
Book reviews: Children's picture books

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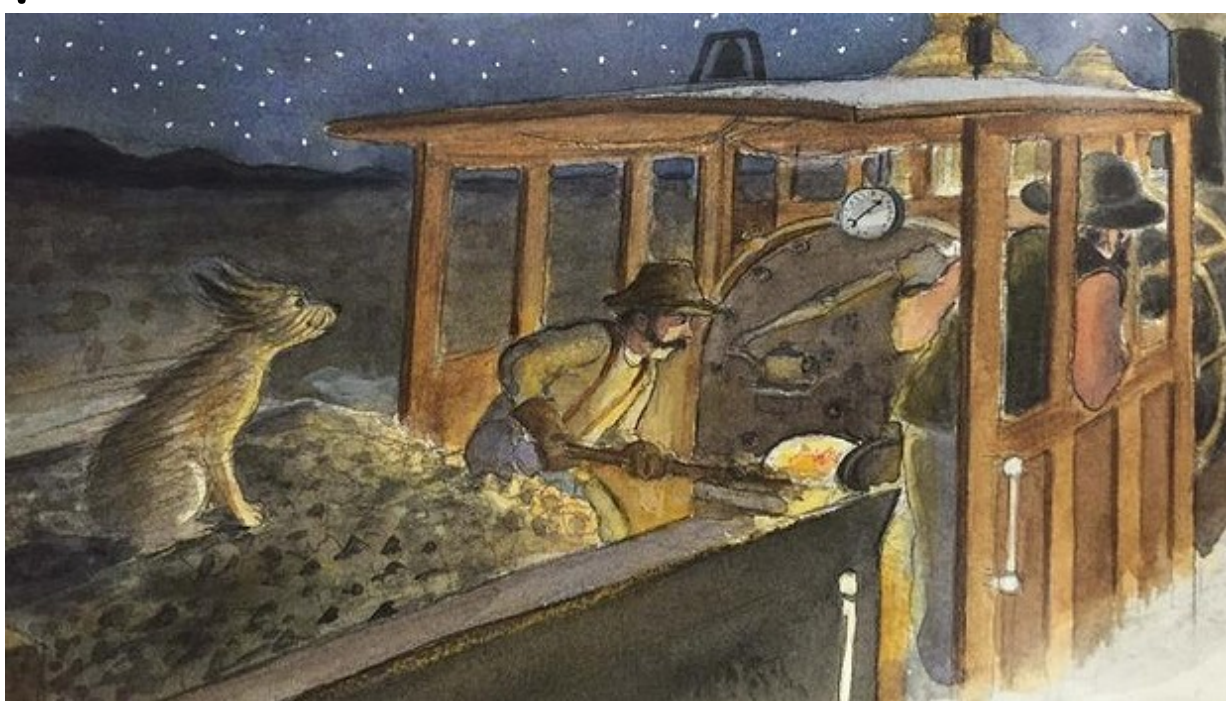


Illustration from *Bob the Railway Dog*. Photo: Supplied

Creators of non-fiction books for young children are faced with the dual challenges of presenting well-researched facts while making the subject they are dealing with both interesting and engaging.

***Australian Kids through the Years* (NLA Publishing, 56 pp, \$24.99)** is an eye-catching book. Its strong child appeal is ensured by Andrew Joyner's enthusiastic cartoon-style images. Tania McCartney's underlying concept is of an historical journey through the years using children as our guides. The book opens with two double-page spreads featuring the "first children", who have occupied this wide brown land for many thousands of years.

Rather than then deal with each decade of white settlement, McCartney has made some difficult editorial decisions, leaving out some decades of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century altogether, while loosely grouping others. However, the modern era has a more detailed coverage, with each decade presented individually, starting with the 1950s and finishing with "2000 to today". This makes sense in terms of the audience appeal for today's grandparents, parents and children alike.

For each period covered, the reader is introduced via a double-page

spread to a boy and a girl. Joyner's portraits show them in historical garb, while introductory thumbnail sketches by McCartney hint at their background, lifestyle and interests. There follows a colourful and detailed double-page spread that puts the characters in context. Captions, speech balloons and break-out boxes document what the children wore, ate, did and played with, with each period covered providing an enticing window into the history of childhood in Australia.

McCartney's well-researched text provides the framework for this book, offering up a multicultural banquet of characters for Joyner to present. Joyner's rambunctious and often humorous illustrations animate this history, creating characters that children can identify with and scenes from domestic life that will resonate with them.

With the added bonus of a closing gallery featuring some of the images from the National Library of Australia's collections that Joyner has used as references for his illustrations, *Australian Kids through the Years* provides interesting insights into the history of family life. It is a fitting introduction to the pleasures of exploring the past.

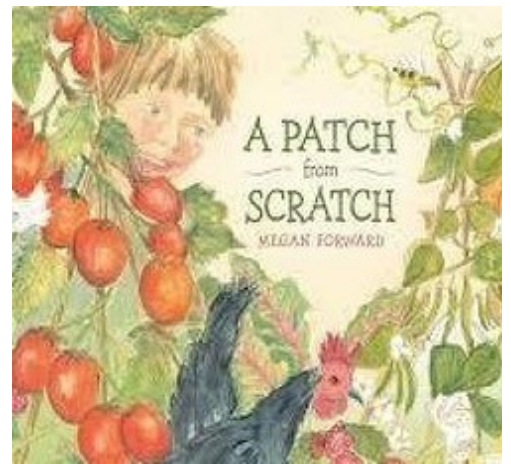
Bob the Railway Dog (Black Dog Books. 32 pp, \$24.95) by Corinne Fenton and Andrew McLean is another book that brings history to life for children, this time through the appealing story of a "train-spotting" dog named Bob. Based on the true story of a rather scruffy but engaging hound who has become a part of railway folklore, especially in South Australia, it is set in the late 1880s, when railways were beginning to open up the far-flung areas of Australia.

