

**Southern Cross University, Central Queensland University, Swinburne University of Technology, Macquarie University, The University of Queensland and Independent Scholars**

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**A series of fortunate readers: a collaborative review article of important Australasian YA writing**

Abstract:

This review article is a collaborative autoethnographic exploration of Australasian Young Adult writing compiled by the contributors of the ‘Why YA?: Researching, writing and publishing YA fiction in Australasia’ *TEXT* Special issue. The contributors to the special issue were asked to produce a brief review of what they considered an important Australasian YA text, and why. While the range of narratives examined in this article (and the special issue as a whole) demonstrates the valuable variety of the field, this review article also serves to demonstrate the personal pleasure which each of the contributors takes in the genre.

Biographical notes:

Denise Beckton, BA Ed (ECU), Grad Dip PH (Curtin), Grad Cert CI (CQU), has a background in public health and education and is a tutor in Creative Industries at Central Queensland University (Noosa campus), where she is a research higher degree candidate, writing a novel and a related dissertation. Beckton has attained multiple awards in the fields of education and public health including the national ACHPER Award for excellence in Health and Physical Education, The WA Healthways Award and a category finalist notation for the WA Premier’s Award (Ed). Her latest publication centres on teaching pedagogy in the Creative Industries field.

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Gyps Curmi is a PhD student in creative writing with the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Southern Cross University. Gyps won the University Medal in 2013, and has had a number of short stories published. Gyps has an interest in intersectional subjectivity through speculative fiction writing and is currently writing a PhD thesis using gender-neutral language.

Maree Kimberley is a writer and independent scholar. She has a Bachelor of Creative Industries, an MA and a PhD from Queensland University of Technology. Her creative-practice led PhD examined young adult fiction through a posthuman framework. Her research interests include young adult fiction, speculative fiction, posthumanism and the intersections between the cultural representations of science, technology and posthumanism in young adult literature. She has published articles, short stories and a children's novella and her work has appeared in academic and literary journals including, as well as several anthologies.

Jodi McAlister is a literary historian at Macquarie University in Sydney, specialising in popular genres for and by women and girls. Her PhD thesis is on representations of female virginity loss in female-authored popular literature.

Catriona Mills holds a BA Hons from Macquarie University and both an MPhil and a PhD from The University of Queensland. She has published and presented work on various aspects of popular fiction, including problems of attribution in early Australian periodicals, adaptations of serial fiction, and the influence of Doctor Who on Australian authors. Since 2010, she has been a senior researcher and indexer for AustLit.

Shivaun Plozza is a project editor, manuscript assessor and writer of young adult fiction. Her debut novel, *Frankie*, is due for publication by Penguin in early 2016. She has published short stories, poetry and articles in various journals, both online and print, and has won numerous awards and fellowships. She holds a Masters in Creative Writing and a Masters in Publishing and Communications, both from the University of Melbourne.

Jessica Seymour is an early-career researcher at Southern Cross University and a recipient of the Australian Postgraduate Award. Her research interests include children's and young adult literature, transmedia narrative strategies, fan studies and popular culture. Last year, she co-edited *Fan Studies: Researching Popular Audiences*, and has contributed chapters to several essay collections, which ranged in topic from *Divergent* and *Doctor Who*, to ecocriticism in the works of JRR Tolkien.

Keywords:

Creative writing – collaboration – autoethnography – Australasia – fiction – non-fiction – Indigenous stories – LGBTQ – speculative fiction – biographical memoir – coming of age memoir

## Introduction

This review article is a collaborative effort by the contributors to the ‘Why YA?: Researching, writing and publishing YA fiction in Australasia’ *TEXT* Special Issue. The contributors represent a range of established theorists and academics, early-career academics and graduate students with creative and research interests in the genre. The following series of reviews examines the various styles and subgenres of Australasian YA and how these texts contribute to the exciting range of stories and perspectives available to contemporary YA readers.

Each of the contributors was asked to produce a brief review of what they consider an important Australasian YA text. These decisions were highly personal, and representative of a remarkable range of narrative styles, authors and historical contexts. In terms of the scope of the field, the stories reviewed in this article span from the late 1980s to 2014, include texts which deal with Indigenous and LGBTQ narratives, historical and speculative fiction, problem novels and biographical memoir. While this is by no means a complete list, it is representative of the broad scope of YA being produced in the Australasian industry. Some of these stories are deeply thematically connected to the Australasian context and Australasian readers, while some have resonated across a range of cultures and backgrounds. It is an exciting time to be a YA reader in Australasia.

