

Shaun Tan - Testimonial

In recognition of Lesley Reece and The Literature Centre

I first met Lesley as a young freelance illustrator looking for work and guidance in the mid-1990's, with an early but largely undeveloped interest in picture book illustration as a possible vocation. Lesley and her staff were (and continue to be) most welcoming – more so than any other institution I approached as an unemployed artist – and I realise in hindsight how fortunate I was to live in a state where something as unique as The Fremantle Children's Literature Centre (as it was then named) actually existed, and to meet someone as visionary, tenacious and welcoming as Lesley.

I'm aware that the Centre largely exists through the concerted effort of Lesley against considerable ongoing odds, juggling creative, logistical and financial concerns in a sustainable way, through many ups and downs. She was and always will be a tireless advocate not only of children's visual and written literacy, but most importantly, of *really great* visual and written literacy for all young people. Not just celebrating cultural standards, but articulating what those are in a very practical and concrete way, through the teaching of both adults and children, connecting the dots, the words, the pictures, the people.

That's no small thing. In the years I've been working as a writer and artist, and travelling the world attending various literary events and conferences, I realise how rare and significant Lesley's contribution to education, and also the support of writer and illustrators for young people (a creative group often overlooked in the arts and critical culture), has been from a global perspective. It's one thing to create and publish great books, as we are all trying very hard to do, but that ambition is often pointless without discerning critical communication to a readership, especially a young readership still developing an understanding of what literature is, and learning to make self-empowering choices, that is, trying to be independent, compassionate thinkers. There always needs to be that cultural bridge between art and life. I've always been particularly impressed by Lesley's sheer dedication to this task, and her handling of financial, cultural and political obstacles in trying to provide the best service for future generations of readers and thinkers, as well as very focused and considered support for artists and writers.

We artists are an odd and scattered bunch, essentially creative freelancers from a variety of backgrounds, and the hub that Lesley created at The Literature Centre has been an invaluable point of contact and professional discussion, not just locally but nationally, in lieu of similar institutions in other states. It's been a wonderful meeting place for creatives to connect, share ideas, professional skill and knowledge, and improve the quality of our work and relationship to readers. I could go on about the value of this, but basically it's hard to imagine Australia children's literature without Lesley's contribution, and it's also inspirational to see what difference an individual can make. And moreover, the invaluable influence that follows in the development of young imaginations, which I think is the only real and enduring hope for addressing all the inevitable challenges of our shared future.

- Shaun Tan, 2021