

**PROFILE \ JO DAVY MEETS
AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S
LAUREATE JACKIE FRENCH**

Jackie French sent an email around to her closest friends late last year announcing that she was to become the 2014-15 Australian Children's Lariat. By Lariat she meant Laureate but, being dyslexic, one of Australia's best-known children's authors didn't see the error before she hit send. The confused responses she received got her thinking, 'Why can't I be both?'

As Laureate, French will serve as an ambassador for Australian children's literature for the next two years, travelling the country to promote literacy in schools. As the Lariat, she plans to bring together ideas and people to change the way we educate.

"School after school, you find kids that can't read," French says, her frustration palpable down the phone from her home in New South Wales' Southern Tablelands, where she lives with her husband, Bryan.

"There is one absolute essential duty that we as adults owe to children, and that is the right to read."

French has written more than 140 books across multiple genres during her 25-year career as an author, but is perhaps best known for the award-winning picture book *Diary of a Wombat* and the historical fiction novel for young adults, *Hitler's Daughter*.

Last November, at 60, she added another feather to her cap when the Australian Children's Literature Alliance (ACLA) appointed her the 2014-15 Laureate at a ceremony held at the National Library of Australia in Canberra.

French succeeded the inaugural Laureates, Victorian author and illustrator Alison Lester and Queensland-based indigenous author and performer Boori Monty Pryor, who shared the position. The role is an ACLA initiative to promote the transformative power of reading in the lives of Australian children.

French, for her part, has some big ideas on how to make her two-year tenure count. "The theme of it is Share a Story, in the many, many ways you can share a story," she says. "Sharing a story, sharing a book, sharing a poem can be one of the most powerful, deepest and long-lasting of gifts."

"I remember the poems my dad would recite to me – *The Lady of Shalott* and of course *My Country*, *The Forsaken Merman* and *Break, Break, Break* – and just the beauty of the language. The last time I was with my father was just before he died ... we were reciting those poems together and I realised the gift he had given me 58 years before, I was returning."

French advocates the sharing of books in a physical sense – "a book isn't something you keep, it should be something you pass on" – as well as through reading aloud to whoever, and whatever, will listen. "If kids are reading aloud to the dog or the cat or the budgie or the teddy bear, they're likely to be far more ambitious about what they read compared with what they will read to an adult, who will be judging them. It's good for the dog, it's good for you, and I suspect it might even be good for the teddy bear," she says wryly.

It's this charming approach to humour that ensured the success of *Diary of a Wombat*, in which a self-entitled wombat named Mothball endears herself to children and parents on an entertaining quest for food.

When French opens up about her own childhood, however, it's difficult to fathom how she made it through, sense of humour or not. Fond memories of bedtime stories at home on the outskirts of Brisbane are followed, rather jarringly, by those of her parents' messy divorce, and several attempts of sexual assault by her mother's new partner when French was just 15.

"There was one incident where I picked up a telephone – one of those big black affairs – and smashed it in his face, and I think I broke his nose. It was at that

THE STORYTELLER



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PICTURE \ KELLY STURGISS

point my mother told me I had to leave the house."

French says she went public with the episode only after being shown a photograph of herself at the time during a 2009 interview with ABC radio. "Seeing that, I just broke down ... I had been thinking of myself from the age of 10 as an adult and thinking it was my fault, but I was a child, and it was their duty to look after me."

She moved into her father's small, unoccupied flat while completing her final two years of secondary school, working during the holidays to earn enough money for food and making the three-hour round trip to school every day on foot.

"The first year of university and the last couple of years at school were very, very difficult indeed, but I had books, I had libraries, and books give you hope ... they show you that life doesn't have to be like this," she says.

That French completed secondary school and was accepted into university on a scholarship seems all the more incredible given her severe dyslexia.

"Some of my schoolwork was very good, but some of it – where it involved spelling, handwriting or numbers – I just could not do. Some days I would have two or three lots of the cane across my hand for daydreaming and for not trying and for being messy."

"Back then, the term dyslexia hadn't been coined, but a surprising number of teachers, even at university, did accept that there was a problem – that I was trying, that I wasn't dumb," she says.