While compiling this collaborative article, the editors noted that the range of narratives being reviewed by the contributors demonstrates the strength and diversity of Australasian YA. As discussed in the Editor’s Introduction for this special issue, Australasian YA is a dynamic and progressive genre that deserves scholarly attention – but as demonstrated by the reviews compiled below, this genre is also engaging, enjoyable, and can sometimes become deeply personal to its readers. CS Lewis writes in his *On Stories* that it ‘is astonishing how little attention critics have paid to Story considered in itself’ (1966: 12), and by this he means that when scholars pay too much attention to the construction of a narrative and how it engages with nominated themes, they can lose track of what he considers to be Story’s true purpose: to connect with readers emotionally. To entertain as well as illuminate.

This review article acts as a kind of history-making, rather than a theoretical engagement, and draws its inspiration from the work of Quinn, Ablitt, Baker, Hecq, and Brien (2015), who used their experience as journal editors to produce a series of case studies exploring discipline-related content production and dissemination. Review articles can loosely be classified into two types: the non-systematic and the systematic. Dobri Atanassov Batovski (2008) writes that non-systematic type ‘may include a selection of a wide range of technical results related to a chosen topic which reflects the professional experiences and interests of the authors’ (199). This review article acts as a history-making collection of reviews (results) which reflects the autoethnographic experience of the contributors.

As Denise Beckton notes in her article ‘Bestselling Young Adult Fiction: trends, genres and readership’, the Australasian YA market owes much to the American and UK markets, which often influence literary trends here and around the world: ‘Most recent and current Young Adult global bestsellers are from the USA. In Australia,

these titles feature on the bestselling lists of sites such as *Booktopia* and *Books and Publishing*' (2015: 5). Bestsellers such as *The Hunger Games* (Collins 2008), *Twilight* (Meyer 2005), and the *Harry Potter* series (Rowling 1997) have all influenced Australasian readers and their tastes. Beckton also quotes Susannah Chambers, who offers an international editorial perspective to the American influence on YA fiction: 'I met many editors who had worked for a long time in children's literature in New York, and all of them felt that things were different than when they had begun their careers' (2014: 14). Despite this heavy American influence, the Australasian market continues to produce quality YA fiction, though it does not enjoy the remarkable commercial success of texts from America and the UK. It is only in recent years, thanks to movie adaptations of works such as *The Book Thief* (Zusak 2005), and *Tomorrow When the War Began* (Marsden 1993), that Australasian texts have broken into the international market and enjoyed similar commercial success.

By producing a series of brief reviews of the Australasian YA fiction which has inspired or excited us, we chart the personal connections we, as academics, have made to the genre, and offer an autoethnographic approach to audience engagement. Autoethnography is a form of autobiographical writing that connects the personal to the cultural (Ellis and Bochner 2000), using increased reflexivity to show how the experiences of the author/reader are mediated and constructed by cultural environments – or, in this case, texts (Berry and Warren 2009). Judith Elizabeth Brown (2014) notes that autoethnography as a qualitative research methodology allows the author to write a 'case study of the self' – allowing them to act as both theorist and theorised: 'Autoethnography is the only methodology that gives me the opportunity to investigate my experience as a piano accompanist from an insiders' perspective' (3). It is therefore a useful tool for allowing critics and researchers to examine their own experience as a subjective phenomenon.

Our experiences as consumers of YA fiction, both as academic fans and young adults, have shaped the way we approach creative practice, the genre, and ourselves. While some contributors offer a purely personal response to their chosen texts, others use current scholarship to contextualise their reading of YA narratives within the wider genre. Some analyse how the texts are constructed to increase immersion, while others describe how they came upon the texts and how they fit into the ongoing narrative of the contributors' lives. The style and content of the reviews are as varied and personal as our responses to the texts.

### **Jackie French's *Hitler's Daughter* (2004), Eugen Bacon**

I discovered Jackie French through a ten-year-old I knew who was reading *Hitler's Daughter* (2004), set in contemporary Australia. The child sat knees up on a stony floor, her back to the wall outside a bookshop in the mall, burrowed in her novel page after page. She was oblivious of raucous traffic making its way along the corridors and a nearby toddler, perhaps a sibling, making a notable din as he snuggled against the legs of a woman that might have been his mother. Seeing a pre-teen so hooked by this story within a story, a re-writing of history, heartened me to acknowledge Jackie French as an author who not only engages her tender-aged and otherwise distracted

readers, but one who confronts challenging issues, such as love, loyalty and evil. French's body of works, her focus on younger readers and her ability to cross genre from children's books to young adult novels, exemplifies to me what Roland Barthes might have imagined in 'pleasure of the text' (1985:173), an author's pleasure of writing that aligns itself with the recipient's pleasure of reading.

