

## **The Donald Graves Address, 2023, Canberra**

The Donald Graves Address is presented annually at the ALEA National Conference to honour his key contributions to our understanding of how children learn to write. The invited presenter is asked to reflect on the implications of Graves' scholarly research and practice and make connections to their own writing practice and to contemporary context related to teaching writing.

The 2023 ALEA Donald Graves address was made by eminent Australian children's author Libby Gleeson AM. Libby Gleeson is an award winning and much loved Australian writer who writes children's picture books and longer fiction for young people. She has been a teacher and lecturer and has also written scripts. Libby has been shortlisted for the Children's Book Council of Australia awards many times and won the award for fiction for younger readers in 1997 with *Hannah and the Tomorrow Room* and the Picture book of the Year in 2002 for *An Ordinary Day*, illustrated by Armin Greder. *Amy and Louis*, illustrated by Freya Blackwood was awarded the Early Childhood Book of the Year in 2007. In 2015 Libby and Freya won the Early Childhood award for *Go to Sleep Jessie*, and the Junior Fiction Award for *The Cleo Stories*. *The Great Bear*, illustrated by Armin Greder won the Bologna Ragazzi in 2000, the only Australian title to have won this prestigious award. Libby is widely published overseas. In 2013 her novel *Red* won the Prime Minister's Award. From 1999 – 2001 Libby chaired the Australian Society of Authors and she is currently chair of WestWords, Western Sydney's Literature Development Organization for Young People. Libby has won many awards during her career, including the Children's Literature Peace Prize in 1991, the Lady Cutler Award in 1997, the Dromkeen Medal and the Lady Cutler Award. In 2007 she became a Member of the Order of Australia for services to literature and literacy education.

The following transcript was developed from her notes. Where a resource used in her presentation is not available for inclusion here, the transcript has been edited in the interest of readability.

We thank Libby Gleeson and ALEA for providing the notes for this address.

## Don Graves

### The Desk

Mother buys  
a cheap wooden desk  
painted bright orange  
with two flimsy drawers  
that rattle  
when I pull them open.  
There are two open shelves  
on the side  
which can hold  
about twenty books.  
Mother says, "You can have  
this desk in your room  
if you want it."

Before the desk came,  
I only slept in my room,  
made my bed,  
picked up my dirty clothes,  
and kept only my Sunday clothes  
on a hanger in the closet.

I sit at the desk,  
rub my hands over the surface,  
pull open the top drawer,  
and put a box of Crayolas,  
and a few pencils inside.  
I shut the drawer  
and I like the  
sound of the thunk  
that says the desk is mine.

I stand up beside the desk  
and feel the silence of empty shelves.  
I pick up the four books I own,  
run my fingers down the bindings,  
and shelve them in alphabetical order.  
Now I have a library in my room.

I sit down, pull open  
the next drawer,  
bigger and deeper  
than the first.  
There, I place my maps  
of Europe, Asia, and the United States  
and my stamp book  
with stamps from the whole world.  
Now, any place on earth is in my room.

(from Graves, Donald (1996) *Baseball, Snakes, and Summer Squash: Poems About Growing Up*, Boyd's Mill Press)

I loved this poem when I first read it: the simplicity, the pleasure on having the poet take possession, the appreciation by which 4 books become a library and a drawer full of maps and stamps become any place on Earth. It's simple in its expression but it's also wise. And it was written by Don Graves. Unlike many people whose words I've been reading in the past weeks in articles about Don Graves, I never had the pleasure and the inspiration of meeting him. I wish I had. In beginning this talk, this address inspired by Don Graves I began wondering how to do it. How to write such a piece. What would you, the audience want to hear? What would honour the contribution of this man, his ideas, his theories, his practice. So, I thought, I should follow his process: his schema of pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and publication.