Adopted by railway guard Will Ferry from a trainload of homeless dogs, smiling mutt Bob soon accompanies his master in the brake van of the train. Bob develops a taste for travel, and this peripatetic pooch starts train hopping, travelling across South Australia from "Oodnadatta to Kalangadoo", until he becomes a part of the fabric of railway life, welcomed on trains and at stations, and into the homes and hearts of railway workers and travellers alike. Occasionally, Bob revisits Guard Ferry, but he always resumes his travels.

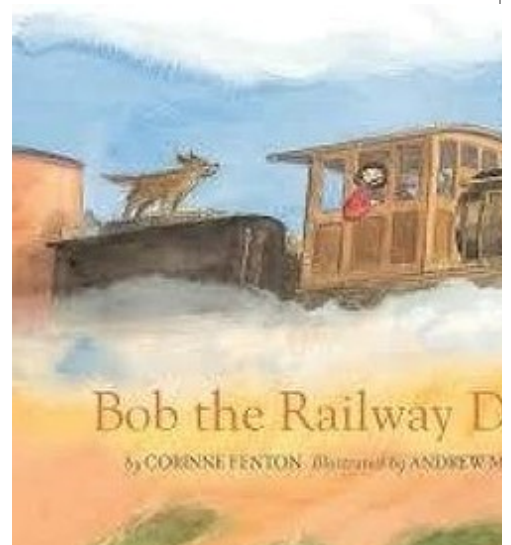
Fenton retells this true story with a deft hand, combining straightforward narrative with often lyrical and evocative descriptions. McLean's watercolour illustrations are equally appealing, mixing double-page landscapes full of meticulous historical details with vignettes that often focus on the personal and the intimate. There are also touches of the dramatic, including the image of Bob, nose to the wind, blissfully riding a speeding train through the night.

Bob the Railway Dog is a well-told historically based story that will particularly appeal to dog and train enthusiasts. It is a great way of showing children that our history abounds with amazing stories that can stir the heart and engage the mind.

A Patch from Scratch (Penguin. 32 pp, \$24.99) deals not with our past but with building for the future, as it champions sustainable gardening for a young audience. Told in the first person by an enthusiastic little boy, the text details how Jesse and his family create



A Patch from Scratch by Megan Forward. Photo: Supplied



Bob the Railway Dog by Corinne Fenton and Andrew McLean. Photo: Supplied

a veggie garden and raise chickens in their backyard.

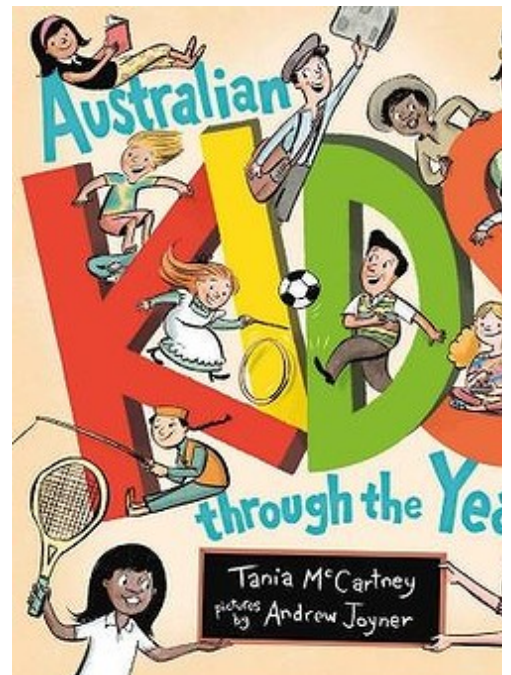
Young Jesse describes how they plant their favourite foods – his are strawberries – and then nurture them, keeping them free of bugs and safe from marauding possums. Both Jesse and his older brother Lewis have their jobs to do, weeding and watering the plants and feeding the family's chickens, which they raise from chicks.

In the process, Jesse learns not only how things grow but also how to be patient, as he waits for his strawberries to flower, fruit and ripen. All their hard work pays off in the end as they put on a celebratory feast for family and friends featuring yummy food made from produce picked fresh from their own backyard.

Author-illustrator Megan Forward successfully uses a child's-eye view of the world to document how to research for, plan, create and sustain a garden that will produce more than enough food to keep a family happily reaping the benefits for many years to come. At the back of the book, she includes a list of books and websites to consult for useful gardening tips, as well as a diagram of how to create a garden patch from scratch. There are also fresh and delicious recipes to make based on the results of your labour, exactly as the family in the story do.

A Patch from Scratch is enticingly presented on warm cream pages, with watercolour illustrations in soft shades of predominantly green and brown. They are full of homely details, domesticity and heart-warming family interactions. The appealing images include visual clues about gardening, including child-drawn diagrams and illustrations. Both text and illustrations also include humorous touches, which add to the child appeal of this inspirational hands-on guide to family gardening. Who knew that keeping things real could be so entertaining.

Dr Reeder is a Canberra author, illustrator and editor. Her latest book is the third title in her Heritage Heroes series, *Lennie the Legend: Solo to Sydney by Pony*.



Australian Kids through the Years by Tania McCartney and Andrew Joyner.
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