

# Children's literature seeks its laureate



Readers: Bronwen Bennett with Richard, 10, and 11-year-olds Renata, Felicity and Justine at St Michael's Primary School in Melbourne

Picture: Richard Cisar-Wright

## Justine Ferrari Education writer

A CHILDREN'S laureate to champion reading among kids will be appointed from next year under a program established by an alliance of authors, teachers, librarians, publishers, booksellers and arts administrators.

The newly formed Australian Children's Literature Alliance hopes the initiative will promote Australian children's and youth literature, as well as convince schoolkids of the importance and pleasure of reading.

Alliance chairwoman Bronwen Bennett, the immediate past president of the Children's Book Council of Australia, said one of the main aims was to educate the community about the quality of

Australian children's literature.

"There's a perception in the broader community that children's literature, for authors, is an apprenticeship for writing 'real books' and it's not always given the credence it deserves," she said.

"Australia has a rich tradition in producing the very best children's writing, from literary greats such as Colin Thiele and Patricia Wrightson through to the irreverent humour of Andy Griffiths.

"And if we don't have reading children, we won't have reading adults."

Ms Bennett said the laureate would be the public face of the children's and young adult book industry, and act as its advocate on relevant issues.

The idea is based on the

successful Children's Laureate program run in Britain for the past 10 years, which was the brainchild of poet Ted Hughes and children's writer Michael Morpurgo. Britain appointed its first Laureate in 1999, the children's book illustrator Quentin Blake, whose work appears in many Roald Dahl books. The US launched a similar program, the Ambassador for Young People's Literature, last year.

The ACLA comprises a 12-member board of industry groups along with the Australia Council, which is providing the start-up funding for the initiative, and the State Library of Victoria, which is providing administrative support.

Australia Council director of literature Susan Hayes said the

project would focus on Australian books, but the intention was to convince children to read books of any type, whether Harry Potter or *The Day My Bum Went Psycho*.

"The aim is to encourage young people to... value literature," she said.

While the selection procedure for the laureate is still being finalised, it is envisaged the public will have a role in nominating suitable people.

Ms Bennett and Ms Hayes said popular writers such as Griffiths, Paul Jennings and John Marsden would be ideal.

The children's laureate will get a stipend for a two-year appointment, during which he or she will travel to every state and territory at least once, visiting schools,

libraries and events such as the Royal Easter Show or Teddy Bear's Picnic.

"The idea is to maximise exposure to the widest possible audience, not just people who visit bookshops and libraries," Ms Bennett said.

Eventually, she hopes the alliance can be a source of information for parents, booksellers and librarians in circulating information about appropriate books for different types of children.

The alliance is a collaboration by the AC, Australian Publishers Association, Australian Society of Authors, SLV, CBCA, Little Big Book Club, Australian Booksellers Association, edit — the association of primary English teachers, Fremantle Children's Literature Centre and an independent bookseller.