

Part 1

Henry: Welcome back to Viewpoints, listeners. I am your host, Henry Grosseck and it gives me great pleasure to welcome one of my senior staff members, Mark Carthew, who is a leading teacher at Berwick Lodge Primary School, and, of equal importance, he is a well-renowned Australian children’s author, presenter and also works in tertiary institutions. Welcome to Viewpoints, Mark Carthew.

MARK: Great to be here, Henry.

HENRY: It’s a slightly different role to the one we share during our normal working week, Mark, as a team, trying to do the best for young children.

MARK: It is and in a sense it also isn’t because teachers, I find, are some of the most creative people that I love interacting with on a daily basis; and as I go around to other schools as well, it’s a very creative profession to be with children, that goes with the territory so it’s not surprising that many primary teachers, secondary teachers also share that authorial passion.

HENRY: I could describe you as, career-wise, a man of many paths, tell us a bit about your career and the various components.

MARK: I started off as a primary teacher at Thomastown East, over 30 odd years ago now and over that journey with primary teaching, I have taught all grade levels and I have taught music and performing arts, I have taught phys-ed, I have taught in the library so I enjoy all those aspects of primary curriculum and I left my leading teacher role at Birmingham Primary School, I was literacy and numeracy co-ordinator there, very similar to this role here to do my PhD, a doctorate in the poetics of language, of verse and children’s rhyme.

I am particularly interested in the power of rhyme and verse and also how we connect the musicality of language with our language acquisition so that took me away from teaching for four years and then after that, I did some work with Swinburne, RMIT and Monash University as a sessional lecturer for teacher education courses so sharing that journey with young graduate teachers and I really enjoyed that and still do, I am adjunct research fellow at Swinburne University at the moment and supervise masters and PhD students there, although I have obviously pulled that back a bit now because my commitment is to Berwick Lodge Primary School and my beautiful grade fours.

HENRY: It’s a bit like a boomerang, you have come back to the career love of your life I guess, teaching and working with young children.

MARK: Absolutely, as I said before, I think there’s a natural connection between writing, reading, books, the school environment, schools are full of books and as I say, I actually feel more creative in that author sense of the word when I am back in the school environment because you’re surrounded by your audience as well, which is great.

HENRY: Your own love of writing and literature, going back to the early days, where does that come from, Mark?

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MARK: My grandfather was an antiquarian book-collector and he’s long since passed on but I grew up in a family surrounded by books and it’s a question that I know the likes of Mem Fox, Andy Griffiths, Paul Jennings, myself whenever we’re on tour, whenever we get asked this question it resonates a lot. The best way to learn to love reading is to be surrounded by books and I have been fortunate all my life to share that passion of the hard copy book in particular. Although of course, these days it’s digital books as well.

HENRY: It was interesting you’re talking about that, we’re moving into a digital era and I was reading a piece just the other day about questioning the value of eBooks as tools for learning, reading and writing, compared with hard copy copies of books.

MARK: The Australian Society of Authors and others in the publishing industry have done research on this topic and the research is clear that children, not only young children but even teenage children really still value the hard copy book. It’s intriguing because for many years people were talking about the death, or the impending death of the book, the digital era was going to kill books and that hasn’t proven to be the case. My own experience touring and visiting other schools, bookshops and the like is that grandparents and parents really still value books as a connection with the tactile; so that’s a good sign for authors. There are some certainly challenges as many book stores are starting to close... but competition also means that it’s only the really good books that are going to survive and maybe such competition is not such a bad thing. Book design has grown exponentially over the last few years due to computer technology, so the skills involved in making a book are fantastic, there are great designers and illustrators out there.

HENRY: Now, moving into writing yourself, children’s books and there are so many, we have a selection here, the audience can’t see them but what took you into writing yourself?

MARK: I started off actually writing school plays back in that first school I mentioned, Thomastown East and I sort of got the love of writing from that very time. I wrote a melodrama with the old booing and hissing type stuff and it went down a treat and then from then on, I kept writing plays and that morphed into the *VoiceWorks* illustrated drama series; which has now gone into Canada and the UK and America and it’s done quite well, sold over a million copies worldwide. That was great fun not just for my own writing as I was also editing some really wonderful writers, Margaret Mahy, Michael Rosen and Graeme Base, Pamela Allen and many others, so that was a fantastic training ground for me to learn the craft of writing.