### **Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005), Denise Beckton**

I bought *The Book Thief* when it was first released in Australia in 2005 as adult fiction. When it became an international bestseller, and was then adapted for film, I shielded my dog-eared copy as carefully as Gollum protected his precious ring. I was of course delighted about Zusak's well-deserved success, yet I (selfishly) didn't want the novel to be 'mainstreamed'. To my mind, there was nothing mainstream about the creative and seamless combination of pictures and words that read like a work of prose poetry from beginning to end, or Zusak's ability to weave symbolism and imagery in a way that had me replaying Liesel's story like a movie reel in my mind.

Following the novel's success in Australia, *The Book Thief* was listed and sold as Young Adult fiction overseas. As an example of contemporary Australian YA, Zusak's novel is, in my opinion, the perfect model of everything that is good about the changing behaviours of creators, producers and consumers of Young Adult fiction at this time. The general acceptance that Zusak's novel, with its intricate exploration of the human condition, including love and loss, is appropriate, even positive, for younger readers means that they have unquestioned exposure to Zusak's beautifully intricate narrative and clever literary devices, while simultaneously learning about the atrocities of World War II from the lesser-represented perspective of ordinary German people who also endured trauma during this time.

### **Peter Walker's *The Fox Boy: The Story of an Abducted Child* (2001), Donna Lee Brien**

Peter Walker's *The Fox Boy: The Story of an Abducted Child* (2001) is a compelling and informative biographical memoir, narrating the story of Maori boy, Ngataua Omahuru, captured in New Zealand's Taranaki forest by the English in 1869. Kidnapped, he was baptized, adopted by – and named after – a New Zealand MP, (later Premier, Sir) William Fox. Sent away to school, the boy was dressed and educated as an English gentleman, but later travelled with Fox and his wife, then aged in their sixties (Dalziel and Sinclair 1990) – as their son to the USA, Ireland, London, Beirut and Egypt. Trained to be the first Maori lawyer, he returned to live in Taranaki when he was aged 19, teaching Maori, working with Maori leaders and later opening a Maori school.

Walker was, he writes, first intrigued by the boy's pose and expression in a studio photograph he saw of the child – 'Someone has combed the boy's hair and made him put one hand in his trouser pocket. He looks as if he has seen a ghost' (6). While this memoir includes the results of Walker's (sometimes stymied) search for historical sources, the result is a revealing speculative memoir, 'openly includ[ing] conjecture

and speculation' (Brien 2015) and Walker's autobiographical reflections on his motivations and emotional responses to his discoveries. This adds another rewarding dimension to his telling of Fox/Imahuru's illuminating and moving story. Published by major literary publisher Bloomsbury, *The Fox Boy* was reviewed in the serious press, including by Emily Perkins in *The Guardian* (2001) (see also, Thomson 2001), but most scholarly engagement with this book has been in terms of what it reveals about colonial race relations in the later 19th century (Bull and Alia 2004, Fraser 2013, Newman 2013). Walker's work, however, deserves serious consideration as a major work of (speculative) life writing.

### **Craig Silvey's *Jasper Jones* (2009), Gyps Curmi**

*Jasper Jones* (2009), set against a background of 1960's cultural anxieties, is a poignant reflection of my own childhood, but remains relevant for Australasian YA readers today for its ability to interrogate difficult issues. Through outsider Jasper Jones, we segue into the underbelly of small-town secrets via white protagonist Charlie Buktin's reflections – exposing racism, child-sexual-abuse, dysfunctional families, bullying, complicity, suicide, ethics, atonement and masculinities – where morality and hypocrisy co-exist in apparent harmony. Sporting heroes on the field, Jeffrey Lu (Vietnamese) and Jasper Jones (Indigenous) are vilified off-field by racists, and Charlie's love of literary classics routinely causes his masculinity to be questioned by playground thugs. Despite the dark themes explored – including Laura Wishart's secret of sexual abuse, perpetrated by her 'upstanding' Shire President father, and her subsequent suicide – the ongoing banter between Charlie and best friend Jeffrey over whether Superman or Batman is the real Superhero, adds lightness and humour to this accessible story. Jasper Jones himself is extraordinarily resilient and, without bitterness, understands the community's 'need' to scapegoat him, thereby keeping their own ethics unexamined. Charlie's simplistic moral code of right and wrong are transmogrified when he acknowledges that, of all Corrigan's residents, Jasper's morals and ethics are probably the most 'honest' of all.

