

**CITATION DELIVERED BY DR BRIAN GILLETT, DEPUTY CHANCELLOR OF THE UNIVERSITY, ON THE OCCASION OF THE ADMISSION OF MERRION FRANCES FOX TO THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF LETTERS HONORIS CAUSA ON 9TH MAY, 1996.**

Chancellor, I present Merrion Frances Fox.

Mem Fox was born in Melbourne in 1946. She spent her early years in Zimbabwe with her missionary parents and returned to Africa in later years with her husband Malcolm to join Volunteers Abroad in Rwanda. These experiences, a vital personality and unique talent have surely contributed to what a colleague calls Mem's "gifts of joy, empathy, peace and challenge". Her capacity to hold and entertain an audience has also, no doubt, been enhanced by her training in drama. She completed a Diploma in Teaching with a major in drama in London in 1968 and was awarded a Bachelor of Arts at Flinders University in 1978 followed by a Bachelor of Education at Sturt College of Advanced Education in 1979.

In Mem Fox's colourful career, theory and practice combine to produce exhilarating scholarship and insightful, powerful children's stories. She is acclaimed as a teacher and scholar and one of the most significant figures on the international literacy scene. Her analysis of children's literature and the way in which children read, for example, has increased the profession's understanding of the language and gender bias in children's texts. Her article in the journal, *Language Arts*, on gender issues has been called "timely and painful". In fact, Mem's academic work is often described in similarly emotional terms: she can be amusing, biting and thought-provoking in giving the strong conceptual insights that have influenced classroom practice here and overseas.

Mem's own contributions to children's literature also invoke passionate reactions. Her simple texts explore powerful themes of parental love, aging and the challenge of change. *Possum Magic*, published in 1983, has become a children's classic. Published in a number of languages, it is the best-selling children's picture book in Australia and has been given "Notable Book Status" by the New York Times. Other popular and touching works followed, among them: *Hattie and the Fox*, *Koala Lou* and *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge* and, more recently, *Boo to a Goose* with its witty, tactile illustrations by David Miller. She has also written an autobiography and two books for teachers: *Radical Reflections* and *English Essentials*.

Just as Mem's scholarly articles and conference papers can be entertaining and provoking, so her children's books are used as teaching texts. The line between theory and practice, between art and analysis is often brushed aside to make the learning enjoyable and the tales instructive.

In 1990, Mem Fox received the prestigious Dromkeen Medal for "outstanding services to Children's Literature" and the Advance Australia Award for "making an outstanding contribution to the advancement and enrichment of Australia, its people and its way of life". In 1993, she was made a Member of the General Division of the Order of Australia for "Services to Children's Literature".

Mem Fox's nomination for an award at this University was enthusiastically initiated by Brian Cambourne and Jan Turbill from our Faculty of Education and supported by citations from the Board of Education for the City of Toronto, Canada, The Australian Reading Association and the Children's Book Council of South Australia. Academic peers sent letters of commendation from the Universities of South Florida, Arizona State, Ohio State, Auckland, Queensland, Monash, and Sidmore College New York. They included Professor Bernice Cullinan, past President of the International Reading Association and Professor Alice Naylor, former Chair of the Newberry Medal Award Selection Committee.

Mem Fox is currently an Associate Professor in Literacy Studies at Flinders University but she has a special association with the University of Wollongong. She had long sought a postgraduate course in the area of literacy and language learning but could not find one of sufficient depth and rigour until, in 1986, she discovered a Masters in Education at the University of Wollongong.

With a group of fellow South Australians, Mem enrolled to complete the course by distance education. Unfortunately, her success as an author and the demands on her time as a speaker meant that she was never able to qualify for the degree. She revealed later in her autobiography, "Mem's the Word", when reflecting on this disappointment, that she still dreamed of being Dr Fox but : "in reality an MA or a PhD in my life is almost as likely as the Queen coming to tea". Chancellor, we might suggest that Ms Fox dusts off the best china in preparation for a regal visit. Her renowned, rigorous scholarship and her international success as an author together with her sheer enthusiasm for teaching make her an outstanding candidate for one the University's highest honorary doctorates. She is not only clever and successful but, in an often cold, impersonal world, she is, as one of her characters says: "something warm--- something warm".

Chancellor, it is a great pleasure to present to you Merrion Frances Fox for the award of Doctor of Letters, honoris causa.