



mETAphor

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 **ETA**
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From the President

Sharyn Stafford

Welcome to 2022, I hope that you have had an opportunity to refresh over the break and enjoy a well-earned rest. I had the pleasure of catching up with some teacher friends before Christmas and I thoroughly enjoyed the experience of feeling a bit normal before this next outbreak occurred.

Looking forward it is clear that teachers and students being together in classrooms is an important aspect for learning and student wellbeing. Your dedication and adaptability is vital for that occur. As we progress through the term remember to take care of yourself and your family.

This issue of *mETaphor* features a worthy collection of interesting reading, stimulating ideas, advertisements for ETA Professional Learning opportunities and practical resources. Of particular interest to me is the article on Copyright and Intellectual Property by Phil Page. It is an area that we all need to learn more about and apply to our resources. The article on 'Building a culture of reading across K–12' by Catherine Phoon really inspired me with some really practical tips and ideas. Last year I enjoyed reading *The dictionary of lost words* by Pip Williams, so seeing it featured in the article called 'Investing in female voices: Teaching *The dictionary of lost words* by Madeleine Conn sparked my imagination. Of course there is plenty more to read and reflect on in this first issue of *mETaphor* for 2022.

If you are interested in expanding your horizons and

becoming more involved in your association, remember you are always welcome to join a committee or just come along to our plenary sessions and join in the fun. The first plenary for 2022 is on Saturday 26th February online. More information can be found at *How to get involved* on our website. There is always such a warm feeling of friendship in our ETA meetings whether we are face to face or virtual.

Remember to register for our free member's event: 'Mentoring New Staff – guiding practice and leading an English Faculty'. This presentation by Paul Grover, Lecturer in Education at Charles Sturt University will provide practical strategies and guiding principles for experienced English teachers to enhance the important roles of mentoring new English teachers and teacher education students. The webinar is on 8 March 2022, 4.30 – 5.30pm. A recording of the webinar will be available for 30 days. This course may be counted as one hour of elective professional development. Register now – www.englishteacher.com.au

Find a cozy spot, put your feet up with your favourite beverage and enjoy this edition of *mETaphor*.



Editorial

Mel Dixon

It's a wonderful feeling to get to the end of editing a *mETaphor* issue and to know you are handing over something worthwhile that will help teachers: everyone has sent in their articles; some promises are a bit late but others stepped in to the breach, the regular columns have been completed, everything has been edited and checked and it looks great. Great feeling of relief until you realise you have to do it all again!

The editing of *mETaphor* continues to be both my delight and my terror but what joy I gain when teachers tell me they enjoyed an article, when writers tell me they appreciated the editing and when new would-be-writers send an email to express interest in writing.

Like other editions, this issue needed a bit of coaxing to get to the final gate but it hasn't lost its form. Each article is evidence not just of the wonderful work teachers do but of their professionalism, collegiality and generosity in giving up their time to write. Writing for a journal is not an easy task; we are all used to writing for students but it needs a very different voice to address teachers so I thank all the contributors to this and to every issue of *mETaphor*. I also thank Sappho's bookshop for the cover image – a great start to this year's cover theme of Reading.

We have our usual share of very useful articles to support you in your teaching of reading and writing but

we've also scored some articles to make you think a bit more. Dr Lindsay Williams shares with us his work on oracy – a much overlooked area. We have all asked kids to produce speeches but have we truly succeeded in helping students understand oral communication? You might like to learn more and sign up for the ETA webinars presented in March by Lindsay.

Felicia Boyages' article based on her presentation at the University of London Conference 'Pockets pouches and secret drawers' offers us a new perspective on the representation of Hermione in Harry Potter.

Just like Hermione's bag of tricks, *mETaphor* keeps yielding more and more – but it can only do so because of your support. Enjoy reading the issue, use the ideas in your classroom, share the journal in the staffroom and think about what you can do to keep the journal reflecting the best possible teaching.



Branching out

Michelle McDonald, Central Coast Branch

On behalf of Alex Wharton, Director of Branches, welcome back to another year of school. This is a special year for our Branches Director, Alex Wharton and his wife Jenny, as they welcome a second baby, a son, Ezekiel, into the world of Gunnedah. It's at family times like this that we truly appreciate the support that regional communities provide.

This year, ETA will continue to provide as much as we can for the English community wherever you are. One of the advantages of the previous two years has been the extended range of webinars being offered allowing regional teachers to have the same access to the best possible professional development as urban teachers. It will be good to have more face to face connections but the past two years have helped expand out contacts – albeit virtually – and ETA is committed to maintaining a presence for regions through webinars. We want to thank Paul Grover from the Border community for co-ordinating the free ETA webinar on teaching in the regions. Make sure you all attend the ETA Paul's free webinar on mentoring on March 8.

