



TALL TALES & TRUE



IMAGINATION, ADVENTURES AND COMMUNITY SPIRIT FILL THE LIFE OF CHILDREN'S BOOK AUTHOR AND ILLUSTRATOR ALISON LESTER.

WORDS Kristin Lee PHOTOGRAPHS Celeste Faltyn

It's midweek in summer. The small and normally placid township of Fish Creek is abuzz. Alison Lester barely sets foot inside her namesake concept store and gallery – which opened in 2014 – when she starts signing books.

Just like the town, Alison has a creative and community spirit and always seems to be on the way to somewhere. She says she hasn't sat at her desk for months. There's been a family wedding, followed by a whirlwind promotional tour around part of Australia with her latest book, *My Dog Bigsy*, based on her Jack Russell-cross of the same name. Before arriving at the store, she's been to inspect the former manager's farmhouse that is being revitalised on a section of the cattle grazing property (near Foster) where she and her siblings grew up.

Although Alison and her husband Eddy have lived on a small property near Pakenham for about 40 years, her family property, which was originally 2000 acres or so and overlooks Wilsons Promontory, felt like "the universe" to her as a child. "My brother sold the farm, but I love having this section that we run cattle on," said the tall, affable and award-winning children's book author and illustrator, who has three children (two have also published books) and three young grandchildren. "It's nice looking out over all that

land that as a little kid I knew so well. I would have ridden my pony over every inch of it almost and I just felt so very close to it, so it's lovely still having that connection."

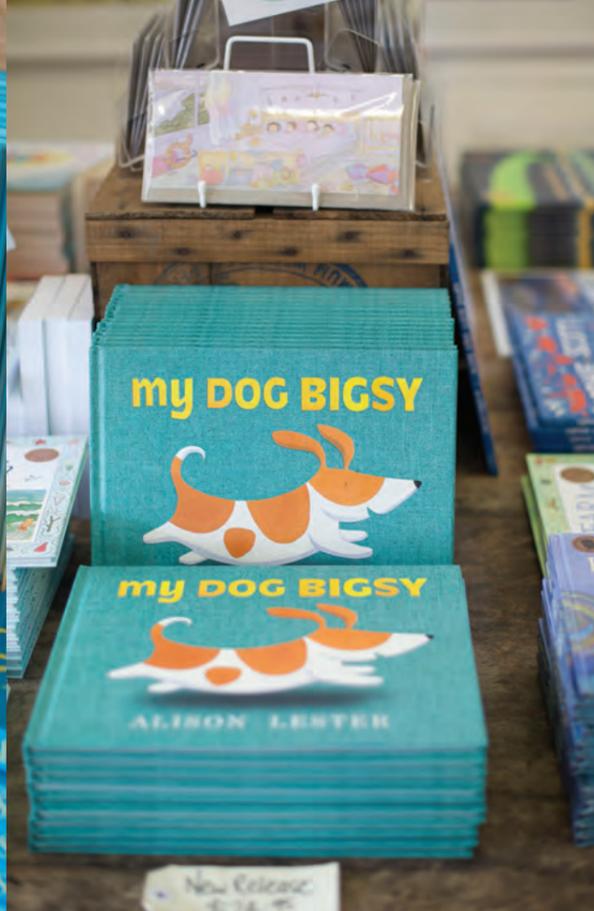
Despite having more than 50 books published, including two young adult novels, I'm surprised when Alison says she wasn't particularly creative as a child. What she did have, though, was a fertile imagination and loads of outdoor adventures and animal encounters, all strong recurring themes in many of her books.

As the youngest of four, Alison believes she had more freedom than her siblings. At the same time, they all had responsibilities from a young age. By the time she was 10, Alison, while riding her pony, was able to move a mob of cattle to another paddock on her own. "It gave you a great sense of being able to do things, but just having all that time to myself was such a wonderful way to have that freedom to dream," she recalled.

It seems her reverie has more or less been the underpinning of her dream run in publishing. After a brief stint as an art teacher, Alison said the birth of her first son prompted her to call Oxford University Press to work from home as a book illustrator, something she did for five years. But after she realised that she didn't necessarily like the stories she was working with, it was suggested Alison write

A prolific creative spirit: Alison Lester (above) in her eponymous store and gallery. Alison has had more than 50 books published. "We just do these beautiful books ... and then you write another one," she says.





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Alison's many books and illustrations are on display or for sale at her concept store in Fish Creek.

her own books. And so, her first written book, *Clive Eats Alligators*, was published in 1985.

A vigorous advocate of reading and literacy, Alison, who was the inaugural Australian Children's Laureate from 2012 to 2013, is a lifetime ambassador for the Indigenous Literacy Foundation and has been nominated for the prestigious Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award 2016 (announced in April). She said the greatest reward from her work is the interaction with people.

“When I go out to remote communities, I work with adults and kids that have these incredible lives, but they never read a book about their life; the book is always about someone else's life. That's very exciting, sitting down with them and helping them turn their stories into a book.”

Such stories include the likes of *No Way Yirrikipayil!*, a warm and humorous tale about a crocodile trying to eat all the animals, with all of the names retained in Tiwi. It's by telling these kinds of stories in Aboriginal language that Alison helps make a difference to how their culture can be shared.

Although she never expected to have all the travel that would go with her fulfilling vocation, such as to Antarctica, India, Italy, China and America, Alison said that her first visit to a remote region left her feeling like a fish out of water. “Now I often go back to places and there are kids running around saying ‘Alison Lester’,” she added, laughing.

“It's mainly just that thrill of being in these wild, remote places and with all of these little kids who have got the potential to be anything. They are just all jumping out of their

skins, and I hope that this little thing that I'm doing might help them get over all the hurdles they have ... to have the life they deserve.”

As for how her light and bright concept store and gallery, which feels like someone's old, welcoming home, came to fruition, Alison said it was an organic process. With so many of her original images and sketches having been locked away over the years, she wanted to find a way to get them out into the world. With the help of long-time friend John Cooper, who manages the store, the character-filled weatherboard house provides fascinating insights into Alison's creative and everyday life.

Complete with a library and reading room, the unique space encourages children to read deliciously tactile books, as well as allow for different generations to connect and rekindle their childhood memories. “I don't know if people really approve of [a writer having a store] because you sort of get this sense – this notion – that authors should be beyond money. You know, we just do these beautiful books and then write another one and you don't worry about things like that,” she said.

Chuffed with the outcome, Alison is toying with the idea of opening a second concept store. Her aim is to spend more time with the grandchildren and her menagerie of animals, including beloved 32-year-old Clydesdale-cross Woollyfoot. She'd also love to write more young adult fiction. She shows no signs of slowing down. [GCL](http://www.alisonlester.com)

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