

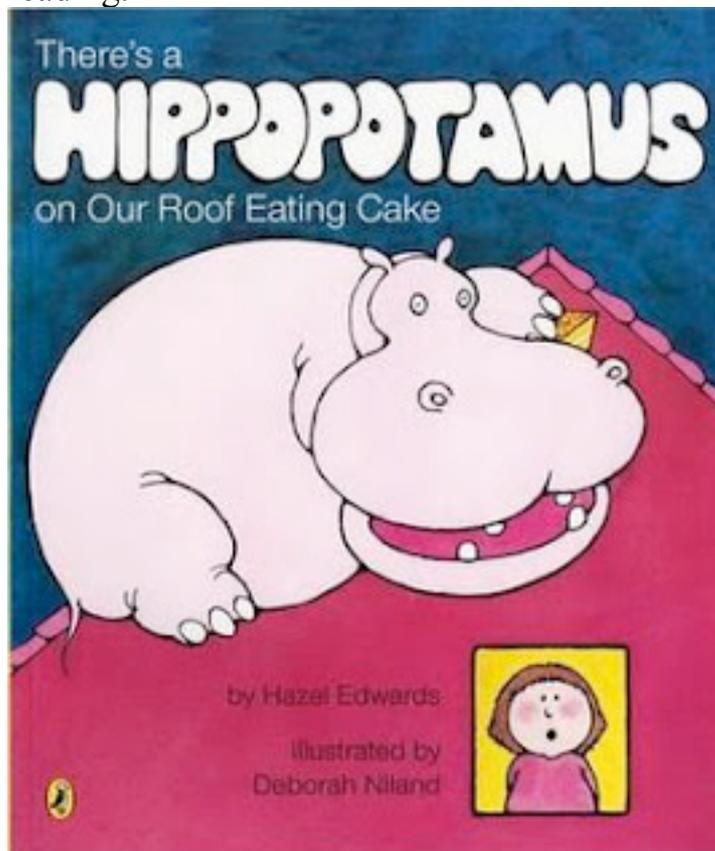
## BUZZWORDS Thursday, 20 February 2020

<http://www.buzzwordsmagazine.com/>

### A whole new world of imagination...

*By Melina Byrne*

There is something magical happening amongst the hustle and bustle of Collins Street in Melbourne's central business district. In a fast-paced world of smart phones, 24-hour TV, and internet streaming, children at the **Kids on Collins Nursery and Early Education** (Little Flyers Learning Centres) are being immersed in the wonder of books. Some of these picture books are the same books that their parents may have grown up reading.



Eric Carle's *'The Very Hungry Caterpillar'* has been delighting children since its publication in 1969. In 1980, Australian author Hazel Edwards created an unforgettable cake-eating hippo in *'There's A Hippopotamus On Our Roof Eating Cake.'* And Graeme Base's vintage *'Animalia'* can involve all of the family as they search the beautifully illustrated pages for clues.

Hazel Edwards' Hippo still receives a lot of fan mail as does his creator, who was awarded an Order of Australia medal for literature in 2013. The

Hippo book was also given to the children of the Princess Mary of Denmark as an official Australian Government gift.

I sent fan mail to Hazel myself recently, after finding a newspaper article that I wrote about her Hippo in 1999 as a student journalist. I am now an early childhood educator who reads Hazel's Hippo books to my students. I interviewed Hazel in 1999 at the performance of a play about the Hippo at a primary school in Rowville, a suburb in Melbourne's outer-eastern suburbs. This play was performed in Indonesian and English so it took a bit longer. Using the classroom play scripts that Hazel had already written, plus the music, the school produced a bi-lingual performance by all of their students. Each class performed a different story, in Indonesian and English. It was a successful and memorable series of performances.

Now the Hippo books have been translated into eight languages, turned into countless plays, a musical and a short film by [Pocket Bonfire](#). The Hippo was featured in a 'Storytime Stars' exhibition and the accompanying book of historic Australian children's books in Canberra at the National Library in August 2019. The book was available from the National Library Bookshop to accompany the exhibition, *Storytime Stars*.