A surprising and paradoxical side effect of webinars – which have no physical location – has been our growing awareness of place, and an appreciation of the spiritual connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to place. Aboriginal place names are being rediscovered and acknowledged in virtual space as part of the Acknowledgement of Country; so in this issue, and over the next few issues, we want to share the Aboriginal names of our regions.

The Central Coast branch of the ETA meets on Darkinjung Country. Its boundaries stretch from Catherine Hill Bay to the north, Hawkesbury River to the south, the Pacific Ocean to the east and Watagan Mountains to the west. Through our student day 'Making Waves' we are proud to connect with local Aboriginal composers and artists who run workshops with students and teachers and share First People's literature and culture with everyone. It is our aim in 2022 to expand on this to



reach more people. We thank the University of Newcastle, Ourimbah campus for their support of this event.

What is the New Year without a resolution? This year 2022, the Central Coast ETA wants to acknowledge that ETA is a cross-sectoral association; we want to run a teachers' day aimed at collaboration amongst all sectors of education and we wish to strengthen our involvement with the University of Newcastle to support Education students and new graduates.

Let's all make sure that 2022 is a year to remember: join your local ETA. Attend whatever you can; offer to present or write; connect with us on social media. Make it your resolution this year to take advantage of everything ETA provides to support you to be the best teacher ever.

This year Branching Out will celebrate our Aboriginal heritage by sharing more about the Aboriginal place names of different regions across NSW.





Teacher Feature: Tegan Morgan

This column is an introduction to our committee members. The ETA motto is 'Sharing the expertise' but the emphasis in this column is on how we each take what is offered by individuals and groups like ETA to build our expertise and become the best possible teachers.

Tegan Morgan was the ETA Scholarship Recipient from the University of New England in 2014. Since then, she's moved around New England, teaching English at Glen Innes High School (2016-2019) and English, History and Geography at Macintyre High School in Inverell (2019-present). She also works as the Year 11 English Subject Coordinator with the Rural Learning Exchange.

Tegan is a member of the ETA Publications Committee. She has presented on practical reading and writing strategies at the IFTE/AATE Conference (2020) and the ETA Early Career Teacher Day (2021). Tegan recently appeared as a guest on the NSW English Teachers' Association Podcast. Tegan shares her inspiration with us below:

The English Teachers' Association (ETA) scholarship came as a complete surprise to me. I was nominated by my English pedagogy lecturer at the University of New England, Edie Wright. I still consider her as one of my favourite lecturers, always bringing interesting, fun and engaging ideas to our English classes. Not only that, but Edie's nomination for my ETA scholarship altered the course of my career. It made me realise my true potential as an English teacher and sparked a long and fruitful relationship with the ETA.

As a bumbling country girl who had only travelled to Sydney on my own *once* before, I was absolutely terrified of navigating public transport and getting myself from Sydney Airport to the John Woolley Building at the University of Sydney on the morning of the Early Career Teachers' Day. I had a 6am flight and it was a long day before I even arrived in Sydney, but thanks to the incredibly kind young teacher who picked me up from the airport, I made it on time and had a fabulous day. I still remember attending sessions on teaching Shakespeare, film and poetry. Alex Wharton's tip of using wrapped lollies as creative writing prompts/bribes is *still* something I use in my English classroom to this day. It was also great to have the opportunity to meet other early career teachers and scholarship recipients, many of whom I'm still friends with today!

Not only that, but thanks to my ETA scholarship and the ETA's exceptional calendar of professional development

events, I had the opportunity to explore new ideas, discover new texts and share my own ideas and experiences with others. And, after all those trips to and from Sydney, I know how to get myself from A to B much more confidently these days!

Permanently appointed as a full-time English teacher in rural New South Wales, I started my career in a small faculty with very few resources. It was during this time that I relied heavily on the support of my colleagues in the ETA Facebook group, who readily shared ideas, resources and feedback with me, as I re-created programs, implemented new ideas and found my feet as a beginning English teacher. I enjoyed scrolling through the newsletters, flicking through *mETaphor* and finding new ideas in our Facebook group; I was constantly inspired by the wonderful community of English teachers who offered their expertise with generosity and grace. The ETA really offered me a sense of community that I was missing. It is still something I value and appreciate today.

