Books are not just kids’ stuff

Academics from all over the world are converging on Wollongong for a conference on the politics of children’s literature, writes BENJAMIN LONG.

While children’s literature might not seem overly political at first glance, the role of the books themselves and the surrounding issue of what children should read provide a rich field of study for academic researchers.

There is a lot of people involved in gatekeeping around children’s literature - librarians, publishers, authors, teachers, parents, other caregivers - and there is a general assumption about children’s literature as being simple and transparent and perhaps devoid of politics,” says conference convenor Dr Debra Dudek, a lecturer in the School of English Literatures and Philosophy at UOW.

“So the (conference) theme excites me because it provides a range of ways in which the literature itself is political. That’s the ‘Representation’ part of the conference title; the ‘Rules of Engagement’ aspect acknowledges that there is a lot of people involved in gatekeeping around children’s literature - teachers, parents, other caregivers, librarians, publishers, authors.

“It’s that idea of the adults who control what kind of information and knowledge comes to children through literature and film.”

The conference - the ninth Biennial International Conference of the Australasian Children’s Literature Association for Research - has attracted children’s literature specialists from around Australia and New Zealand, as well as from the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Sweden, South Korea and Crete.

Children’s literature as a field of academic study really took off in the 1970’s and ’80s as it moved from faculties of education into literature programs.

Dr Dudek, whose own research looks at how social justice is represented in children’s literature, says the conference is also an opportunity to highlight the work being done locally in this area.

“It is allowing us to call attention to the University of Wollongong as a place that is flourishing with the teaching and research of children’s literature,” she says.

The keynote speakers at the conference are Dr Jean Webb, Professor of international children’s literature and director of the International Centre for Research in Children’s Literature, Literacy and Creativity at the University of Worcester, U.K., and Dr Mavis Reimer, Canada research chair in the culture of childhood, from the University of Winnipeg, Canada.

Relishing a challenging role

IQ follows graduates into the workplace

Name: Jason Jennings.
Job: Tools and processes specialist. After working in business operations for four years, supporting major IBM contracts with governance and processes management, I’ve moved into a role supporting all contracts in Australia and New Zealand with their tools and reporting requirements.
Age: 26.
Graduated from: University of Wollongong.
Pay: $60,000
Hours: 40.
Best part of your job: Flexibility of having a social life outside of the office. The responsibility involved in the role, and that my name is known by many people within my organisation across Australia and New Zealand as a subject matter expert (SME) across the range of skill-sets required by a business operations manager.
Worst part: Remuneration in the business has come to a near standstill, where I have developed my skills and responsibility significantly, my salary package has barely increased over the last four to five years.
Scariest part: Meeting with IBM executives.
Worst experience: The other day, when walking back to my desk with a mug of hot tea, I wasn’t watching where I was going, and accidentally walked straight into the general manager of my area of the IBM business! Luckily I didn’t spill any tea on him.
Best experience: Meeting various IBM executives who’d heard my name on the grapevine and were that happy with what they’d heard about me, were willing to listen to what I had to say and act upon it.
What did you want to be when you were a kid? A rock star.
Are you doing what you really want now? Yes, I have a challenging role that allows me to pursue my social interests - like playing the sax in a band.
What do you want to be doing in five years? Continue with a challenging role in IT that pays the bills.
How did you land your job? An internship was offered during uni. I continued on to being a graduate, and now I’m a full-time hire.
Advice for young students: Start looking for opportunities now to get into the industry, and the sort of experience you have will help you get where you want to be.

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