When asked how she feels about the Hippo turning 40 in 2020, Hazel said, "Hippo is age-less. But fans of three generations have sent hippo-shaped gifts and anecdotes about how much the character has been loved in their families. And I now have three grandsons, whose parents were involved in creating the original Hippo when our roof leaked, Truman (aged 20), Henry (aged 9) and Arlo (14 months). I've always written a special story for each grandson on their birthday. Now the older ones write their own."

The future for the Hippo seems bright with the books still being re-printed annually. Hazel said she "would love Hippo to be on a stamp. And travel everywhere. And to tour again as a musical."

There are seven books in the Hippo series. When asked whether the Hippo will be back in another book, Hazel said, "Each of the seven Hippo picture books shares an experience about which a child might be apprehensive (like starting school). And the Hippo is the reassuring big friend who has all the answers. But I think seven books is enough although I'd like to see them all in one special box families can share. And although they have been translated into many languages including Chinese, Braille and Auslan signing, I'd still love to have a Spanish edition."

Hazel's book '[Hijabi Girl](#)', which was co-authored with children's librarian Ozge Alkan, is being transformed in a travelling puppet show by the [Larrikin Puppeteers](#) for the Children's Book Council of Australia's 2020 Book Week. 'Hijabi Girl' is a story about Melek, a girl who can't find a super-hero female character in a hijab for a book parade so she creates a costume herself. And a girls' footy team in the 'Hijabi Girl Plays Footy Too' sequel is being written now. This is also about Melek's friendships with Tien, Zac and Lily. It is a refreshing look at the diverse mix of cultures within most Australian schools.

Hazel, the award-winning author of over 200 books for children and adults, reveals the importance of reading to children, saying, "as an author, I can tell the children who have been read to regularly. They have longer attention spans, more general knowledge and are more tolerant of differences. They also get the rhythm of the language, or languages, if you have the benefit of a bi-lingual household. Picture books are a great way to cross cultures because the pictures are clues. Families can also share (read or tell) stories from their own family history."

Hazel explained some of the benefits of reading to children; "A really good story takes you into someone else's world, for at least the length of the story. It shows ways you can use words in your writing or speaking. It gives you more words to re-use, and makes you a better listener. It also feeds curiosity and introduces funny words and you can laugh together."

Hazel believes that reading to children can make them better equipped to start school because "a child who can read, can amuse themselves anywhere. Books can also reassure; others have faced the same challenges. '[Antarctic Dad](#)' has been popular with families whose parents work away from home for long periods."

If you need help choosing books, Hazel recommends "start with picture books as family gifts where everybody looks in the detail for the answers. Therapy books before starting school or going to hospital e.g. '*Guess What? There's A Hippo On The Hospital Roof Eating Cake*' has helped many children in hospital. If you're worried about how to pronounce a word, admit it. The child will be accepting that we all face new words sometimes. But ENJOY the reading. It's not a job, it's a pleasure. Last year my grandson taught me FaceTime and we shared reading on that every night as we live in different suburbs."

Hazel is often asked to demonstrate how to read books to children. On [her website](#), you can watch an amusing video of her reading one of her

books with Yamba the Honey Ant on an indigenous themed book program on Imparja TV in Alice Springs.

**About Hazel Edwards:**

Hazel Edwards, O.A.M., is an award-winning author of over 200 books for children and adults. Her beloved picture book *'There's A Hippopotamus On Our Roof Eating Cake'* has been hugely popular for almost 40 years, inspiring a musical stage production and a short film.

Awarded the Australian Society of Authors' Medal in 2009, Hazel has been nominated three times for the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award.

Melina Byrne was an early childhood educator at [Kids on Collins Nursery and Early Education in 2019](#). She has an education degree and a journalism degree from Monash University. Experienced in journalism, copywriting and publicity, she works as a freelance journalist in her spare time.

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