I was always a conscientious English student at school, with a strong passion for writing, but as I started university, my heart pulled me towards the Humanities. With majors in Ancient History and Geography, and a minor in English, I never expected to become an 'English Teacher.' But the ETA scholarship changed that for me. It reignited my passion for English, and I decided to make it my personal mission to ensure that my students loved English as much as I did. I wanted them to love learning about Shakespeare. I wanted them to love reading. I wanted them to fearlessly experiment with words and sounds and structures. Even my mother, who has never seen me teach, said to me just the other day, 'You just think outside the box, Tegan. You're not afraid to try something new and fun, and I think that's your strength as a teacher.' I think she might be right.

From *The Secret Librarian* to *Date with a Book* and *Literary Feasts*, I have loved finding new ways of inspiring students and fostering a love of English, just as my teachers, lecturers and colleagues have done for me. Looking back on the article I wrote for *mETaphor* at the time I received my scholarship, I am pleased to say that my love of English teaching has only grown, and I could not be more proud to be a member of the NSW English Teachers' Association.

Copyright and Intellectual Property

Phil Page

Delivering teaching programs online or offline: what it means for you and your use of third-party material

Australian schools, educational institutions and libraries enjoy some of the most generous and user-friendly copyright exclusions and exemptions that exist anywhere in the world. Indeed, so much so that many of us don't even realise that our use of others' intellectual property in the forms and circumstances that we are afforded by our schools' statutory licence – is not allowed **outside** of our schools, leaving us to think that we can do exactly the same in any context. This is simply **not** the case.

So what does a school's (note not a teacher's) licence allow its teachers to do?

Under the Statutory Education Licence, Australian educators can copy and communicate text, images and print music without a copyright clearance if it is for educational purposes.

Copying or sharing must **only** be for educational purposes. If it is **also** for other purposes (e.g. if a copy is made available to the general public), then the licence **does not** apply. This includes copying and sharing third party content in connection with a course of instruction – and for teachers, this means that while you can share your own materials, you **cannot** share third party content with other teachers outside of your own school and the courses it delivers.

The Statutory Education Licence allows the use of text and images from any source or format:

- digital or hardcopy
- online or offline
- Australian or foreign content
- published or unpublished content.

How does this work in practice, especially for online delivery?

For materials containing text and images, there are four main requirements...

Requirement 1:

The institution is covered by payment arrangements with Copyright Agency (your school's Statutory Licence fee of \$17.00 per student is paid by your educational sector: state, independent or Catholic).

What this means

There are payment arrangements in place for: nearly all Australian schools, libraries, TAFEs and members of Universities Australia, other education institutions such as registered training organisations, and members of Early Childhood Australia.

Requirement 2:

The material is copied and / or shared for educational purposes.

What this means:

Education purposes include:

- made or retained for use, or is used, in connection with a particular course of instruction provided by the institution
- made or retained for inclusion or is included, in the collection of a library of the institution.

Requirement 3:

The material is not used for any other purpose.

What this means

Institutions need to take steps to make sure that materials are not used for any other purposes, for example by:

- using secure servers to ensure that materials are only available to the relevant students and parents assisting them
- telling students and parents how they can and can't use the materials (e.g. no sharing with others)
- not retaining material any longer than needed for educational purposes.

Requirement 4:

The institution does not copy or share more than a reasonable portion of a publication that is available for purchase.

What this means

An institution copying from a publication that is available for purchase can copy and share 10% of the pages, or a chapter, per student per course. If a publication is out of print and unavailable, all of it may be reproduced.

Provided these requirements are met, an institution can copy and share any material containing text and images that is available to it, including digital and print material.

It can digitise (scan), duplicate digital copies, and upload to a server. It can share material on a server to students,

Copyright and Intellectual Property

and email to students, provided the material is only available to the relevant students, and for the necessary time.

The Australian Government has appointed Screenrights (www.screenrights.org/) to manage the licence that allows educational institutions to copy and share broadcast content, such as documentaries shown on television. There are also arrangements in place with APRA|AMCOS for music licences.

The Statutory Education Licence allows any form of 'reproduction' or 'communication'. This includes adding to or changing the content, or presenting it in a different context. The licence doesn't apply to translations from one language to another, or to a 'dramatic version' of a non-dramatic work (such as screenplay based on a short story), or vice-versa (e.g. a novel based on a film).

Please note again that this licence covers institutions, not teachers working independently of their own institutions. This means that when teachers share the materials they have prepared for their own classes – which we all like to do – those resources must not contain any third party copyrighted material. You should try to stick to clearly labelled Creative Commons' licensed material or open source copyright-free materials.

