

L I S W A's

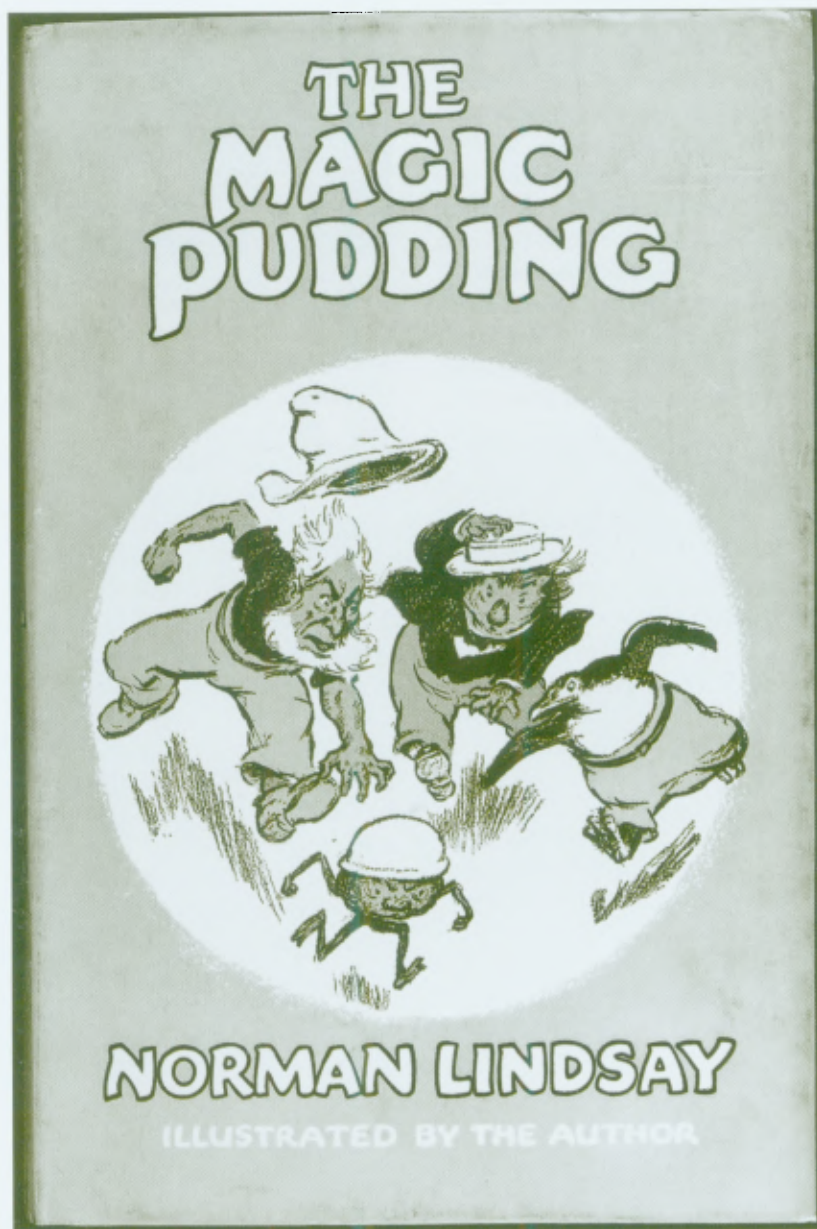
Research Collection of Children's Literature

Diana Giese goes west to locate some favourite Australian childhood stories

Anyone who remembers being read to from Norman Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding* in childhood, or peering for the first time into May Gibbs' charming drawings of gum-blossom babies, will revel in the Library and Information Service of Western Australia's Research Collection of Children's Literature. Situated in the Alexander Library Building, the collection, ranged enticingly along highly-polished bookcases, attracts today's writers, illustrators, publishers, students and members of the public to this most successful field of Australian literature.

Appointments must be made to use the books, which include first editions of Ethel C. Pedley's *Dot and the Kangaroo* and Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians*, with reprints of the latter right through to the 1990s. Recent acquisitions include a numbered copy of a large-format 1926 edition of *The Fairyland of Ida Rentoul Outhwaite*, with its seductive illustrations. There is a particularly good selection of 1940s board books, printed on cardboard-based paper. These inexpensive and colourful children's books were produced in large quantities by printers who capitalised on the demand for low-priced picture storybooks.

The first Australian children's book (Charlotte Barton's *A Mother's Offering to Her Children*) appeared in 1841. Before the 1890s, however,



nearly all children's works set in, or referring to this country were written and illustrated overseas, by people who had never set foot in Australia. LISWA's collection contains material

Cover of *The Magic Pudding*, written and illustrated by Norman Lindsay (Sydney: Angus & Robertson)

from each decade, right up to the latest national prizewinners.