First the pre-writing, the gathering of information and ideas about Don Graves, maybe what he said about children learning to write and how he went about setting that learning in process. My sources for this were the articles and notes gathered from so many sources. Google offered lots as did friends. In particular I want to acknowledge my friend Professor

Robyn Ewing whom I have known since first meeting her at the University of Sydney many years ago, and with whom I've had many conversations about all kinds of teaching and working with teachers and children. My thanks go to the many sources which have published papers and articles about the man who transformed the way children were taught to write in the seventies and eighties. So, I read widely, taking notes and viewed videos. You Tube was a great source for that.

Let me share with you some of the comments that I jotted down as I read, comments I wanted to remember, not just for this address but because I wanted to commit them to memory for the wisdom, the feelings about teaching, the feelings about children specifically and about children writing. In *'Writing: Teachers & Children at Work'* Don said,

*"Children want to write. They want to write the first day they attend school. This is no accident. Before they went to school, they marked up walls, pavements, newspapers with crayons, chalk, pens or pencils, anything that makes a mark. The child's marks say, I am."*

That one rang true for me. I am the mother of three daughters, all scribbled and wrote their marks on whatever was available when they were young. In fact, when I asked one of them about her learning to write, all she could remember was the way she and her two sisters were encouraged to write and draw when they were little. They made their mark. All of them are now great readers and writers, some of them professionally, although I can't swear to the process of how they became that. Writing is a love story. It glows with Graves' love of children, of writing, and of teaching. For those of us fortunate to have attended a Graves workshop, Writing is an extension of that experience. His calm, wise voice sounds on every page. Readers still unacquainted with Donald Graves will delight in encountering his warm, caring, supportive personality and his gentle humour. Writing is a love story. I love writing. I love putting words down on the page, seeing how when I haven't determined what I want to make in a story, in a piece of text, the actual act of writing somehow creates the thoughts that become formulated and make up the final product.

This next comment comes from Thomas Newkirk, a colleague of Don's at the University of New Hampshire. Talking of Murray who first used the phrase Writing Process . He, Murray, was the head of the journalism program at the university and a writer who was a good friend of Don's and who spoke with him on almost a daily basis.

*“If students were to progress as writers, they had to cease to imagine themselves as students. But it was one thing for Murray to propose this for college or high school students; it was something different to imagine it working in elementary classrooms,”*

In addition, at the time of their first studies, writing instruction was tightly regulated, Newkirk explains. Topics were assigned, all errors were marked, outlines were required for all longer papers, a five-paragraph structure was imposed, all papers were graded, and there were no readers other than teachers. In lower grades, teachers listed the words to be used on the blackboard. Newkirk says:

*“Murray and Graves were appalled by this overregulation, believing that it stunted the expressive possibilities of writing, not to mention that it killed the **joy**. It imposed a compliant student role, rather than the role of the writer. It ignored the most necessary condition for writing – having something to say to someone,”.*

The joy of writing. The having something to say to someone. That's how it feels for me: the joy of writing and especially something to say. It is the antithesis of much of what is talked about in the current political approach to education. Evaluation often comes from testing. NAPLAN is an example. A specific writing task, a very limited time to write that will be read by only the testers and the evaluation itself. What is that? The conventions of literacy: spelling, punctuation, correct grammar. Nowhere will the assessment focus on the ideas the student put forward and wove into a coherent piece of creative writing. I was an English teacher, secondary, back in the seventies and my memory of what I did is gone. Studying literature remains in a vague way. But I don't recall teaching writing, and if I did, it certainly was nothing to do with any of the methods of Don Graves.

I thought I'd try to figure out just how I learnt to write as a young person myself. How did I learn this? It was a long time ago, more than sixty

years, probably, in the small local school I first attended in the town of Glen Innes, high on the New England Tableland of New South Wales. I had been read to since babyhood, but I know I couldn't read myself and I couldn't write. All I can remember when I cast my mind back is a huge wall chart, the same size as the huge ones of plastic or some such fabric that were maps of the world but on this chart were the letters of the alphabet. Each was in a square, the chart was divided like a chequerboard, and each square had the letter, brightly coloured in both upper and lower case and an object. A is for apple, B is for box, c is for car and so on. Maybe some of you share this memory. Was this to teach reading or writing? Who knows? Possibly, probably both.