This especially includes the vast multitude of seemingly free images available online. Check all images that you use (there is usually a Terms of Use section at the bottom of the webpage on which the image is included), as very often the copyright ownership belongs to someone and therefore should not be used, except for your own students in your own school. Otherwise you are illegally using someone else's third party intellectual property.

Similarly, you need to remember that when you give your educational materials to someone else you are also effectively withdrawing your claim to IP ownership rights. I'm sure most of us have had the experience of seeing our own materials turn up in other contexts with someone else's name on it claiming ownership.

Copyright theft and the appropriation of others' intellectual property – either deliberately or unintentionally - has almost become a national pastime.

"If I can gain free access, why shouldn't I use it?" For most teachers this is unintentional and well-meaning, but we need to remember the IP rights of those who have produced the material in the first place and their right to be recognised and recompensed for their work.

Unfortunately, Copyright law is often deliberately flouted by those who should know much better. Several recent examples include a number of very large social media platforms appropriating news content provided by journalists, press agencies, newspapers and TV stations, and perhaps the most egregious example of all, originating in the office of our own Prime Minister, with the wide distribution of an unauthorised electronic copy of Malcolm Turnbull's autobiography, *The Bigger Picture*.

As English teachers our appreciation of the work of writers and content creators is second to none. Let's make sure that we acknowledge those creators by respecting their Intellectual Property rights and conforming to our already world-leading Copyright laws.

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Further information can be obtained from the above source or from the *Smartcopying* website: www.smartcopying.edu.au/



Phil Page is the TATE Public Officer, the AATE Treasurer and manages The Copyright Agency's Reading Australia secondary resources' program. He has recently presented at the UN's World Intellectual Property Organization's Standing Committee on Copyright Exclusions and Exemptions in Geneva on the subject of "Teachers as Creators of Educational Content".

Oral language in the secondary school

Dr Lindsay Williams

The role of oral language

Stop for a moment and list all the different occasions today when you spoke to someone else.

Personally, I would list the following (amongst others):

- conversation with my wife about the weather on wakening (it's been especially humid in Brisbane as I write)
- conversation with my six-year-old grandson about the games he was taking to school, including a discussion about the value of the various games
- with my wife, discussion of recent emails about a health insurance claim and our house insurance renewal
- a phone call with my brother about a family situation they are confronting – this involved some gentle counselling
- a practice webinar presentation, during which I had to brief my support person on her role
- a negotiation with my internet provider about a new plan.

While this list is by no means exhaustive, it reveals something of the breadth of my interactions – and over just one morning.

The ability to use oral language (talking and listening) is central to our lives.

For young children (0-5 years), oral language is the foundation of reading, writing and the development of interpersonal skills. In turn, interpersonal experiences are as an infant is the ground on which this foundation is laid (Snow 2021). Snow goes on to report that where there is no solid ground or foundation (for example in children who are maltreated), children and adolescents can end up in the 'school-to-prison' pipeline. Unfortunately, she argues, schools are often not very effective in supporting these students in appropriate ways (see Snow 2021, p. 226). And while the development of listening and speaking skills in early childhood is crucial, continued development across the middle years of primary and into secondary is also essential (Snow 2021, Jones and Thomas 2022).

The challenge for secondary English teachers

As secondary English teachers, then, it is worth considering this provocation:

Do we teach oral language development effectively in secondary schools?

The teaching of spoken language is a requirement of all English curriculum documents in Australia (for example ACARA, 2010 to present). And yet, there is little specific support for teachers in what to teach (beyond broad, commonsense features such as volume, variation in expression etc) and how best to teach it – and things do not look set to improve much with version 9. Moreover, based on 39 years of anecdotal evidence as an English educator, I would claim that most spoken tasks are treated

as written texts to be spoken aloud. Other researchers have also noted a deficit in this area, for example, with respect to film studies, a call was made to adjust the *Australian Curriculum: English* 'to make knowledge about body language in the Language strand more comprehensive and unified with knowledge about language and image' (Ngo, 2018). While a number of resources describing and discussing the generic structure and linguistic features of written texts is available for teachers and students (e.g. Derewianka & Jones, 2016; Humphrey, 2017; Macken-Horarik et al., 2018), systematic and principled reference to paralinguistics (e.g. gesture, facial expression, body movement) is limited and rarely moves beyond commonsense understandings. It is telling that there appears to have been no survey of teacher knowledge about spoken language in Australia, and certainly not in the recent past; compare that to surveys that have been conducted into teacher knowledge of written language features (e.g. Macken-Horarik et al., 2018, pp. 2–3 for a review of studies of teachers' grammatical knowledge). This means that anecdotal evidence (such as my own) is all educators appear to have.

