

Dromkeen: Children's Literature Collection

Over hundred years ago Judge Arthur Chomley planted pine trees along the road front of his Riddell's Creek Property. Today they hide one of Melbourne's best kept secrets. Up the dusty old track to a magic maze of garden, bronze sculptures and winding paved paths, Dromkeen, the homestead nestles in these magnificent grounds and these days, the stately old home houses the Dromkeen Collection of Australian Children's Literature.

However 'the true magic and wonder commence inside the homestead for here we have one of the most significant collections of artwork from children's literature in the world', the result of the vision and dreaming of two people, Joyce and Courtney Oldmeadow.

Joyce came from a family that encouraged her love of books and she went on to train as a kindergarten teacher. College lecturers 'kindled an interest in children's literature and developed an appreciation of the creative effort underlying the production of a picture story book.' She remembers the vibrancy of a tale well told and cites *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and *The Story about Ping* as the first stories in her storytelling repertoire. A seed was planted, a dream was hatched, a place was needed 'where children and books could come together in a more intimate way.'

'Courtney Oldmeadow's passion for books and love of literature developed during his school days and when he matriculated he was offered an art scholarship to university. But it was the time of the great depression and he was unable to accept, he needed a job. Shortly after the outbreak of WW2 Courtney enlisted as a Flight Lieutenant in the Royal Australian Airforce.

After he returned his first venture was a mixed business but it wasn't long before his love of literature resurfaced and he added children's books to the shelves of his shop. Further developments saw time as travelling children's booksellers, then a bookstore from the garage behind their home in East Ivanhoe, until it threatened to take over their lives. A major expansion of the business was to follow and they moved to their renowned shop in West Heidelberg

The philosophies that were to become Dromkeen's creed were fine-tuned. There was an urgent need to conserve 'all manner of materials associated with children's literature', particularly Australian and this material needed to be 'a living collection, displayed and always available for children to enjoy.'

Then one spring day in 1973 Dromkeen 'was found' by Joyce whilst visiting a friend at Riddell's Creek. The friend suggested the old homestead as a place to store books. Joyce immediately fell in love with it, 'and then as always, I became wildly enthusiastic. I already had the homestead as a home for children's literature and all sorts of things. Court made me take things slowly and be practical I was the one who had wild ideas; he was the one who made ideas and dreams a reality.'

Years of hard slog saw Dromkeen officially opened on the 12th October 1974, a dream slowly realised, a chance for children to understand 'that books were created by real people who had an equally real audience in mind.'

But Dromkeen has come along way since those early days and now it is an impressive collection that chronicles the traditions and heritage of Australia through its children's

literature. Visiting Dromkeen is like visiting old friends, books we have known and loved and worked with over the years gain an added 'vitality and freshness' when viewed in the original form. Writer's, illustrators, publishers, librarians and storytellers mingle as colleagues.

Take the winning form of Mem Fox and Julie Vivas in the classic, *Possum Magic*. How wondrous children must find it to see the pre publication material where the main character was 'a small invisible mouse, the ghostly ancestor of Hush, the invisible possum.' Vivas's illustrations are even more sparkling when viewed as original paintings.

Most of the 'greats' of Australian children literature are represented in the collection 'from early colonial works; the romantic Fairy Era of Ida Rentoul Outhwaite; Ethel Jackson Morris; Peg Maltby; to our well-loved icons *The Magic Pudding*, *Blinky Bill* and the *Gumnut Babies*; to the contemporary heroes of Julie Vivas; Patricia Mullins with her world acclaimed tissue paper collage; Graeme Base; Jeanie Baker's three dimensional collage sculptures; and works by Indigenous artists Bronwyn Bancroft, Pat Torres, Arone Raymond Meeks and Ian Abdulla.

The exhibitions are constantly changing; authors, illustrators and storytellers continually visit to bring the magic of story alive to eager young listeners. The homestead built by Judge Chomley in 1889 for his wife and eight children still exudes homely warmth that displays the artwork to full advantage. In one room beside a grand old fireplace bookshelves display editions of Australia's renowned author Ivan Southall. For *Ash Road* alone, there are 19 different versions. Behind each door, through each archway pleasures await.

Of interest to storytellers is the luscious throne for a kingly storyteller and the storytelling cape covered in amazing array of illustrated patches. A small antique display case houses a glorious gold and red crown and a jewel studded orb these are 'clues to the special children's program known as *Dromkeen Dragons*, a 'friends of Dromkeen' for the juniors. A grand dragon, a prominent author or illustrator reigns over activities for a year.

Friends of Dromkeen was formed in 1981 and they provide ongoing support for the development of the collection with donations of artwork, promotion of the collection and assistance at particular events. The 'friends' reconsidered their charter and role within literary circles in Australia to become the Dromkeen Society in 1994,

A highlight of the Society's year is the Dromkeen Dinner held in the last week in February; it is here that the prestigious Dromkeen Medal is awarded. A medal designed by Robert Ingpen, it recognises a person who has made 'a significant contribution to the appreciation and development of children's literature in Australia.' The recipient in 1999 was

Norman Lindsay wrote his classic *The Magic Pudding* to back up his theory 'that infantile concepts of happiness (were) based on the belly. ...And if a kid was offered his choice between food and fairies as delectable reading matter, (he) was willing to bet he would plumb for food. Likewise Dromkeen delights the senses with wonderful entertaining and refreshments and maybe that's another reason people keep coming back. At their literary lunch held first Friday in December Kaye Keck and the team spoil and indulge our every sense. It is here also that the Dromkeen Librarians award is given to an outstanding Children's Librarian.

In 1997 Dromkeen commenced a program focusing on reconciliation it 'aims to produce a sense of national identity based on shared historical experience and recognition and respect for indigenous cultures

This year sees huge celebrations planned for the launch of a new heritage trail through the gardens at Dromkeen. Huge boards (1m by 2m) will wind through the pine trees; on them will be colourful illustrations depicting significant events in Australia's History. The boards will pay homage to our indigenous people, look at depictions of issues such as multiculturalism and the environment and portray significant events such as the raising of the Eureka Flag. The trail will be launched on October the 20th this year in time for celebration of Federation in 2001 and our hundred years of nationhood.

It will be a very interactive day, children are invited to come as a character in history and map themselves on the timeline that will thread across the boards. Storyteller Anne E Stewart will tell stories around the theme of Australian History through her picture books

As I read through information about Dromkeen a phrase keeps repeating over and over in my head, 'If you build it they will come'. The line made famous by Kevin Costner in the movie Field of Dreams. Unsure of why, he builds a baseball ground in his cornfield.

Joyce and Court's concept has frequently been referred to as 'a dream becoming a reality.' But unlike Costner's character they knew exactly what they were doing. It was always their intention to 'present (children) with positive images to delight the senses, stir the emotions, nourish the mind and inspire the soul.'

Only two years after Dromkeen was open they were presented with the prestigious Eleanor Farjeon Award in recognition of their services to children's literature. It was the first time it had been awarded outside the UK, or to booksellers. International recognition of the importance of Dromkeen and fitting tribute to the creators of an inspiring venture, 'a meeting place of minds, children and books'.