The collection was established in 1979, with the primary aim of acquiring all material written for children by Australian authors, illustrated by Australians, or with Australian content, setting or characters. The Library Board initially called for submissions towards a master plan for public library and information services during the second quarter-century of its activities. Pat Cook and Dr Laverne Carroll, of the then Nedlands College of Advanced Education, called a public meeting. Then a detailed proposal was made to the Board by the Western Australian Branch of the Children's Book Council of Australia. When it was accepted, the Humanities and Social Sciences Division of the State Reference Library was called upon to take responsibility for the collection. In a letter dated 19 March 1979 inviting participation at the public meeting, the then State Librarian, Robert Sharman, set forward his

view of the importance of children's literature to society:

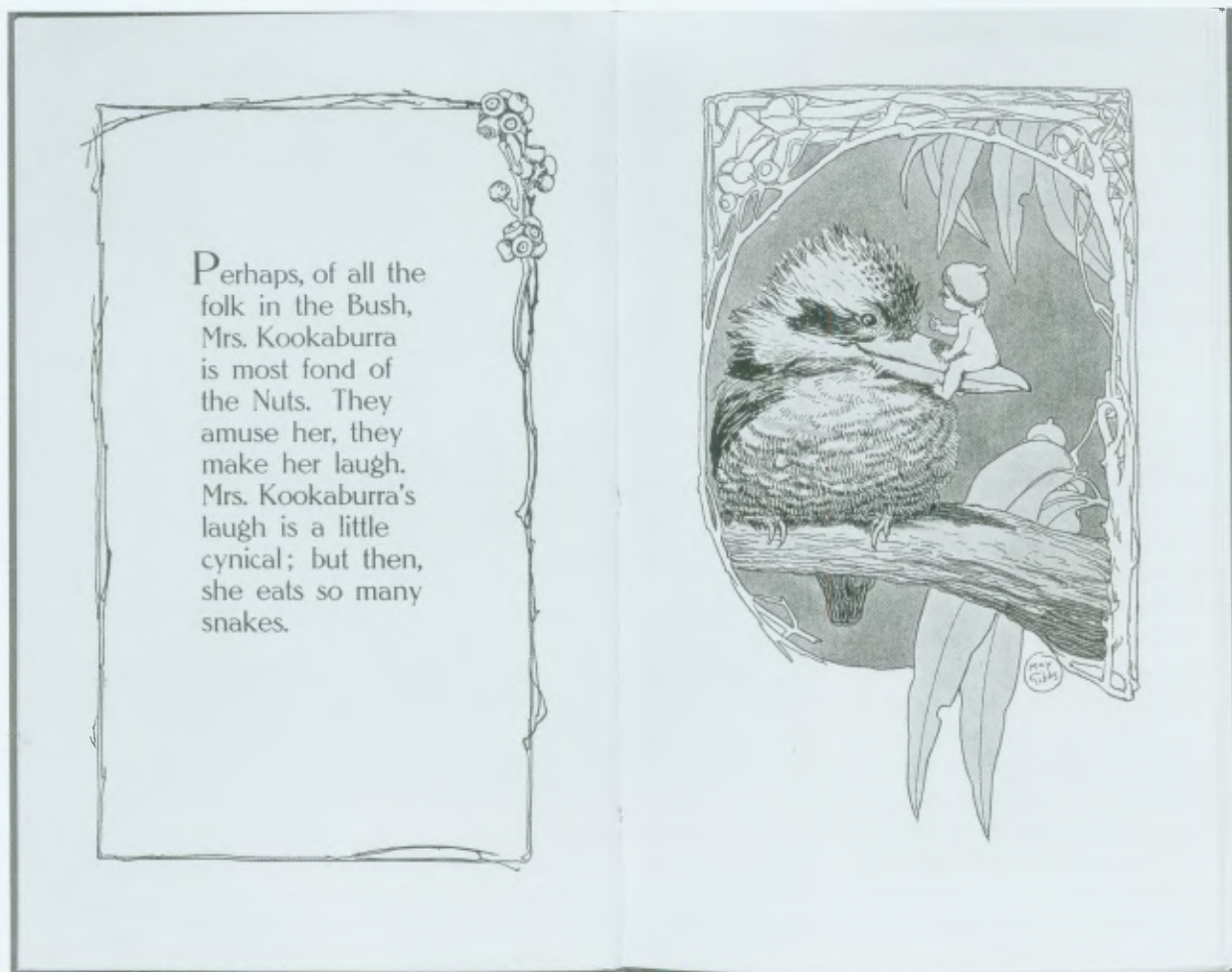
It helps writers, sociologists, educationists and others discover a great deal about the social, intellectual and philosophical ideas

and ideals of the different periods of history. It forms a yardstick for the growth of theories of learning and teaching, and the form in which this literature appears repays study by those interested in art, typography, design and aesthetics.