The problem with this situation arises by implication from the findings of my own PhD study about how performers, especially stand-up comedians, negotiate relationships with their audiences (see below for more). In particular (and this is not a new observation), aspects of written language and spoken language (e.g. vocabulary and aspects of grammar) may overlap, but they are not the same. At its simplest, my study has reinforced that language and paralinguistics interact in quite complex ways to construct meaning and enact relationships. Moreover, while spoken genres such as stand-up comedy may appear to be monologic, the evidence suggests that they are created dynamically in the interaction between the comedian and audience members.

Oral language in the secondary school

As a result of my study, I believe there is a need for further research into the teaching of spoken language in classrooms, answering the following key questions:

1. What is the current state of teacher knowledge about spoken language?
2. What are the key spoken genres (and associated structures and features) that students require to participate in contemporary world? [Note: Clearly, it is impossible to ignore the use of spoken texts online which, in fact, involve even more multimodality, including images and sound.]
3. How does the unfolding nature of linguistic and paralinguistic features of the genre allow the speaker to achieve their social goals within a particular social context (considering field, tenor, mode)?
4. How can spoken genres best be taught (teacher focus) and learnt (student focus)?
5. How can students best be assessed on their developing control of spoken genres?
6. How can this development be reported in a rich manner?

As can be seen, these questions have implications for curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and require a large-scale project that will take time to undertake. Unfortunately, though, there is little evidence that this research is occurring in the field of English – just do a quick flip through recent editions of our peak journal, *English in Australia* to confirm this.

However, there is considerable interest in linguistics in multimodal communication. This includes an interest in the role of various aspects of spoken language and related paralanguage in making meaning. As indicated earlier, this was the focus of my own PhD.

What can English teachers learn from stand-up comedians?

The focus of my study was the way presenters use the resources of spoken language and paralanguage to build relationships with audiences. Three Australian stand-up comedians were my case studies.

Comedians are very successful at making connections with audiences and this is presumably one of the reasons they are so popular as presenters and panelists on television. For example, Channel 10's *The Project* has employed comedians from the beginning – Dave Hughes and Kitty Flanagan both made regular appearances in the past, with Tom Cashman and Peter Heliar being the current regulars. The original male host of *The Project* was comedian Charlie Pickering who has gone on to make *The Weekly*, a satirical news show for the ABC.

In 2018, Pickering teamed up with political journalist, Annabelle Crabbe, to present a panel show on which serious social issues (e.g. genetic engineering, euthanasia, artificial intelligence) were explored; Dave Hughes appeared on the changing panel. At the same time, he hosts his own panel discussion show on Channel 10, *Hughsey, I've got a problem*. Adam Hills, another popular comedian, hosted the very popular ABC program *Spicks and specks* before moving to the United Kingdom where he has hosted *Adam Hills: The last leg* since 2012, after it received strong support as a segment during the broadcast of the London Paralympic Games.

These examples reveal that the abilities of stand-up comedians are clearly highly valued by content producers and broadcasters, and by audiences (without ratings, these comedians would be quickly 'dropped'). So, while it would be easy to dismiss stand-up comedy and its practitioners as being trivial, or the insights offered in such routines as having 'no practical consequences' (Purcell et al., 2010, p. 373), humour generally allows comedians to do serious work while at the same time distancing themselves from it and even disguising that work (Egins & Slade, 1997, pp. 166–167). They are highly skilled at building connections with audiences and encouraging audience members to come together through laughter even when the ideas and arguments might be controversial and socially risky. Interpersonal skills such as these are critical and yet are they part of our planning when preparing students to deliver persuasive speeches, for example?

Using the resources of spoken language

Comedians can articulate and theorise in a commonsense way about their work. Take, for example, the following extract from a conversation (Goldsmith, 2017) in front of a live audience between Stuart Goldsmith (SG) and W Kamau Bell (WKB). They are discussing one of Bell's famous jokes. (Note: == indicates overlapping dialogue):

SG: there is there is a kind of preaching element to you there is a rhythm==

WKB: ==mm==

SG: == you're very good at rhythm and tone and pausing and your line about the the the ah the judge being too racist for Alabama==

WKB: ==yes

SG: ==you know that is that is like your- could you just give us that line how you==

WKB: ==oh yes I mean it's like it's it's one of my favourite things to do it's a Norm McDonald thing where the the joke is just the th- you know it's not the joke is sort of just saying the thing==

