

## Jackie French AM - Testimonial

All that Lesley has built here will last as long as Australians read and share stories. The Fremantle Literature Centre began with Lesley's vision of a home for Australian children's literature. It became a building, and a Centre indeed, where books were inspired, discussed and taught, and the ways to teach and see and understand them taught, and generations of new Australian writers given the tools, the hope, the pride and the integrity to create their own work. It continued, at times, on a mere thread of hope, surviving solely on Lesley's determination and strength of will and a few shreds of strength through tragedy and illness. Time after time I saw Lesley manage the impossible, weaving donations in the background while the galleries glittered with all that had been created, celebrated, inspired, and kids sat, in awe and laughter, seeing possibilities that without this Centre they'd have had no chance to glimpse.

I've travelled to audiences across WA with Lesley literally and metaphorically, across desert or through the Roaring Forties, or crawled along the beach by moonlight to watch turtles lay their eggs. Everywhere we went, I saw the love that Lesley evoked, the awe, and especially the contagious commitment to help every Australian child, from those struggling those whose brilliance, if fostered carefully, might remould the world. Like decades of authors I've joined those treks because every single session left lives changed, doors opened, not just with the love of books but the lifetime of potential that books contain.

I've watched Lesley plan figures and donations and a thousand opportunities at midnight, or sweep into the kitchen in her dressing gown when I was one of the hundreds of authors she's cosseted not just in visits here, but throughout our lives. Lesley has always, always been there for us, to share tears or triumph, a strength that continued for others even when she had none. I don't know if I speak for thousands of us tonight, or ten thousand or ten million. I know the numbers will grow, as the fruit of Lesley's work continues to spread.

Long before I first visited the Centre I was warned of the ghosts that walk the prison walls. I've never seen one. But I know there will be one spirit who will never leave here. The heart of the Fremantle Literature Centre will always be Lesley Reece, and seen or not, her spirit will stay with us, with love and indomitable persistence, and possibly a glass of wine on one hand, and a new book in the other. I don't think any of us could bear it, if she were not.

To Lesley, with more love, and gratitude, and memories than I have words to say.

### **Jackie French AM**

*Author, Historian, Ecologist, Honorary Wombat*

*Senior Australian of the Year, 2015*

*Australian Children's Laureate 2014-15*

*Ambassador National Centre for Australian Children's Literature, Patron Monkey Baa*

*Theatre Company, Patron Book Links, Patron SPELD QLD, Patron Wombat Protection*

*Society, Code Read Ambassador*