

Breathing Life Into Text

Jackie Kerin



Working with oral culture

In 1999 Museum Victoria acquired from Dr June Factor the Australian Children's Folklore Collection.¹ Amongst all the traditional and homemade artifacts was an archive containing 10,000 card files. These cards are a record of chants, rhymes, jokes, insults and riddles from the oral culture of the playground.

The collection was initiated in the 1970s but much of the material has origins at least as far back as the 1870s—small narratives that have travelled on breath from mouth to mouth for generations, before being caught and transcribed. Fixed on paper, oral culture can languish, the sentiments, values, world order contained within them become archaic and the rhymes and chants are like the insect trapped in amber – strange and dead but a clue to times gone by.

Working from the ACFC cards, my colleague Bettina Nissen and I were engaged by the Museum to collaborate with primary school students to breathe life back into the texts. The aim was to create a soundscape for, *Melbourne—stories from a city* an exhibition that included a display evoking the atmosphere of primary school playgrounds between the 1960s and 1980s. We are traditional story-tellers and used to working with material that was once ephemeral. This was a joy.

However, children's rhymes can be brutal and the collection reflects this. Moya McFadzean, the curator for this exhibit had to tread carefully. Before we could begin work the content was presented to a teacher and parent committee with a set of questions which included, what harm could these rhymes cause?

The rhymes are classified in themes such as taunts, insults and warnings, as well as by historical era. The committee requested us not to use culturally offensive material like, 'ching chong China man' or 'red yellow blue, my mother is a Jew, my father is a Scottish man and I'm a kangaroo'. This is understandable however, the edited rhymes, riddles etc were accessible in the exhibition as cards in filing drawers, so anyone wishing to go deeper into the subject was able to.

The school we were associated with had students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds but regardless of this, oral culture was strong in the playground—so the task was easy. The children were soon creating handclapping, thigh slapping, finger clicking arrangements. We had to teach the children the old national anthem so they could sing, 'God save our rubbish bins. Long live our rubbish bins.' Bettina and I taught one student who was not familiar with Christmas carols the tune to We Three Kings for this golden oldie:

We three kings of orient are. One on a motor bike. One in a car. One on a scooter tooting his hooter. Following yonder star.

And he sang it like a champ!

Working with historical tales

Children frequently ask me, "is that a true story?" Because the truth is of great interest I have taken to crafting historical tales. Writing *Phar Lap The Wonder Horse* was a response to my storytelling experience at Melbourne Museum.² I wanted to enliven that mounted hide and those objects behind glass but most of all I wanted to give my audience a beginning, middle and end or a born, lived and died story.

Phar Lap's story takes place between two World Wars, after an influenza pandemic and during the Great Depression. As an olden days story it has the distance that makes the sad elements easier to talk about with young children. It's a big story that is highly valued by people who share a sense of ownership of the tale. Working with stories like this is a responsibility. I aimed to get the facts right, avoid schmaltz and reach the hearts of my audience.

From the moment I set to work I knew I wanted to write in rhyme. I'd read Elizabeth Willis' essay in the book *Phar Lap*.³ Elizabeth wrote, 'Australians of the 1930s...understood poetry as story-telling.' She described the out pouring of grief when Phar Lap died and much of that grief was expressed in rhyme. Writing in rhyme was another way of linking my telling to the times in which Phar Lap lived and died.

The facts were checked and double-checked before it was ready until Edward Butler Bowden (Phar Lap's previous curator) spotted an error in regard to the purchase of Phar Lap. Then the news came to hand as to how Phar Lap really died when Harry Telford's tonic recipe book was found and purchased by the Museum. It was then that we added notes to expand on the text and the beautiful illustrations by Patricia Mullins. Subsequently *Phar Lap The Wonder Horse*, was published by Museum Victoria.

Reciting the text at the Port Fairy Folk Festival, I won the 2009 Pat Glover Memorial Storytelling Award.⁴ How appropriate. *Phar Lap The Wonder Horse* is a true folk story given shape in the style of a bush ballad—a genre that once flourished in Australia as a way of spreading news.

My tale is done, my race is run, let's leave it in the past; In my imagination Big Red gallops free at last. A household name, he helped to put Australia on the map, I hope like me you've come to love the wonder horse...Phar Lap.

Jackie Kerin is an author and storyteller who has worked in kindergartens, schools, museums, galleries, libraries and at festivals. To find out more visit: www.jackiekerin.blogspot.com

¹Developed from research by Dr June Factor and Dr Gwenda Davey. For more about the collection visit: www.museumvictoria.com.au/discoverycentre/infosheets/australian-childrens-folklore-collection/

²Kerin, J. (illustrated Mullins, P.) *Phar Lap The Wonder Horse* (2008) Museum Victoria

³Armstrong, G. Thompson, P. (2000) *Phar Lap*, Allen & Unwin.

⁴*Phar Lap The Wonder Horse* was listed as notable by the Children's Book Council of Australia in 2009.

Photo Jackie Kerin storytelling.