Oral language in the secondary school

SG: ==yes==

WKB: ==there's not really a punchline there==

SG: ==yes

WKB: it's just about how you say it and I learnt that Norm McDonald or watching him but it's like so Donald Trump appointed Jeff Sessions to be the Attorney General of the United States ah:: and the whole idea is some people like saying Donald Trump's not racist and I'm like it's clear he's racist Jeff Sessions was thought to be too racist to be a judge IN ALABAMA == ((laughing))

Audience: ((laughing))

WKB: my voice totally gave out in the middle==

SG: ==HA HA==

WKB: you get it that's the punchline it's just screaming Alabama people go ahh if you just say in Alabama that's not==

SG: ==yes

WKB: maybe funny but it's really the fact that I feel like I have to ridiculously push it through and then I usually do the thing where I tap the mike can you hear me I scream it again==

Audience: ==((laughter))

SG: so you have you absolutely have all of those gears of being able to- you know to corral an audience but (Goldsmith, 2017)

Notice that Goldsmith and Bell go beyond the words spoken (the script), recognising explicitly that other resources (e.g. pausing, rhythm and intensity of the 'voice') are important when comedians want to 'corral an audience'. Also of interest in his extract is the fact that the joke does not have a traditional punchline; it's vocal features that do the heavy lifting in terms of meaning. These tools of the trade were learnt by observing other comedians. Finally, as an important aside, I would draw your attention to the grammar in use in this conversation, with the overlapping turns, hesitations and repetitions, use of coordinating conjunctions and so forth.

This sort of close analysis of a spoken text and what makes it work can reveal features that might not be evident otherwise. For example, at one point in one of his performances, Adam Hills begins a joke with banter, asking the audience if anyone loves Americans. A member of the audience calls out 'Hope not'. Hills responds to this heckle first by echoing the words used, but at a higher pitch, stressing the second word (not) instead of the first (hope) and scrunching up his face to signal negative evaluation of the heckle. In doing this, he changes the meaning of the heckler's words.



Adam Hills, 2008 Paralympic Games, Beijing.
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Hills then riffs on this idea of Americans falling out of favour by first taking on the character of an American ten years in the past and then in the present. This practice of adopting roles allows Hills allows him to distance himself from the evaluations his performance evokes, i.e. he is not saying anything directly negative about the heckler or the Americans.

Comparison of wordings in different eras (Hills, 2006)




Ten years ago (AH as 'Americans')	Present (in performance time) (AH as American man with wife)
whoo I'm from the States man yeah come on	put your hand down Marjorie

These words really accumulate meaning when considered in terms of the paralinguage (gestures, facial expression, gaze or eye contact, body orientation and so forth) – and also voice quality which won't be considered here. The figure below shows (some of how) Hills performed the role of the American ten years in the past.

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Selection of paralinguistic resources by Hills while enacting role of American man in the past



(Images of performance: Hills, 2006)

Elements	Ten years ago (AH as 'Americans')		
Language	*/WHOO I'm from the */STATES man	*/YEAH	*/COME on
Paralanguage	Body orientation: involved (i.e. turned to audience) Gaze: direct		
Images			

Contrast is a powerful rhetorical tool and Hill uses it here to make his point about how attitudes to Americans have changed – see below for his performance of the American in the present.

Selection of paralinguistic resources by Hills while enacting role of American man in the present

(Images of performance: Hills, 2006)

Elements	Present (in performance time) American man with wife	
	put your hand down	*/MARjorie
Paralanguage	Body orientation: involved (front on) Gaze: observe (looking away from audience)	Body orientation: partially uninvolved Gaze: observe
Images		

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As can be seen, the evaluation an audience member is likely to make of the American now is something more like 'lacking in confidence'. This is reinforced by the contrasting use of his body orientation and gaze: while in the past the American man engaged directly with the audience, now he averts his gaze. The response from the audience is laughter and Hills turns the original audience heckle (and related challenge to his control of the genre) into a reinforcement of the connection between audience and comedian.

A takeaway message here is that just studying the words spoken or relying on editing to obtain a tight script is not enough (actually, much of the refinement of the 'script' occurs during repeated performance) and omits so much of what carries the meaning in spoken texts. In addition, these examples suggest that the use of frequent, quality spoken models is important, and a shared, specialised language for analysing quality models (as we have for written texts) is also likely to be helpful.

