

**Address by the Honourable Kim Beazley AC
Governor of Western Australia**

Annual Leslie Rees Lecture

'Honouring Our Past, Shaping Our Future'

Wednesday, 20 November 2019

I would like firstly to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet – the Whadjuk Noongar people – and pay my respects to their elders past and present. The Whadjuk Noongar people have an ancient history of oral literature, their rich life and land narratives encompassing thousands of decades.

I am delighted to be here this evening as your Patron to deliver the 2019 Leslie Rees Lecture. It is a wonderful opportunity to honour one of Australia's best loved children's authors of the 20th century, as well as honouring the exemplary work undertaken on behalf of children and authors across the nation by The Literature Centre.

The centre and I have come full circle, as Lesley mentioned, from our first association in 1992 when I was Minister for Education and supported her exceptional efforts to set up the centre. It was after - what I might call - her persistent persuasive pressure that I did help secure the seed funding in the belief that it could become a project of national significance and a model for the rest of the country.

I think the 27 years of great successes and achievements since – as outlined earlier by Lesley - are proof of that, and it was with genuine pleasure that I agreed to be the centre's Patron when I took up my role as Governor.

This year's lecture theme, ***Honouring Our Past, Shaping Our Future***, is extremely relevant in today's world. Back when I supported the centre I said this:

"At a time when computers and video games are so accessible to young people, it is essential that they also have the opportunity to appreciate the importance and beauty of books."

What was true then is more so now with the phenomenal advances in computer and communications technology; the new world of written information via the web, text and email. And while technology has no doubt transformed the education process, it seems it may be a double-edged sword when it comes to literacy.

Worryingly, the impact of excessive screen time among our children is raising alarm bells with leading teachers, educators and academics. Last week (November 11, 2019), the ABC's Four Corners program used the initial results of *The Growing up Digital Australia* survey by the Gonski Institute to reveal concerns that screen time is contributing to a generation of 'skim readers with poor literacy.'

The survey of 1000 teachers and principals found that excessive screen time has had a 'profound impact on Australian school students in the past five years, making them more distracted and tired, and less ready to learn'.

While teachers reported benefits of technology in the classroom, most thought it was a 'huge distracting force in young people'.

In fact, one leading educator from the Grattan Institute said the writing standards of the average teenager were about 12 months below where they used to be a decade earlier.

Another, a cognitive neuro-scientist, spoke about how the deep reading experience of a novel is becoming far more difficult. The constant movement between screens, among other things, is creating 'digital reading brains' - making us browsers and word spotters, with skimming becoming the new normal.

There is a deep concern about children who do not read books because this affects their ability to think critically, to develop background knowledge and to take on other perspectives.

If you want to read the value of such processes read the 'Uluru Statement from the Heart'. Superb, logical, clear pointed English. It doesn't bear skimming it demands concentration. It concludes, "*In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australia people for a better future.*"

A digi brain cannot connect with deep moral context.

Another consequence of these so-called 'digi brains' that I think seems to be missing is the ability of younger people to be able to sustain an argument at length because the methods of study have become episodic, with snapshots taken from the net.

To develop a brilliant, essential logic really requires skills that book reading and essay writing help develop through the expression of concerns, values, creativity and imagination.

This needs the highest encouragement when children are young. It is where the centre comes into its own as a totally unique operation dedicated to this strategy.

This latest survey demonstrates just how critical it is for our children to appreciate literature and the importance and beauty of books.

When we look at our past, we see that all literature is oral at its root. We are lucky enough to be able to experience this fact through the many Indigenous languages that are still spoken across the country, telling the stories that belong to some of the world's richest and truly classical literatures.

Reading, like speech, is also an ancient preliterate craft. Humans have for millennia read the winds, the gestures and facial expressions of others, the tracks of animals in the sand, the stars and moon phases, geological forms and weather patterns. This form of 'reading' predated written text which inevitably followed us into history, indeed into the history books.

Both spoken and written literature, though, have at their heart the same unique character and purpose; to tell the human stories of cultural and social identity, of belonging and explaining. Human beings are storytelling creatures.

The centre is integral to that task of helping share our stories. We need to tell them and we particularly need to tell them through Australian children's and young adults' literature.

It goes to the priorities I outlined when I took up this role – I said I would advocate for WA's rich and vibrant arts, cultural and educational talents; and promote education including the importance of science and arts education in schools.

We need our children to be steeped in their own literature; to love it and seek it out in their young and adult lives – and for some to even become part of the creative process, something that this centre is renowned for fostering and encouraging. It has championed and nurtured our children and teenagers, and the Australian authors and illustrators who create books for them.

STEM is critical, no question about that, but STEAM is a better concept. The arts gives context and explanation, and is at the heart of creative thinking.

I was fortunate as a child that my father had a great love of books and learning. As many of you would know, he was Education Minister in the Whitlam government. He and my mother, who was a teacher, encouraged me to read from an early age - all the English children's classics; Enid Blyton, Biggles, Boys Own annuals – books from that genre and time.

My parents knew the value of literature. They knew that exposure to books and learning, ideas and creativity, encouraged broader perspectives, deepened the intellect, widened the imagination and exposed us to the 'other' – a deeply important component to a well-rounded and inquiring mind.

Later as a father myself, I used to read to my daughters for the same reason; to bring that beauty of books and their stories and knowledge into their lives.

The centre, with this same purpose, has been instrumental in bringing literature to thousands of children and young adults, particularly here in WA through its literacy education programs, exhibitions, workshops, and teacher and school collaborations. The Talented Young Writers' Program is a great example of the incredible experience students around the State are given to meet and work with authors they look up to, encouraging them to improve their writing skills with confidence and courage. This is an important service to our regions and to the families and children who live outside our cities.

Its reach though goes even further, extending around the country with its commitment to promoting and developing the talents of authors and illustrators, and promoting their work both here and internationally.

I congratulate the centre for drawing together those crucial pillars of its important work and for bringing together fantastic collaborations and new concepts such as the 'Sound of Picture Books' with the West Australian Symphony Orchestra which has, in the past two years, become a key part of the Perth Festival Writers' Week. As Patron of both those organisations as well, I am really pleased to see these exciting partnerships occurring.

The centre has and does inspire new generations of readers and, importantly, it raises the bar of Australian literature for children.

Works of literature come from imagined and inherited materials filled with solitary and shared ideas. They are made, however, in all cases, by individuals. The Centre's work reflects this, in every sense of the word, with its commitment to the professional development of writers, artists and illustrators.

My congratulations to the Centre on your nomination for the prestigious 2020 Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award – the world's richest prize for children's literature! You are one of twelve Australian candidates, and I wish you the very best of luck and hopefully, great success!

The Centre's pledge to carry on developing its reach and operations will continue to shape the future of Australian literature for our children and young adults, bringing it to the centre of their worlds.

It is a remarkable effort. I see it as being of the essence of our creative and social endeavours to expose children to our stories. After all, it is through these stories that our memories of the past and our ideas for the future exist. And where better to begin telling them, than with our children.