My writing life developed from that kindergarten class and that wall chart. I have memories of small paperback books, simply illustrated: '*Fay and Don*', was one. Probably that was part of our learning to read. As I moved through primary school, I know there were compositions on all kinds of topics – 'What I did in the summer Holidays,' was a common one and in retrospect, I don't remember any real preparation for that, not even a discussion about what truly had happened. There was probably not even a word list on the board. And then there was angst ridden adolescent, poetry. But I believe I truly learnt to write well in a very different context.

In 1976 I was living and working in Italy. I had taken myself there on a bit of an adventure to experience living in a different culture and having to learn another language. At first, loneliness overwhelmed me before I developed friendships and understanding. And in that loneliness, I wrote. I started with a short story about being alone and unsupported in a new environment. My situation in Italy was too raw so I cast my mind back to my childhood when my family moved from the small town on the tableland to the broad sweeping plains of Western New South Wales. My story focussed on being a new girl in the wrong school tunic, standing on the school veranda watching other girls playing hopscotch. The boys were probably somewhere else playing football. I couldn't join in. I wasn't trying to write a memoir, but I was drawing on the experience, the feelings I had back then. Here is the notebook where I began that writing. And believe me, that writing is pretty terrible. It begins with a boring description of the family arriving at the old house where they are going to live. No dialogue, no genuine detail, nothing to show the reality of the experience. No mention even of the kids in the car until close to a page or so in.

As I said, I was living in Italy, Crema, near Milan. The loneliness gradually evaporated, and the short story got me wondering - what happened next? I realised I wanted to write a lot more. I wanted to be back in an environment of my own language, but I didn't want to come home so that meant London. And after a few days in London, I heard about a place called the City Literary Institute, in Covent Garden. I went along to it because it said in the brochure that there were courses in Italian: spoken. And I felt I wanted to get a greater grip on the street Italian I had learnt during my time working there. There wasn't a conversation class. The only course the day I went to was translation and so I left. Along the corridor was a sign: *Literary Workshop*. I'd never heard of one of those. What did it mean? There weren't any in Sydney, none in any part of Australia. None in the Universities, the TAFE colleges or any of the private institutions. I was curious So I went in. I'm so glad I did. There I learnt to write and to think about writing the way I do now.

The woman leading the workshop was Carol Burns, a writer of fiction and a successful painter. She asked me to tell them about a long car trip in NSW in the nineteen sixties. I had had plenty of experience driving from our home, wherever it had been, to Sydney for Xmas with grandparents. Hot December drives, through sometimes drought-dry bush, kids squashed in the back seat, parents refusing to stop unless there was an emergency. The audience, used to driving in the green rolling hills of Southern England was a bit incredulous. There had been a paragraph, deep in the draft about the heat and the stop for cool drinks from a bush café. Write about that, said the group leader. So, for the next year I wrote about that. I regularly read my efforts to the group and received critiques, most of which were helpful and steered me to writing a much better book.

I came back to Australia in 1981. I had finished the book and I named it '*Eleanor, Elizabeth*' and offered it to Penguin. They rejected it saying that the time slip of the life of Elizabeth, as opposed to the modern girl, Eleanor, made the story inaccessible to the young reader. (Elizabeth is Eleanor's great grandmother and Eleanor finds her diary and reads it) and there was also some swearing in it which they wouldn't accept. But it was accepted by Angus and Robertson and published in 1984.