Genre and stand-up

An unexpected outcome of the study was the challenge it posed for the teaching of genre in both written and spoken texts. It has long been a criticism of the so-called 'Sydney School' of genre that genre is taught as a formulaic recipe (see for example Freedman & Medway, 1994). While there is some evidence that this may be a problem of classroom practice, a number of recent books have tried to develop a more nuanced approach to the teaching of genres (e.g. Humphrey, 2017; Macken-Horarik et al., 2018). Nevertheless, there is a tendency for genre to be considered largely in terms of sequencing subject matter/information.

This study has highlighted the need to consider much more seriously the influence of the interpersonals on the structure of a text. A re-orientation along these lines has the potential to improve the teaching of many school genres. The teaching of exposition, for example, is especially problematic in this regard. The basic structure is well understood, that is some variation on the following:

- Thesis
- Arguments
- Reiteration.

However, most teachers are familiar with the worst manifestations of this: the much maligned five-paragraph or 'hamburger' essay. The emphasis on getting the structure right overshadows reflection on an arguably more important aspect of argument and persuasive texts: the need to enact appropriate roles and relationships that lead to an alignment of values/beliefs. For example, for the first ten minutes or so of performances, comedians

often spend time building close relationships, including using inclusive gestures, smiling and the discussion of shared topics such as the weather (to name some straight-forward examples). It is obviously not a case of structuring topics or relationships; it is the interaction of the subject matter and interpersonal positioning that may have the best possibility of resulting in highly appropriate and effective texts.

Although the sample size makes findings difficult to generalise with confidence, one other clear finding from my study was the use of a range of genres across a performance, even though stand up is closely associated with the traditional set up ^ punchline style of joke (^ means followed by). In fact, comedians used a variety of genres as vehicles for their humour, including ones specific to speaking such as Observation/Comment, Opinion and even what Fran Christie termed the Curriculum Macro-genre, as well as Anecdote, Exemplum, Narrative, Nature-documentary commentary, Safety announcements and Historical recount.

To take one example, the genre of historical recount is found only in one performance by Adam Hills and would not seem a typical choice for someone trying to create a high degree of familiarity between the comedian and audience members: anecdotes and (general) recounts are the genres likely to be more frequently found where 'participants are in regular contact or quite familiar with each other' (Eggins & Slade, 1997, p. 266). However, as Hills (2006) does with another unusual choice – the Curriculum Macro-genre (in simple terms modelling, guided and independent practice) – he uses the historical recount to share reactions and enact relationships, rather than simply communicate historical information. This is a brief example from a recount of the 'discovery' of Australia to demonstrate the point:

AH: [...] and the Dutch kind of got off their ships ((turning to stage right and walking slowly across stage)) and just went ((adopting accent, presumably mock-Dutch)) well this is ((looking upwards and around, not making eye contact)) ridiculous== ((holding pose briefly))

Audience: ==((murmur of laughter))

AH: ((looking to stage right)) we cannot grow ((shifting gaze across to stage right, looking upward not making eye contact with audience)) marijuana crops here== (Hills, 2006)

Hills is not giving the audience an actual history lesson here, but rather provoking a laugh based on common and assumed shared stereotypes about the Dutch.

The message we might take from this is that students need the ability to draw flexibly on a repertoire of genres to achieve their purposes and create texts for specific

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audiences. However, we should reflect on whether our current programs allow for the development of a wide range of genres, and opportunities to experiment with how a wide range of spoken genres can be used and combined.

Conclusion

While there is a lot more we could say, hopefully this discussion has provoked you to consider the question posed earlier:

Do we teach oral language development effectively in secondary schools?

It seems to me there are a few takeaway messages about what we might be doing to support students.

1. Provide frequent opportunities in classroom for students to talk and actively listen. These opportunities should have a clear purpose (learning intention) and involve active participation of the teacher as necessary, for example in modelling, and providing guided and independent practice.
2. Speaking opportunities should involve the sequential development of knowledge about and considered use of:
 - a range of genres, both by themselves and in combination. Moreover, spoken genres are frequently co-constructed by the participants and should be structured not just according to the subject matter under consideration, but also according to the relationships desired in the interaction.
 - a repertoire of resources, including aspects of spoken language (including intonation) and paralinguistic, for example gaze or eye contact, gesture, facial expression and body movement. In this paper, I have tried to minimise the use of technical metalanguage, but systematic frameworks for analysis using common terminology can be developed if those in education and linguistics work together.
3. These opportunities should allow students to develop the ability to shunt along the mode continuum from the most spoken-like language (e.g. spontaneous, activity-oriented, collaboratively co-constructed) and the most written-like language (e.g. stands alone, typically a singular author, edited) – see below for examples of spoken activities situated on the mode continuum.