HENRY: Just looking at a couple of your books, *The Gobbling Tree*, we have that copy here in front of us, it’s a beautifully covered illustration, Susy Boyer was the illustrator. That one was the winner of the Speech Pathology Australia Book of the Year, 2009; tell us a bit about *The Gobbling Tree*.

MARK: That’s one that’s still very popular and that arose out of an experience on yard duty at Birmingham Primary School where a boy came up to me while I was coaching the footy side and he said, “Hey Mr. C, Mr. C, can you help me get the ball down from the tree?” as his footy was stuck up there. All the kids were shaking the tree and throwing stuff and I borrowed a basketball and threw that up ... and this is a true story, of course the basketball got stuck and a story evolved. When I was a young kid my brother and I were always getting balls and shuttlecocks and Frisbees and stuff stuck up in the tree so that was a fun story to write.

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HENRY: One of my favourites, if I may be so self-indulgent, is *Witches’, Britches, Itches and Twitches!*, the title alone and it gets back to, I think, your sense of rhyme too, doesn’t it? That’s one of my favourites.

MARK: Yes, certainly titles are a hook into a book and I enjoy playing with alliterative explosive phrases. My title *Wicked Wizards & Leaping Lizards* is the precursor to that. It’s good fun and as you can see, I love word play.

HENRY: You mentioned in your PhD that you’re fascinated by the musicology and the rhyme in writing and reading for children, there’s a time where it sort of all went a bit out of vogue, rhyme, didn’t it? We had Dr. Seuss and a whole heap of people, do you think that trend is one that should come back a bit, more than it is?

MARK: I think rhyme is coming back, it’s a bit of an interesting one because rhyming text and rhyming picture books in particular are actually quite difficult to write. Rhyming books also have to feel natural otherwise, as soon as rhyme becomes forced, it can grate on you. It’s a very difficult thing to do but very satisfying when you get it right. Mem Fox, one of our highest profile children’s writers, uses rhyme quite a lot and as you said, one of my writing heroes is Dr. Seuss.

HENRY: I think Dr. Seuss was one of those authors I think are timeless and last forever. Mike Spoor, you work a lot with Mike Spoor, tell us a little bit about Mike Spoor.

MARK: I work with a range of different illustrators and occasionally you repeat and I have done three books with Mike; *Newts, Lutes and Bandicoots* which is the one you have got in your hand, an illustrated one about the end sounds of words, a bit like a reverse *Animalia* similar to Graeme Base’s idea there. After that we went into the cartoony joke books and part of the reason I did that I wanted to write for the middle primary and upper primary kids, as well as the younger, early years set. These types of joke books have gone down really well with the older kids and Mike brings that cartoony fun illustration, very similar to Terry Denton, he’s like the UK’s Terry Denton and I love working with him.

HENRY: Is there a particular reason why you work with a variety of illustrators? Is it because they bring different skill sets or is it just the way it works?

MARK: I’m with multiple publishers, I think I have worked with 10-14 publishers and they often choose, sometimes I choose, it’s the joy of writing is to actually work with different illustrators and a publisher will make those decisions based on how they see a book resonating with the public.

HENRY: We’re going to take a short break, listeners, don’t go away.

Part 2

HENRY: Welcome back to Viewpoints, listeners. I am your host, Henry Grosseck. I am in the middle of a discussion with Mark Carthew, author, presenter and leading teacher at Berwick Lodge Primary School, my own school. Welcome back, Mark.

MARK: Good to be here.

HENRY: Mark, obviously writing is linked – and it’s children’s writing that you do – is linked back to your work. Children and writing and reading, what are the keys to making that a successful learning experience for children?