### **Ambelin Kwaymullina's *The Tribe Series* (2012-2015), Maree Kimberley**

Australia produces fantastic speculative fiction for young adults and emerging Aboriginal writers are adding new voices and insights that provide a depth of knowledge and experience previously unexplored in the genre. As a writer of speculative fiction, I am excited to find writers bringing fresh perspectives that speak to young adults with an open, honest and forthright voice. Ambelin Kwaymullina's *Tribe* series (2012-2015) weaves themes of friendship and family, discrimination, and environmental stewardship into a post-apocalyptic world. The *Tribe* series has been described as dystopian yet, across the three novels, the narrative provides a clear way forward for a better future, and places responsibility for this future in the hands of its teenaged protagonists.

The series incorporates Australian Indigenous perspectives subtly yet strongly throughout the three texts, and the narrative reveals a complex and intricate world

layered with meaning that underscores a fast-moving, action-packed plot. Each novel focuses on a different protagonist, and across the series these characters develop and mature through their experiences and life choices, revealing strengths and flaws and recognising and overcoming weaknesses. Romance elements are not overlooked, however friendships formed within, and across, gender boundaries are given importance above romantic attachments. Narrative interconnections both bind the elements of the story and illuminate the ultimate source of power within the texts.

### **Isabelle Carmody's *Obernewtyn Chronicles* (1987), Jodi McAlister**

Isabelle Carmody's *Obernewtyn Chronicles* (1987) were hugely important to me as a child and a teenager, and continue to be among my favourite books today: I can guarantee that I will be one of the first in the line at the bookshop in November this year when the final instalment, *The Red Queen* (2015), is released. For a girl often isolated by her own intelligence, their heroine Elspeth was immediately both a relatable and an aspirational figure. Although her mental powers set her apart and she often felt alone, Elspeth found a community of people who not only liked her, but respected her. Today, when I joke with friends about running away and starting a scholarly commune, that dream commune is, to me, influenced by the Obernewtyn community: a community built on respect for intellectual power.

The *Obernewtyn Chronicles* are among the first Australian young adult novels I remember reading. Although they never achieved widespread popularity overseas, they have something of a cult following within Australia. It is remarkable how many of the friends I have now also read these books as a child and related to Elspeth the way I did. In some ways, these books have helped me find the community that they represented, and that I dreamt of.

### **Lee Harding's *Waiting for the End of the World* (1983), Catriona Mills**

The 1980s were rough for young readers. Teachers were handing us *Bridge to Terebithia* (Paterson 1977), *The Chocolate War* (Cormier 1974) and *Z for Zachariah* (O'Brien 1974): no one escaped those books unscathed. The Australian publishing industry produced Victor Kelleher (whose book covers alone were terrifying), Colin Thiele (never get attached to a dog in a Thiele novel), and – most traumatic of all— the brilliant, devastating Lee Harding.

*Waiting for the End of the World* (1983) was Harding's last novel before a long hiatus. Its opening lines have lingered in my mind for more than twenty years: 'Manfred decided he would make a longbow. The task took him almost a year.' No training montages or convenient flash-forwards in Harding's post-apocalyptic world. If you want a longbow, the wood takes eight months to cure and season. Then, if you have survived the Patrols, helicopter gunships, and compliance drugs, you can build your bow. Harding's work is of that typically Australian earthbound science fiction where our geographic isolation sees us survive some great horror, only to slowly bend under the consequent tightening of authority around the survivors. Sound familiar?

Maybe it's about time that Harding dazzled – and traumatised – another generation of Australian readers.

**Melina Marchetta's *Jellicoe Road* (2006), Shivaun Plozza**

For many, Melina Marchetta is the reigning queen of Australasian YA and, for me, *Jellicoe Road* (2006) remains her most accomplished and affecting novel to date. Seventeen-year-old Taylor Markham was abandoned on the Jellicoe Road as a child. Now, with the disappearance of her only adult ally and the return of the boy who betrayed her, Taylor's world quickly unravels as the past collides with the present.