Despite her academic struggles, she is quick to point out the advantages of her disorder. "I read incredibly quickly, I retain data incredibly well and I make correlations very well," she says, crediting her dyslexic need to do things quickly (or not at all) for her impressive body of literary work.

"One of the great tragedies of dyslexia is that the kids that have the greatest problems learning how to read in our current education system are often the more intelligent ones, not the least intelligent," she says.

Unsurprisingly, given her own experiences, French has very strong ideas about the way Australia educates its children. "We're too confined in our thinking about schools – that the answer is simply more teacher education and more money, but while more teacher education and more money are very definitely a good thing, I think it's also possibly blinded us to working more creatively with what we have."

"There are so many different ways to read but, all too often, kids are offered only one or two."

French's broader aims for her time as Laureate are driven by her belief that the one-size-fits-all approach to education often fails the one in 10 Australian students who have difficulty learning to read and write.

"The job of being a child is to learn and to want to learn ... so why don't they love school? Why do they celebrate the holidays? Why are they glad when they have a day off? We need to start asking kids these questions ... we might be very surprised at the answers."

French advocates teaching outside the classroom as much as possible, arguing that with the provision of a lapel microphone for every teacher, lessons could be conducted outdoors or, at the very least, without the need for absolute silence.

"Human beings did not evolve to sit at a desk for five or six hours a day ... it's a convenient way to teach discipline, but it's not the best way to learn."

She counts "boring" reading material and a lack of specialist teacher librarians among the contributing factors to illiteracy in children. She says there are plenty

of "gloriously fascinating" books for children to learn to read with, and that Australian children's literature is "completely underestimated" – another issue she'd like to throw a spotlight on.

Dismayed by the absence of any statistics to prove the children's publishing industry's contribution to the Australian economy, she says literature's cultural significance has made us blind to its economic strength.

"A thousand jobs are lost at Qantas, there are calls for national intervention. A thousand jobs are lost from car factories, there is federal intervention. But when the financial crisis hit and publishers lost 30 to 40 per cent of their staff, there wasn't even a call for the government to help ... even the publishing industry itself didn't realise how important it is," she says.

"Australian children's literature is regularly on [international] bestseller lists. We're talking about Terry Denton, Andy Griffiths, Mem Fox, John Marsden ... these are major export-earners."

Over the past 25 years, French has cemented her own place among these decorated children's writers, winning more than 60 awards for her work in Australia and overseas. So it's another surprise to learn she didn't write her first book until the age of 30.

After university, she worked in the public service for a few years but, by the late 1980s, found herself broke and living in the bush with a young son. Desperate, she sent her first book, *Rainstones*, to a publisher in the hope of earning enough money to pay her car registration.

She has hardly stopped writing since. "My reaction to anything is to write. If I'm overtired, I'll write; if I'm feeling full of beans, I will write; if I'm sad, I will write; if I'm happy, I will write; and if I'm very bored on a plane, I will write and I find that the flight goes much faster."

True to form, there has been a steady stream of French's latest work onto bookshelves already this year, with two more young adult fiction novels – *To Love a Sunburnt Country* and *The Beach They Called Gallipoli* – due for release before Christmas.

As for the immediate future, French is looking forward to introducing her grandchildren and step-grandchildren to the other love of her life, her patch of paradise in the Araluen Valley, 100 kilometres south-east of Canberra. She and Bryan have turned much of their property into a conservation refuge for endangered wildlife – including wombats – and an experimental orchard that has more than 800 fruit trees.

"It is extraordinary to know that you are part of the landscape, to know not just what has happened here in the past but also to know what will happen over the next couple of years," French says of her connection to the area. "I can tell you what the weather will be like, I can tell you what the fires will be like, I can tell you what the animals will do. You are part of the land and you know these things."

But it's the future French can't predict that has her most intrigued.

"I want to know what will happen to planet Earth. Yes it will probably get swallowed up by the sun but I don't know that definitely. Maybe a rogue star will come along and capture us. Does the universe compress and then explode again – who knows?"

"It feels as though I've been given a book, and some of the pages of the past have been torn out and all of the pages of the future have been torn out, but what's left is so tantalising I want to know the rest of it."

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