifestyle?

The point has been made before that books for young people have always been in a different position from adult literature; that is, 'a more open and obvious mix of artistic, educational and commercial ideologies' (Sussin 1993, vii). The pressure now, however, is not simply to serve those three masters. The latter two represent a global culture that is overwhelmingly North American or British. Statistics about imports and exports and the success of various titles can be interpreted in more than one way (Rabinovitch 2005), but an overview indicates that, in Australia, foreign titles are selling more than domestic product: 'For children's books ... income earned from the sales of imports exceeded those of Australian originated publications. The income from children's books was $64.9 million, compared with $42.9 million from the Australian-originated product' (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002-03).

Harry Potter dominates bestseller lists here just as he does in the UK. Rosalind Price, of Allen and Unwin, says that a 'small population and, therefore, a small local market, small print runs and high production costs per book' (Sheahan-Bright 1999b, p. 9) make an Australian-based publisher's business challenging. Children's authors, thus, generally find it difficult to live from royalties alone (Australian Society of Authors 2005; Fisher 2005).

This situation means that Australian publishing companies, as well as local branches of multinational firms, try to sell some of their lists into overseas markets. To make it easier for work to travel, publishers have been 'translating' (to use Arthur Levine's term [2000, p. 20]) vocabulary for young audiences. To be fair, this has also happened to JK Rowling and Roddy Doyle in the US. Judging by anecdotal and printed evidence, however, the pressure seems to be stronger on Australian writers and illustrators to alter more than vocabulary. Richard Tulloch admits that he decided to make the school setting of his novel, Weird stuff (2004b), non-specific enough so that it could travel easily overseas (Tulloch 2004a).

One of the most obvious examples of a best-selling domestic book that had to fight for an international audience is Possum magic (1983). As author Mem Fox explains, it took years to be published in the US 'unaltered' (Fox 1990, p. 163): 'They wanted to change lamingtons to brownies, and Vegemite to peanut butter ... better to remain unpublished ... than to cave in to this bullying cultural colonialism' (p. 163). Fox's original publisher at Omnibus, Sue Williams, observes that very Australian picture books can find it difficult to gain an overseas audience because the visual narrative incorporates 'a set of cultural assumptions that enables the reader to decipher the "codes" instilled in the text and art' (Sheahan-Bright 1999c, p. 4). By the time Possum magic was published by Abingdon Press in Tennessee in 1988, Fox had established a US reputation based on other books.

Other pressures come from our culture's worship of celebrity. Forays into the field by the Duchess of York, John Travolta, Jerry Seinfeld, Jeanette Winterson and Elmore Leonard, for example, raise the stakes. Madonna hosted a tea party to launch The English roses (Magendie 2003), the first of her books, and she now has a series. Superstar Paul McCartney has got into the act; his 'first tale of Wirral the Squirrel is being published this coming autumn' (Rabinovitch 2005, p. 2). Can there be a level playing field when any author with a standard publicity budget comes up against a name that already has a global following?

Bright spots in the gloom are public and educational lending rights (PLR, ELR), which involve surveys of the number of books by an author in public, school and university libraries and distribution of pro rata payments. Author and illustrator payments have increased in 2003–04 (Fisher 2005) for PLR, although not for ELR. Nevertheless, ELR allows children's writers and illustrators their best chance of supplementing their income from royalties and subsidiary rights, since school libraries purchase the bulk of children's books. That program is scheduled only until 2008, however, unless it is extended.

At the present time, publishers I have spoken to have acknowledged that school library purchases and book clubs such as Australian Standing Orders can have a significant impact on a title's success, as can shortlisting for a major state literary or Children's Book Council award. As Erica Irving [Wagner] comments: '... focusing on the library market provides a certain predictable number of sales, whereas the
trade is far more erratic’ (Sheahan-Bright 2000b, p. 21). The role of libraries has been enhanced, too, by such initiatives as the Premier’s Reading Challenges that encourage purchase of books, although there has been debate about the balance between local and international texts selected (Fisher 2005).

Hilary McPhee, former chair of the Australia Council and an influential publisher and editor in the past, has recently viewed the situation of Australian arts in general and is not optimistic. She insists, ‘to state the obvious, only strong local cultures have a chance to thrive in a globalised world’ (McPhee 2004, p. 3), but she sees the arts as weaker than 10 years ago, despite the media’s hype about our profile abroad. There are exceptions, of course, but in general she asserts:

The odd megastar and lots of actors and technicians and extras will be provided by weak local cultures. There will be some bestselling international authors, too, and a few script writers making a good living in London or LA – talented individuals good at seeking out what they individually need. But telling us, as they do already in interviews on returning home for the occasional doses of surf and lifestyle, that they have had to reinvent themselves. They don’t expect any more to be able to use their local stories or points of view or to speak or write in their own rhythms. The audience in their heads as well as in reality is over there, much as it used to be before technology and cheap airfares. (2004, p. 3)

What constitutes a strong national culture or identity is a complex question that was at the fore of debate in 2004 during the free trade negotiations between the US and Australia, particularly regarding cultural material (DEAT 2004; Fisher 2005). The point needs to be made that the market economy is not specifically interested in culture. Profit overrides the origin or quality of the product. ‘Well-written, well edited books last longer than their opposites’, McPhee says; in other words, they have the chance to become classics, but she sees ‘underdone’ works here becoming the norm. Gestation, writing and editing time has shrunk, not increased, because of cost-cutting in a competitive climate. The situation for adult literary fiction and drama has been replicated in the children’s domain. Erica Irving [Wagner] agrees, although she is optimistic: ‘I think eventually the bean counters will see that a book, properly edited, will have more chance of standing the test of time than 15 books pumped out in five minutes’ (Sheahan-Bright 2000a, p. 7). This has not happened as yet, however.

In summary, myriad pressures affect global publishing and, hence, the works that Australian publishers can accept and what local writers will be encouraged to produce. Government bodies, educators, reviewers and critics can have some impact in various ways: through reading programs, review and study of Australian work; and selective purchasing, for example. Education needs to be part of the solution. Whether books stay in print for educators to share is another matter, and it is availability that determines what texts will become classics for the next generation. Whether, in a global market, those classics will embody an Australian ethos is problematic.

References


Tulloch R 2004b, *Weird stuff*, Random House Australia, Milsons Point, NSW.


---

Style guide for Access

Use of quotation marks: Single quotation marks only for direct speech. Italics for emphasis. Ensure referencing is appropriate (page number necessary).

Formatting: Subtitles in bold, fully justified, bullets, and italics for emphasis, NOT quotation marks.

Graphics: Indicate where to place graphics (e.g., Figure 1: Books for boys). Ensure full identification (title, author, figure and caption).

In-text references: Author-date system; page number when direct quotes.

Primary references: Only those references cited in text.

Secondary references: Listed after 'References' as 'Bibliography'.

Capitalisation: Proper nouns or acronyms (e.g., cooperative planning and teaching as CPPT). Care with over-use of capitals for common nouns (principal; president). Titles of published materials, and workshops, begin with a capital and thereafter lower case, unless proper noun.

Spelling: Accepted spelling examples: teacher librarian, online, proactive, web site, lifelong, CD-ROM, World Wide Web, Internet, intranet, workstations, 'Net, e-mail, curriculums, information and communication technology (ICT).

Contact editor for further information. Editor reserves the right of negotiation regarding inclusion, as well as the style and content of each article. In a journal such as Access, flexibility is central to the publishing of each issue. Deadlines are tightly honoured.