In *Jellicoe*, Marchetta interlaces two narrative strands – one past, one present – weaving tantalising fragments until both strands convene in a heart-breaking climax. It's a disorientating but intriguing mystery – who are these characters? How do they connect? What secrets bind them – and tear them apart? Structurally, the novel is complex, always treating its reader as mature and capable. The characters are achingly real; they love, fight, fear and fail in ways that leave you drained and breathless. Taylor is a particularly vivid character, a young woman barely containing a lifetime's worth of anger and resentment: fierce, smart and complex. And, as always, Marchetta's language is crisp and deeply evocative – effortless.

For me, *Jellicoe* is what YA is about: characters and events that warm and break your heart in equal measures.

**Melissa Keil's *The Incredible Adventures of Cinnamon Girl* (2014), Jessica Seymour**

In *The Incredible Adventures of Cinnamon Girl* (2014), Melissa Keil does a remarkable job of capturing the all-consuming dread that accompanies a significant life change. Alba, the delightfully artistic main character, is getting ready to leave her small town – and, her friends, her family, and everything familiar – for university. Also, the world might be ending. So there's that to deal with as well.

What Keil does so remarkably well is to imagine secondary characters whose lives and interests are as rich and exciting as the main characters'. I love this book because it reminds me of what it's like to be on the cusp of a massive change, surrounded by people who are, in their own unique way, going through the exact same thing. Her minor characters leap off the page, take hold of you, and force you to acknowledge their authenticity. The dialogue between these characters feels as real as the conversations I used to have with my own friends on the playground. In fact, by the time I finished *Cinnamon Girl*, and Keil's wonderful debut novel, *Life in Outer Space* (2013), I felt as though these secondary and minor characters were *my* friends. *Cinnamon Girl* made me nostalgic for the people I knew and loved when I was younger and the way they made me feel and, even though my personal circumstances were unique. It made me feel that I was never entirely alone in my fears and insecurities.

## Conclusion

The wide range of stories and perspectives available to YA readers speaks to the flexibility and accessibility of the genre. From Indigenous stories and LGBTQ narratives, to speculative fiction and biographical memoir, Australasian YA offers its readers a range of depth and complexity in every story. We, as academics and readers of YA, have compiled this brief list of the titles that make us particularly excited to be working in such an engaging and rewarding field. This review article is, therefore, an autoethnographic exploration of the affective relationship between Australasian YA and its readers. Autoethnography, as noted by Brown (2014), allows theorists to investigate subjective phenomena – such as reading for pleasure – by providing a ‘case study of the self’. This review article has been produced with the knowledge that we, as scholars, are invested in the genre not just because it offers exciting and occasionally ground-breaking discourse for analysis, but because we love it.

While this list is by no means complete, it is our hope that this review will demonstrate the diversity of stories being produced in the Australasian YA market, and also to serve as a reminder of the emotional connection we as critics make to the narratives we assess and critique. This special issue of *TEXT* is as much a celebration of Australasian YA as it is an examination of it. The contributors who produced scholarly essays have immersed themselves in a genre which excites them in order to understand it better; those contributors who produced prose works in the YA genre have added to a growing body of work which is as progressive as it is pleasurable.

## Acknowledgement

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What made "A Series of Unfortunate Events" such an intriguing book series was the wonderfully poetic way in which the books were written. The author, Lemony Snicket—a pen name for Daniel Handler—didn't just "tell" the story of the Baudelaire orphans. He also taught his young readers a slew of advanced vocabulary by defining words within the story in a way that didn't feel like you were reading a dictionary. In doing so, Silvey seeks to articulate universal ideas and concerns through a contextualised Australian lens, bringing Jasper Jones to life within the metanarrative of human experience. An individual's sense of place is fundamental to their intellectual and social makeup. It is vital for writers of children's fiction to be aware of the connection between person and place. Craig Silvey's text Jasper Jones provides an excellent representation of rural Australian life during the 1960s. The town of Corrigan is unsophisticated, isolated and parochial in its thinking. A series of fortunate readers: a collaborative review article of important Australasian YA writing. By Denise Beckton, Jessica Seymour. A Series of Unfortunate Events is a series of thirteen novels written by American author Daniel Handler under the pen name Lemony Snicket. Although they are classified "children's novels", the books often have a dark, mysterious feeling to them. The books follow the turbulent lives of Violet, Klaus, and Sunny Baudelaire. After their parents' death in a fire, the children are placed in the custody of a murderous relative, Count Olaf, who attempts to steal their inheritance and, later, orchestrates