KIDS’ LIT AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Fourth-year education students Joanne Griffin, Ann-Marie Nulty and Susan Stone were delighted to meet and hear from award-winning Australian writers of fiction for children and young adults at a recent forum at the Strathfield Campus.

Writing ‘makes a difference’
Words Images Voices, presented by ACU National and the Edmund Rice Centre (ERC), centred on the value of literature that “speaks of justice”. It featured writers Nadia Wheatley, Libby Gleeson, AM, Susanne Gervay and Melina Marchetta, and specialist reviewers Maria Boyd and Dr Robin Morrow.

The students, among more than 120 teachers, teacher-librarians and academics attending the forum, had studied Melina Marchetta’s Looking for Alibrandi while in high school, and Joanne and Susan had recently worked with Libby Gleeson’s Hannah and the Tomorrow Room while practice teaching in a primary school.

“This forum has given us lots of ideas for what books we will bring into the classroom,” said Ann-Marie, pictured above, at back right (Joanne is at back left, and Susan is at front left). “What they were saying blew me away, the idea that you can make a difference by writing about social justice issues.”

“We love our books,” said Susan. “They take you away from your own hassles.”

Reading the truth
Opening the forum, ACU National’s Institute for Advancing Community Engagement director Professor Jude Butcher spoke of “stories that must be told”, and ERC director Phil Glendenning said, “It’s entirely appropriate for young people to be able to read about the truth of other people’s struggles.”

“We have to unashamedly look for stories that will help young people make sense of the world around them and to see what it would be like to live other people’s lives,” said Mr Glendenning, who was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University in 2007 for his work advocating for refugees and other people who are disadvantaged.

Dr Morrow spoke of the importance of “the thrill of recognition” among children when reading, saying that when she was a child, children in books were all portrayed as white and English. Since then, many Australian stories had been told, including those of migrants, but there were still “battles of representation” being waged with publishers on the value of showing diversity in ethnic background, gender, disability, homelessness and the urban and rural divide, as well as the right to portray faith.
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**Reconciliation**
Nadia Wheatley said she received rejection slips for five years for her first book *Five Times Dizzy*, which portrays a Greek family in multicultural Australia, until Oxford University Press printed 1,000 copies in 1982 and it went on to receive the NSW Premier’s Literary Award and become an Australian television series.

Nadia also spoke of the elaborate collective process of researching *Papunya School Book of Country and History* with an Indigenous community in the Western Desert, addressing reconciliation, and her most recent project, *Going Bush*, involving children from Muslim, Catholic and public schools in a similar collaborative fashion.

**Inspiring empathy**
Libby Gleeson is the author of 30 popular books including the recently released *Mahtab’s Story*, based on the true story of a refugee and her family fleeing Afghanistan bound for Australia. She believes a novel “driven only by issues” will fail, so it must be “driven by narrative and always by character”.

“The story of one person told well can make real the tragedy of situation, and inspire empathy,” she said. She upholds the value of fiction, of “story as antidote to officialese and propaganda”.

**Writing for understanding**
Susanne Gervay’s novels include *I am Jack*, which tackles bullying, and *Butterflies*, which deals with the life of a burns survivor.

“I do not write for any other reason than to understand the world myself and to be able to partner young people in that passage from childhood to adulthood,” Susanne said.

**‘Humanising’ others**
Melina Marchetta, who graduated from ACU National in 1995 with a Bachelor of Education (Humanities), spoke of her writing experiences. “I can’t say that my writing has changed the world. Unfortunately, after *Looking for Alibrandi*, we still had the Cronulla riots, but by seeing people up close and personal, it humanises them,” she said, adding in discussion that she tried to “find the line between humour and pathos”.

Asked whether some children’s books could be too sad, Nadia Wheatley pointed out that many young people face death, divorce and other challenges in their lives, and want to read about how other children deal with similar problems.

Maria Boyd praised forum organiser Marisa Brattoni from the ERC for organising “such a rare event … of such amazingly intelligent and articulate women”.

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**FOR MORE INFORMATION**
- Email Dr Morrow at robin.morrow@wordsandphrases.com.au to request a copy of her recommended list of “social justice” books for children and young adults.

**TELLING TALES**
Delacombe Primary School pupil Courtney Swan, pictured with Ballarat Campus student teachers Simone Zammit, Melanie Gale and Andrea Mansour, enjoyed her moment centre stage during a free four-week storytelling program collaboratively developed by The Smith Family and ACU National to develop literacy skills. Nearly 40 pupils and 29 student teachers took part, enjoying new, imaginary worlds.