MARK: Well it does have to be fun in all its respects and that means the writing process of course, is a bit different to the reading process but it’s a question I often get as I go around and I think coming back to where we went before, Henry was being surrounded by quality literature, quality books, that’s the most important part of the process and you learn from reading and you pick so many things up and as a writer, you learn from reading other people’s books and some of the best writers out there, I have travelled overseas and spoken to some of the top writers throughout the world and they all have a very similar story, there’s the old thing there’s no such thing as an original idea, but there’s certainly original spins on it and bringing your own voice to is the challenge to make it different but good ideas, the myths, the fairy tales, those old stories, they come back in different forms and it’s exciting to be surrounded by books.

HENRY: It’s an interesting point you raise because - and Harry Potter would be a classic whereby - and it is hard to get books published, particularly in the established press, what constitutes good writing and what will trigger that interest in children? Adults often make that decision and I guess getting through the bureaucracy of the publishing world to the children can be a challenge in itself.

MARK: Yes, a major challenge. I am a mentor for the Australian Society of Authors, as I said before and there’s a lot of people that want to write a book and feel that they have a book inside them and it’s a real challenge to get the attention of a mainstream publisher. Luckily these days of course there is self-publishing and that’s exciting I think for the market and the quality of the books is definitely out there in all those environments but it certainly is a challenge to make those connections with the mainstream publishers and therein lays the quest. It is to know the industry and to get to know those who is publishing what and in what genres, whether it’s picture book, whether it’s novels, whether it’s information books, there’s a lot of them, books that are not chapter books at all, they’re actually information books and that’s a really exciting part of the industry actually.

HENRY: You mentioned it right at the beginning and it’s a passion of mine, poetry. Poetry is one of those things in schools that I think for a long time was a bit of a lost art and yet it shouldn’t be. What’s the key to success with poetry and having that in your classroom, Mark?

MARK: Surrounding the kids with some high quality poetry from high quality poets and there is plenty out there, over the years as you rightly said before, there were the golden years of the Shel Silversteins, way back 20, 30, 40 years ago and it has gone off the boil a little bit but people like Andy Griffiths, Michael Rosen, particularly in the UK, I have tried myself to write anthologies and I have got a few out there, *Machino Supremo!*, I wrote with South-

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Australian poet, Janeen Brien, poems about machine so trying to find themes and catchy topics and then once again making it illustrated or with photography, there's ways of making that interesting to the reader but it is a challenge, no doubt about it.

HENRY: A lot of authors specialise, you seem to specialise in being a smorgasbord writer as I would describe, plays, poems, stories, collections, all sorts of things, you really have got quite a smorgasbord of interest in what you do with your writing, Mark.

MARK: Yes, that's a really perceptive comment, Henry and that's why in some senses when people say, 'what are you, a children's writer, a poet, a musician, a playwright?' I am all of those things and that's not uncommon. A friend of mine, Hazel Edwards, she writes history, she writes poetry, she writes like myself, picture story books and I suppose when you love words, you love books, you enjoy all those different genres as well and poetry falls into that, song-writing, absolutely.

HENRY: A book here, it's only a small book and I think you could escape the attention but I think it's a very powerful one and I know we've had chats about this type of thing before, Mark. *Where do Flies and Spiders Sleep?* It's a very educational book and it's deceptively deeper book than the few pages suggest, you might like to tell the listeners about it?

MARK: That's one of my favourite little ones, I was the development editor for a series called Chatterbox by Pearson Education and that's where I cut my teeth in the publishing industry and met a lot of wonderful people, illustrators, designers and this one was really one of those texts that - as the teacher I suppose, comes out of me there and teachers often are searching for books that are engaging and interesting in a way that the kids are going to want to read and there was a bit of a reaction - occasionally I have seen a lot of stuff that has come out of America that is very literal and that's OK at one level but at the other level you see it with the kids, you want a book that the kids want to read and where do spiders and flies sleep, that actually came out of it, the first line was "Where does all the water go when it flows down the sink and where do flies and spiders sleep and do they ever drink?" so the open-ended questioning gets the kids in.

HENRY: Discussion points, absolutely. While we're on poetry, *Poems that Make a Noise: Munch, Crunch, Zoom, Roar!* why focus on poems that make a noise, what's the appeal in that to children and to you, Mark?