Make Your Own Storybook Competition entries, Children's Book Week, 1994
Photograph courtesy of LISWA

(below) May Gibbs, *Gum Blossom Babies*
(Sydney: Angus & Robertson c.1916)



Marcie Muir's *A Bibliography of Australian Children's Books* (two volumes published by Deutsch from 1970 to 1976) was used to guide the collection. It all began very modestly. Only 30 items were initially available from the public library stock, all adventure stories for boys published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The only real treasures found were Ida Rentoul Outhwaite's *Elves and Fairies*, a 1916 publication lavishly produced in both colour and black-and-white. A very dilapidated first edition of the *Magic Pudding*, bought from Angus and Robertson in 1921 for seven shillings and sixpence, and a first Australian edition of *Dot and the Kangaroo*, which cost three shillings and sixpence, were also found.

The collection is managed by one full-time and one part-time librarian in the Humanities and Social Sciences Branch. Patrick Moore, the Branch Manager, is the only person who's been continuously with the collection since its inception.

'None of the material comes to us on legal deposit,' said Claire Forte, Senior Librarian, Humanities and Social Sciences Branch, when she was acting custodian of the collection. 'We have to actively go out and acquire books.'

Such activity has accelerated impressively in recent years, despite restricted resources. For instance between 1981 and 1989 there were 3,500 out-of-print items transferred from other branches of LISWA, were donated by institutions or individuals, or were purchased from charity book sales, market stalls, auctions or local and interstate antiquarian and second-hand book dealers. Current material is supplied by the Singing Tree, a local firm specialising in children's books. The single most important source of historical and out-of-print material has been the South Australian firm, Pioneer Books.

Books are displayed chronologically to provide researchers with a clear view of the range of writing available to children in particular periods, to indicate prevailing social attitudes, and to demonstrate fashions and changes in format and presentation. Variant

editions, including foreign translations, are also collected, as are audio and video cassettes, including readings of whole works.

'We also have a smaller collection of Pacific and New Zealand material,' said Forte. 'We have a reference collection of critical analyses of children's literature, bibliographies and bibliographic source material. We have periodicals and serials relating to work for children, both those reviewing books and those containing relevant articles. There are also children's annuals, newspapers, magazines and comics, as well as a small, but developing collection of manuscripts, drafts, illustrative material and editorial correspondence. These have been donated by authors. We are very actively seeking this kind of thing.'

The annual Western Australian Premier's Book Awards now contain a category for children's literature, 'and we always make sure we inform entrants about the collection, should they wish to donate their manuscript or illustrations to us,' said Forte. Carolyn Logan is one recently short-listed author who has donated manuscript material.

In addition, 'when any new children's book is published by a West Australian author, we try to contact them to see if they would be willing to look at the collection, and perhaps be interested in donating to it,' confirms Forte.

One useful way in which the collection is showcased and promoted is through displays at the Fremantle Children's Literature Centre, operating out of the old Fremantle Gaol, and presided over by Lesley Reece. There are writers and artists-in-residence there, and groups are organised to tour the centre. 'We liaise with Lesley Reece a great deal,' said Forte. 'We've also put on various thematic displays of our material at the centre. The writers-in-residence may come and sign their books in our collection.'

The other main method of publicising what the collection has is through Young People's Services consultant Val Noake, who is in touch with what's going on throughout the public libraries. 'She's always

responsible for such activities as Children's Book Week,' said Forte, 'and will help us get our copies signed by any authors or artists over here in the West for the occasion. And she keeps us generally in touch with what's happening in the wider children's book world.'

Western Australia Children's Book Week each year opens at the Library, and displays the prizewinners of the Children's Book Council Book of the Year Awards. In 1994, author Penny Hall and illustrator Wayne Harris were brought to Western Australia for the week at the library, and a busy schedule of talks, teas and radio interviews. In Harris's case this extended to visits to Northam, York, Merredin, Beacon, Bencubbin, Mukinbudin, Doodlakine and Kellerberrin, where he spoke to audiences of both children and adults.

The Alexander Library was also the venue during the week for the display of winners and the prizegiving for the Make Your Own Storybook Competition, presented by Hall and Harris. Year 5 students from Mel Maria Primary School entertained visitors with a performance of Narelle Oliver's *The Best Beak in Boonaroo Bay*. The Carnival of Books theme was carried through in a show from the Supertrooper Circus and a books-based film festival, attended by 1,550 children and teachers.

The Research Collection of Children's Literature is the fixed heart of all these activities. It is now impressively comprehensive. In the early 1990s, the Australian section included over 250 titles from the nineteenth century, 680 from the 1940s and 1,120 from 1980-89. More and more, priorities over and above collecting are emerging. 'A lot of the material is in dire need of preservation work,' said Forte. Preservation priorities have been set, and a modest start has been made on them.

If one of the aims of the collection is to stimulate interest and research into this important component of our national identity, it has in a short time made a determined showing.

DIANA GIESE's *Beyond Chinatown* is published by the National Library