

Our Story

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When I was nine my grade four class went to see *Storm Boy* at the Chelsea Cinema. I vaguely remember the day: lollies thrown around, catcalls (we copped it when we got back to school), mumbled comments as Greg Rowe fretted over Mr Percival. Maybe time reshapes memory, but I can still recall sitting deep in my seat, my sweaty, tomato-stake legs sticking to the vinyl. I can see the Goolwa shopscapes scissored neatly on the screen, and Storm Boy and his father, Hideaway Tom, trudging silently along the beach (he was one of those old-fashioned, no-nonsense fathers). These characters seemed familiar. Neighbours, perhaps? An uncle I hadn't seen for years? Someone who worked at the local Tom the Cheap?

I think, now, perhaps, this was a revelatory moment. Greg Rowe looked like me and my mates, he dressed like us, talked like us and, somehow, saw the world like us (not that I really understood this until much later). For a kid brought up in the Brady Bunch living room, and the streets of *The Professionals*' London, here was an actual *film* about my mob.

Years later the same thing happened with a book. Barbara Hanrahan's *The Scent of Eucalyptus* became a sort of Bible-of-identity. Rose Street, Thebarton, was Ramsay Avenue, Hillcrest. Hanrahan's dad was mine, her Nan looked like mine, and her Downs Syndrome aunt, Reece, reminded me of all the stray aunts and uncles who lived in sleep-outs and granny flats around my neighbourhood (from a young age I learnt that there are minor imperfections in every family - these people, of course, were the ones who taught us most about the vagaries of life, and the value of love).

In the intervening years I've read many books about my mob, and each has informed me. Books are a way of transmitting shared values, dreams, fears, prejudices. The best, in my opinion, are novels. Unlike non-fiction, good stories don't attempt to tell

the whole story. The gaps, the inferences, the lessons, have to be added by the reader. This is what gives the message credibility: it's tailor-made to everyone who holds the pages in their hands. This is why the book, the yarns, the ghost stories and fairy tales, work so brilliantly. We own them. We carry them through our lives. We trust them. We allow them to answer our questions.

Which is why the National Year of Reading 'Our Story' program is so valuable. Not just because my book got up (although that doesn't hurt), but mostly because it seems that we as a nation are starting to say: Stories matter.

I don't think the NYoR organisers are claiming that these eight books, about many aspects of our country, culture and landscape, have any exclusive right to define a time or place. More, that these are good starting points, reliable markers that give an idea about the desert, forests, beaches and suburbs of our nation, and about how we humans have tried (with mixed success) to fit in.

I hope the Year of Reading provides a focus for libraries to celebrate, and perhaps rediscover, the stories and story-tellers close to hand. In South Australia, there is a whole library of great writers, past and present, who describe our patch far more convincingly than a hundred street directories, atlases, tourist brochures and history books ever could. Alistair Sarre will tell you about Woomera in his *Prohibited Zone*; Tracy Crisp will show you Port Pirie, in all of its industrial nakedness, in *Black Dust Dancing*; Max Fatchen will take you along the Murray in *The River Kings*; Colin Thiele will take you almost anywhere, from Eudunda to Port Lincoln; Rosanne Hawke will show you the wheatbelt around Kapunda in *The Messenger Bird*; the Old Line of Sean Williams' *Books of Change: The Storm Weaver and the Sand* will remind you of the red country around Whyalla; Peter Goldsworthy will personally drive you south to Penola in *Everything I Knew*.

And these are just a few.

The challenge, now, is to connect. With readers and non-readers alike. Libraries, schools and book-shops can all play their part. No more the local writer hidden away in the alphabetical section, gathering dust, hoping for a review. 2012 is the year of blaring,

in-your-face Aussie stories – posters, parties, high teas – whatever it takes. 2012 will make Billy Graham's Last Crusade look like the Jimmy Sharman boxing tent. This is the year that all manner of politicians will go to *at least* as many literary events as sporting finals.

And somewhere, sometime, this year, there will be another kid sitting in a cinema, or picking up a stray book, reading, smiling, and beginning the journey. Just one. That's all it takes. And then it all starts again, as it has for a thousand years – the descent into imagination, like Alice down her hole.