Back in Australia I never joined another workshop group, but I regularly shared my work-in-progress with friends also writing, in particular Nadia Wheatley and Jenny Pausacker, both fine writers of children's and YA

fiction. What that workshop in London had taught me was the power and the value of sharing my work, of seeking a response to it, and of taking on board what I heard. And this approach to writing has continued with the picture books I have written. Let's have a look at *'Go to Sleep Jessie'*. I didn't have a writing group to share with this story, but I did have a very perceptive editor. I don't have my original version of the story, but I do have some of the comments from her, the editor, before she took the story along to the acquisitions meeting.

Roughly the story, at this stage, is pretty classic: small children, sharing their bedroom. One not wanting to go to sleep and the various members of the family try all sorts of things to try and get her to sleep. Both the Mum and Dad come and sing to her, change her nappy, and tell her it's night-time and that everything sleeps at night. Finally, Dad takes her for a drive in the car and she gets to sleep that way. (I remember doing just that with small children) and is this going to work? The editor said that the story felt like it was very much the parent's story. They were the ones with the various answers to try and maybe the older child, Jo, had to solve the issue in the end. I rewrote and did manage to emphasise the role of Jo.

With regard to that writing workshop in London, I think, it was the first time I had ever shared my writing that way and it was exactly straight out of Donald Graves. I knew it as a workshop. I could have called it 'conferencing': the technique he and Murray advocated to approach writing for students. Treat them not as students at all, treat them as writers. Just as I had been in my London workshop – I was writing what I wanted to write, I was sharing with people who wanted to listen and to know what I wanted to say in that writing and they were prepared to discuss what I had written and give me their views on whether I had best achieved what I intended.

Murray and Graves wanted children as young as in the Infants School to be given the tools of writers, implements pens or pencils and paper. They, the children, chose what they wanted to write about and then they shared that with others in their group. Their teacher hovered and chatted and asked questions or responded to the writer's questions. Of course, in the beginning, there were maybe pictures with a few marks underneath or around them. But they were the child's marks. Marks that said 'I am.' What followed was not predictable or standard. It would depend on the context: the teacher's relationship to that child, the events of the day that would follow, the nature of the classroom, a whole host of



possibilities. I am confident there would be no red pen descending on the page.

Subsequently, as with Go to Sleep Jessie, it is the relationship with the editor that has played the role of the group – asking the questions that force me, the writer, to think again and to come up with different solutions that solve a problem or that enrich the text. Some editors in some publishing houses may well rewrite bits of texts – I haven't experienced this although I have heard that it happens. But to me, a good editor is like the kind of good teacher that Don Graves wrote about: one who asks questions, seeks explanations that might enhance the meaning of what the writer has written down but has not really successfully conveyed to the reader.

I saw the reality of this in my first encounter with kindergarten and my eldest daughter. I asked her as I was preparing this what she could remember of learning to write. She said she was too old to remember anything but then, after more conversation, she could remember being invited to write a story and she filled a whole page with all the letters she knew. It's possible, she said, that there was a specific word in there, but she wasn't sure. Then she asked the teacher to read her story back to her. She thinks the teacher first asked her to tell her about the story, but she wasn't sure.

My eldest grandchild is now learning to write in the Infants School, year one. I'm not focussing on the way she's being taught but I do have access to her first stepping out into the world on learning about writing when she was about three. It is apparent she was growing in a literate household where her parents wrote, writing was valued and talked about.

AI is currently the conversation topic with so many of the people I talk to. Journalist friends talk of the fear they have that stories or '*content*' will be sourced by artificial intelligence rather than journalists. Television creators and film writers share those fears. As you are probably aware, the writers in Hollywood have been on strike for some time from a fear – among other things - that their jobs could be abandoned, replaced by the output of AI '*creators*'. The profit motive for the big production houses will be an incentive. If you haven't had the experience of using AI, can I urge you to have a go. I did it myself recently. There's a free system, Chat GTP A I 3.5 and when you go onto it and issue a question it will respond almost instantly. I know people who have used it experimentally to generate mail, love letters, all sorts of things. In advance of this

address, I asked it to write a story of a small child who doesn't want to go to sleep. It produced enough text to be a kids' picture book story. There was the form of a story – a beginning, middle and end. The language was almost all appropriate - but for me it was unpublishable in the modern world of excellence in children's publishing. Which doesn't mean it won't happen. A technique like this is probably out there already; self-published or by someone starting out in the business. Let me read the first couple of paragraphs. What I did was type into Chat GPT – 'write a story about a young child who does not want to go to sleep':

