



**CHILDREN'S BOOKS** Juliet O'Connor's lavishly produced celebration of Australian illustrated children's books is a feast worth savouring, writes **Belle Alderman**.

# The art of illustration

## **Bottersnikes and Other Lost Things: A Celebration of Australian Illustrated Children's Books**

By Juliet O'Connor  
Miegumyah Press, \$59.00

**B**OTTERSNIKES and *Other Lost Things* is a book to savour: lavishly illustrated, high quality reproductions and beautifully designed.

It is a large book and has a huge brief. Juliet O'Connor aims to highlight both the iconic and the little known from the early 19th century to contemporary times, demonstrate diversity, broaden perceptions of Australia's literary heritage, compare international trends with Australian developments and finally encourage research into artistic styles. While these aims are too ambitious to fully realise, there is much to admire.

O'Connor is responsible for the State Library of Victoria's children's literature collection of more than 100,000 Australian and overseas books. From such riches, we are offered more than 400 illustrations from rare books and little-known

illustrators, as well as contemporary examples such as *Possum Magic* and *The Arrival*.

Here we have various book jackets for famous books such as *Seven Little Australians* and *The Magic Pudding* and illustrations from the early work of May Gibbs and Dorothy Wall. These provide insights into our changing views on audience and book design over the years.

Little has been documented about Australia's early illustrators venturing into advertising products. These days, merchandising of specific Australian children's books is not uncommon, with small stuffed animals accompanying the authors' books. So the history of early illustrators, such as Ida Rentoul Outhwaite, using her art to "brand" Solv-Ol Soap, or Pixie O'Harris endorsing the O.K. brand of canned jams and fruit, reveals little known aspects of their careers.

Not all illustrators' efforts were credited. Such was the case with John Mystery's more than 300 publications for children published between the 1930s and 1950s. These widely available booklets in all shapes and sizes

engaged young readers with stories, poems and illustrations, but copyright was obviously not the issue it is today.

O'Connor gives us several excellent overviews. One example was the Australian alphabet book and its place within the international scene. The back jacket cover of *The Young Australian's Alphabet* provides an amusing insight into cultural history with its advertisements for wine, hair oils, French stays and tombstones, among others. Another was the brief, but sensitive and astute, analysis of the presentation of the Chinese and indigenous cultures in seminal books between the 1940s and the 1960s.

Little-known illustrators such as Ethel Jackson Morris, Minnie Isabelle Rowe and Ruby Winckler feature alongside the prolific creators Connie Christie and Kay Druce. Together their work contributes to our understanding of art movements and creators' attitudes towards children.

Some features, though, work against a satisfying read. The text is frustratingly brief and each of the



The John Mystery titles rarely acknowledged their illustrators.



Dr Belle Alderman AM is emeritus professor of children's literature at the University of Canberra. She is the collections development manager of the Lu Rees Archives of Australian Children's Literature.

five major sections on Schooldays, Morality and the Family, Home and Land, Journeys and Other Worlds abruptly ends with no conclusions and areas for further research are rarely raised, as the author said she wished to do.

Why not, for example, suggest a comparison of the early school papers and readers from Victoria with those from NSW? Instead, only Victorian papers are examined and no mention made of other similar works. The text is occasionally dry, but when excerpts were included, these added flavour and often revealed more than the analysis.

The text also includes 11 valuable profiles of early authors with a brief critical overview of their contribution and biographical details. Mem Fox and Patricia Mullins were an odd inclusion among these historical creators. There are nine critical studies on historically important topics such as various illustrations for Oodgeroo Noonuccal's *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, children's annuals with clear roles for boys and girls, and Cobra boot polish with its references to World War I and the women's suffrage movement. Unfortunately, too often the placement of these interrupted the main text for several pages.

This resulted in a disjointed shift in historical perspective for the reader. Perhaps the book design dictated the placement of the profiles. While valuable, they interrupted the historical flow of the book.

Additional useful features include the Children's Book Council of Australia award winners for illustrated books, further reading, and author and title indexes.

Despite a few quibbles, this is a book of special achievements. No book demonstrates the visual riches over time of Australian children's literature as well. The profiles of historical writers and illustrators and overviews of their seminal works are invaluable. The little-known aspects of illustrators branding products contribute to our understanding of Australian children's literature as a cultural product of significance. *Bottersnikes and Other Lost Things* offers a treat worth savouring.