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Stuff and Nonsense – Thinking differently about children’s play – Inspired by the work of Stuart Lester by Russell W. et al

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Book Review

Russell, W., Derry, C., Fitzpatrick, J., Handscomb, B. (eds.). (2021). *Stuff and Nonsense: Thinking differently about Children’s Play, Inspired by the Work of Stuart Lester*.

Reviewer

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Interwoven so beautifully throughout *‘Stuff and Nonsense: Thinking differently about Children’s Play’* is Stuart Lester’s true legacy: his work and thinking. Yet more important is the impact he had on so many people, across fields and sectors and in so many ways. Each chapter illustrates the profound effect Stuart Lester’s work had on different facets of the play and playwork world, from out-of-school clubs, museums, adventure playgrounds, other academics in the field and individuals the world over.

When I was first asked to write this review of this book, I felt extremely inadequate in setting about to review a book by a multitude of contributors inspired by the work of Stuart Lester, who was someone whose work was so widely regarded and respected. What’s more, I so admired the editors and the many contributors (not to mention that this was my first book review). I questioned whether I would be able to articulate, debate or decipher what its pages held, until I picked it up.

The structure of the book is worth noting. I often found myself lost in the theory of some chapters, leaving my brain resembling something akin to one of Stuart Lester’s cartography maps. Consciously or subconsciously, influenced by Stuart Lester’s playfulness, the editors have structured it so that every so often there is a chapter, an image, a ‘ditty’ that returns you to the ‘moment’, pulls you from the depth of academia and into a playful moment of “stuff and nonsense”, a fitting tribute in itself.

One chapter contains letters exchanged by two authors about their work in UK and US museums. One author states quite clearly, “I can only write what I know”. In the prelude, editor Wendy Russell references a project that measured the effectiveness of certain settings: *‘There is a prevailing playful feel to the setting’*. (*“How do you measure that?” they cried; “You don’t,” we replied, “you feel it”*.) After reading this, words began to flow for me because the most significant thing about this book is how it made me feel.

The book covers a myriad of concepts and ideas that more experienced minds in play and playwork could debate. There are chapters that leave you with more questions than answers and leave you with no choice but to ‘think deeply’. As a practitioner in an Australian setting that adopts a playwork approach, I will forever be grateful for what this book has given me. The book is a timely reminder, arguably more important than any other through my lifetime, to notice the ‘moments that make life worth living’ (page one). I was reinvigorated with a desire to think and delve deeper to understand the ludic state, intra-action, assemblages, to plan for the disturbance of space and challenge the complacency or predictability. It forced me to think deeply about my own practice, whether emotional hazards and risk were considered when completing risk benefit assessments, to consider my place within playwork leadership in Australia, to consider the subtle messages children receive from the

settings they play in. Like the possible contradictions in what we try to offer and instil that are possibly undermined by our words or actions, regardless of having the best of intentions.

One chapter reaffirmed what I had already been grappling with in relation to our (Australian) National Quality Framework and consultation with children. What should it look like? What could it look like? And indeed what it should *not* be when adopting a playwork approach to your practice, especially in an adult agenda-led setting. I was given food for thought around the idea of the ‘becoming’ child and how this is interpreted through our Australian Learning Frameworks; the potential impact that this has on children and their play or lack thereof. I considered my own presenting and consulting style and committed to becoming more playful.

Another chapter had me thinking about lines and how I’d approached reading this book from start to finish, an end and a beginning, because I was conditioned to do so. I decided to consider my approach to life and lines differently from that moment forward. Thanks to the book’s playful nature, I would have missed a whole lot had I not read it from cover to cover. I would not have had the playful pauses and moments the flow of the work provided. I found the collective wisdom of the contributors inspiring. One chapter towards the end of the book was so eloquently explained, in a way that made sense to my brain. That chapter led me to go back and re-read some of the previous chapters as they contained some concepts that made my brain feel scrambled. I reread this work with some clarity and a different perspective. “...*nothing is an individual affair we are always more than one*” (Wendy Russell, post – postlude).

I was reminded to stop and notice the moments we as adults so often overlook, the incidental playful ‘moments’ that Stuart Lester would contest are the moments that matter most to children. Moments that he, in his teachings, created for adults to better understand what we observe in children. I was left with a responsibility to learn more and do more professionally and personally. It was a reminder to pause and smile not only at the playing child in public but also to their accompanying adult, the ones clearly doubting their instincts to allow the play to continue. These adults are also feeling societal pressure to stop the child because that’s not what you do down the aisle of a supermarket. I pledge to be an ally for that adult and to bring the playfulness wherever I go.

As I read, I found myself smiling or shedding a tear as I related to certain stories or recounts of meeting Stuart Lester. I count myself among the lucky to have met Stuart Lester, albeit only once. I heard him give a conference keynote in Australia and subsequently rushed to be in the front seat for his breakout session. The content was phenomenal, but it was more than just the content. It was the feeling, the desire to take on the world, to right the wrongs, to start today not tomorrow or in a week or a month, no NO today! That was the feeling I had as I walked out of his room and down the hallway. I gently nudged a painting so it didn’t sit straight to see if anyone would notice - much like the feeling I was left with after reading this book.

To purchase this book, go to <https://gwealantops.org/stuff-and-nonsense/>