*Once upon a time, in a small town nestled among rolling hills, there lived a young child named Emily. Emily was a bright and curious little girl who loved exploring the world around her. She was filled with endless energy and enthusiasm, and there was always something new and exciting for her to discover.*

*However, there was one thing that Emily did not particularly enjoy—going to sleep. Every night, when the moon rose high in the sky and the stars twinkled, her parents would gently remind her that it was time for bed. But Emily, being the determined and independent spirit that she was, would always find a reason to resist.*

*"Bedtime already? But I'm not even tired!" Emily would protest, her eyes sparkling with mischief.*

*Her parents would smile and patiently explain, "Emily, sleep is important. It helps you grow strong and be ready for all the adventures that await you tomorrow."*

*But Emily had other plans in mind. She would often come up with imaginative excuses to delay bedtime ...*

And another: 'write a story about a young child who does not want to go to sleep':

*Once upon a time, in a cozy little house on the edge of a bustling city, there lived a young child named Oliver. Oliver was a spirited and imaginative boy, always brimming with curiosity and excitement. But when it came to bedtime, Oliver had a secret—he did not want to go to sleep.*

*Night after night, as the stars began to twinkle in the dark sky, Oliver's parents would lovingly tuck him into bed. They would read him his favourite stories, sing soothing lullabies, and create a peaceful atmosphere in his room. However, as soon as they would bid him goodnight and close the door, a mischievous sparkle would light up Oliver's eyes.*

*He would climb out of bed and tiptoe around the house, convinced that sleep was a waste of time. There were just too many adventures to be had, too many secrets to uncover in the world around him. From his bedroom window, he would watch*

*the moon cast its silver glow over the rooftops, and his heart would fill with longing for the nocturnal wonders that awaited him outside.*

*One night, as Oliver's parents tucked him in and kissed him goodnight, a soft, gentle voice whispered through the room. "Oliver, my dear, would you like to know a secret?" The voice belonged to the Moon, who had noticed Oliver's restlessness from high above in the sky...*

These two stories are very similar. The denouement – which I won't bother to share with you are not the same but not too dissimilar either. Neither story is, for me, credible or genuinely authentic. Neither reads as if it is written by a real person who has taken on board the real experience of what that situation demands. And at the moment that is the problem. I say 'at the moment' because who knows the depth that AI algorithms will attain sometime in the future. I believe AI is no substitute for creative writing. As a research tool it is phenomenal, I can see it replacing so many hours of laborious work compiling and analysing research results but in generating prose, creative writing, there will be that lack of authenticity. There will be a homogeneity about the styles.

And the discerning reader will be able to suspect that no real human person has been over the making of that work – just the machine that can travel through/over hundreds of thousands of creative works that are before it. AI is here now and it is going to affect all of us. Maybe you have already seen materials advocating ways that it will affect your teaching. What would Don do if he were alive today and still concerned with children, teachers and writing. I think he would have turned his computer on looked up the source and then be spending as much time as he could working out how he could implement the new technology to work for him.

I began this address with a poem of Don's. Let me finish with another.

## **HANDWRITING**

**Loops and circles**

**circles and loops**

**march across my page**

**from left to right.**

**The class leans**

into their pages  
like factory worker;  
heads go up and down;  
Miss Fortin patrols  
the aisles to check  
our posture, the position  
of our arms.

She looks at my page  
of circles and loops  
mixed with black smudges  
and eraser holes.

She doesn't get angry;  
she just lets out  
a long, low sigh  
like  
she wants to go home.

Donald Graves