MARK: The onomatopoeia, that structure of word play is really important to me in virtually everything that I do and there's a lot of call and response and I think that comes from being a musician as well, you know the chorus, verse type thing in a song can be replicated in plays and in my picture story books where there is some natural parts where the audience actually wants to be part of the telling of the story and that sort of alliterative onomatopoeic, *Munch, Crunch, Zoom, Roar!* really appeals to me as a writer.

HENRY: *VoiceWorks*, you wrote a book there, *Tiddalick the Thirsty Frog*, this is a play based on an Australian aboriginal story retold by Mark Carthew. The challenge in retelling an aboriginal story, the challenge in doing that justice and the reason for doing that, Mark?

MARK: In that *VoiceWorks* series, we wanted to have a strand within it that actually valued multiculturalism and particularly as an Australian-based series, the *VoiceWorks* series, it would have been totally remiss not to have indigenous tales in there so I did quite a bit of

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work to actually get permission from some elders to retell that story and also it is beautifully illustrated - it was actually going to be illustrated by Bronwyn Bancroft, an indigenous illustrator but she wasn't able to do that project and we got Greg Rogers, he has unfortunately passed away now, but he was one of our most talented illustrators and he has brought that story to life. It's a beautiful Australian indigenous story.

HENRY: And you of course, didn't stop there in the *VoiceWorks* series, you have got a traditional American tale, *The Hairy Toe*. Any particularly challenges in getting that one to print?

MARK: No, that one has been around for a long time. I put my own spin on it but it's very popular with the kids, it's a [whispers] *'Who's got my hairy toe...? Who's got my hairy toe...?'* and so on so once again, there's a call and response element where the audience loves getting involved. It's a radio play perfect for this station.

HENRY: Ah, we'll have to get it on board and as we get to the end of it, there's a sentimentalist in Mark Carthew, *Timeless Songs to Share and Treasure, Can you Keep a Secret?* Am I right, a sentimentalist there a bit?

MARK: Yes, that's a sort of an ode to my love of the great story collectors, like your Edward Lear's et cetera and as I said, I love those old-fashioned tales and stories and often we don't know where they came from; that's the same with those songs and the rhymes that are told from grandparents and parents to their little kids when we are young. My PhD, *Can you Keep a Secret?* included investigation of the idea of the history and poetics of rhyme and verse, and that book and the CD in your hand was the artefact or the creative work that came out of my PhD.

HENRY: Writing your stories and your poems and your books, compared with writing the manuscript for your PhD, which was more enjoyable?

MARK: Oh, a difficult question. It took a long time to do the PhD but no regrets there, it's all part and parcel, and I have met some wonderful people in academia as well as back in the teaching profession, so the two things work really well together.

HENRY: As we close Mark, a message to teachers, young teachers particularly, literacy and literature is a huge part of your teaching, in fact you invoke them in practically everything you do in teaching, what's your advice to an up and coming teacher who wants to make a difference?

MARK: Look, it's a pretty simple message and I think it's as simple as saying 'have fun' and if you have fun in the classroom, whether it's the reading, the mathematics, science, anything in a school, if you make it fun and engaging the kids will go with you and they share that passion. Teachers are really good at doing that.

HENRY: And you too. If people want to get hold of your books, we will give you a plug there, how would they do that?

MARK: They're all over the place. In this day and age, you're only a click away from ordering a book but the latest ones and *The Great Zoo Hullabaloo!* which is coming out next month, that will be in all good bookstores near you, hopefully.

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HENRY: If it's not, they're bad bookstores [laughs].

MARK: That's exactly right. You have sometimes got to do a bit of research because they're all over the place and of course books go out of print and quite a few of my books around here are out of print now so you go to the second-hand bookstores.

HENRY: And they become collectors-items.

MARK: Indeed.

HENRY: Absolutely. That was Mark Carthew, listeners, leading teacher at Berwick Lodge Primary School, author, presenter and great raconteur too. We'll take a short break, don't go away.

END OF TRANSCRIPT