BOOK REVIEW

THE FIRST COMPUTER MOUSE

"The First Computer Mouse" is an enticing book with a self-explanatory title. The storyline is dominated by four appealing characters, Grandad and three children; Anna, Dan, Lucy, and a group of mice (more about them later!). Grandad reminisces about a computer he used in his youth, and compares it with current computers. The story opens with Grandad surrounded by the children in his office as he operates his computer. All characters then retire to eating lunch with the children’s parents, in a suburban Australian garden setting. After lunch, Grandad reminisces about when he worked with the CSIRAC. The computer in question is the CSIRAC (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation Automatic Computer), an integral part of Australian computer history. The convention of thought bubbles from Grandad and Lucy who begin to travel back in time to Grandad’s youth provide a clever transition to the past, and so the story unfolds.

Grandad starts to tell his story about a computer he used in his youth, and his colleagues undergo. The mice assist and monitor the humans’ computer usage, including observing the stresses Grandad and his colleagues undergo. The mice assist by appearing in the humans’ computer lab and gluing their torn computer tape together.

A separate information page at the back of the book briefly explains the computer mouse history. In addition, the history of CSIRAC is explained; from when it was first switched on in 1949 until it was switched off in 1964. This history is cleverly integrated throughout the book by way of illustrations of calendars and pictures on the office and computer laboratory walls.

An enticing cover encourages one to select the book (see the illustration). The story is supported by large, detailed and colourful illustrations ingeniously spread across two facing pages. These assist children in constructing meaning and sustaining their attention. The use of a grandparent as a character is clever for several reasons. Firstly it generates empathy with young readers, secondly it breaks the stereotype of computer illiteracy in older people, and finally, allows the “reminiscence” technique to tell the story. The more obvious incorporation of female computer operators in the historical sequences would have been beneficial.

Rather than jargon or unfamiliar terminology, language which is easy-to-comprehend, for example “big computer” is used. Accordingly, the book would be suitable for an adult reading to students or for children from about eight years of age to read independently.

"The First Computer Mouse" may be integrated into a primary language or computer curriculum. It could be treated as a simple story or extended to encompass more historical and technical aspects. As the history of the first computer and computer mouse is an unfamiliar topic, the use of familiar stereotypes and one type of suburban Australian environment may assist in providing a structure for some children on which to base new meanings.

Further allowance for individual differences with a more diverse set of characters that further recognises the changes in Australian societal characteristics would be a welcome modification. As most children are aware, books can be real or imaginary, and this one has combined both real and imaginary experiences resulting in an easy to read style, with a rather whimsical storyline. Familiar repetition of mice appearing on every page assists with sustaining interest and incorporating a fictional style that cleverly supports the more information-based story line. Detailed illustrations encourage readers to pick up the book again and again, discovering more each time. For example, find the mice, check out Rex’s antics and note the features of the mouse lab!

Overall, an enjoyable and educational book with bright, detailed, and attractive illustrations. ‘The First Computer Mouse’ may be beneficial in supporting a primary school computer or language program. The refreshingly Australian flavour and sense of fantasy and fun is welcomed!