Most spoken-like language Most written-like language



- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| • casual conversation | • storytelling | • reading quality texts aloud |
| • banter during games | • questioning | • scripted speech |
| • small group discussion | • panel discussion | |

Of course, written language can be spoken-like (think text messages), just as spoken language can be quite written-like (think a scripted multimodal presentation). The aim is to support students in developing a wide repertoire of language capabilities that they can draw on flexibly in different contexts.

Have fun reflecting on your own English curriculum and designing learning experiences that support students in the development of authentic oral language.

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Dr Lindsay Williams will be presenting a webinar series *Developing Students' Oracy* starting in March.

Dr Lindsay Williams is President of the English Teachers Association of Queensland and was co-convenor of the 2021 AATE/ALEA National Conference, 'Challenge and Change'. In 2020, on the first day of lockdowns, he started working for the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority where he is currently employed as Principal Project Officer, Literacy. His PhD was completed through the University of New England and focused on the way that presenters and performers use multimodal resources to connect with audiences.

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DEVELOPING STUDENTS' ORACY

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Presenter: Dr Lindsay Williams Venue: Your home or school computer

Session 1: Stand-up comedians have a reputation for being class clowns, probably university drop-outs – if they made it that far. However, they are also ubiquitous in the media. And, before the pandemic struck, comedy festivals around the world were some of the most successful arts festivals. The question is why? Part of the answer is their ability to communicate, including their skill in rapidly building relationships with audiences. In this presentation, we will examine ways they structure their performances and manipulate a variety of multimodal features, especially body language and consider the implications for teaching speaking in schools.

Session 2: Genre gets bad press when students produce formulaic, recipe-like, mind-numbing persuasive or imaginative writing. The question is how much of that critique is based on a genuine, deep understanding of genre? In this webinar, we will look beyond genre as a way of sequencing content, to focus on the way that humans use genres – often in complex combinations – to create texts that serve an author's purpose, and enact specific relationships.

Session 3: All too often, the teaching of oral language is constrained by assessment. The result is that students often produce a script that they then perform – and the teaching emphasis is frequently on the written language. Building on previous sessions, in this webinar we will consider strategies for supporting students' spoken language development.

Session 4: The research shows that providing alphanumerical grades as a form of feedback is ineffective – students tend to focus on the grade rather than any verbal comments that might accompany it. How can we provide more effective feedback on students' spoken language development in secondary schools? How can we provide feedback that will help to build student confidence and move their learning forward?

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Caring and carrying: The bag of female experience

Felicia Boyages

In her 'Carrier Bag Theory of Evolution', Elizabeth Fisher points to the 'origin of bags rather than weaponry as a critical point in human development' (1979/1980, p.56), spotlighting the bag as the harbinger of human experience. The bag as a communally orientated object allows for the 'continuation of life' (Rich, 1995, p.98) whilst also showcasing deeply personal and individual female experiences and 'histories' (Bowen & Harstang, 1994, p.7). Systemic to these communal and individual experiences is an untold dimension – what Ursula Le Guin dubs the silent 'all-inclusive life-story', a story about 'gathering' (1989, p.168) and one which formed the foundation of human culture and society. This dimension displays an intrinsic female care ethic, namely that of provision, sustenance, and nurture. This reflects cultural feminist, Carol Gilligan's metaphor of the female 'cob-web' where women perceive relationships in terms of their level of connection and powerful sense of duty and responsibility. According to Carol Gilligan, a 'woman's sense of integrity appears to be entwined with an ethic of care' such that she only 'sees herself' in a 'relationship of connection' (1982/1993, p.171). Consequently, women's roles have traditionally been that of 'nurturer, caretaker and helpmate' (p.17). Whilst prima facie this appears to crystallise a woman's experience as one of disempowerment, there is also empowerment at the heart of a woman's bag in its facilitation of the 'continuation of life' (Rich, 1995, p.98). Consequently, the bag stands as a powerful symbol of female experience through its communal orientation and systemic care dimension, its ubiquity proclaiming both its silence and often concealed personal narrative.

In my MPhil dissertation at the University of Cambridge, I examined the bag in children's and young adult literature as emblematic of a distinctly feminine identity and inherent mode of female caring, notably Nel Noddings' model of 'natural caring' (2013) and Carol Gilligan's 'ethic of care' (1982/1993) or what has been termed a female morality of caring (Boyages, 2020). As mentioned, I discussed the bag as reflective of a woman's 'ethic of responsibility' (Gilligan, 1982/1993, p.171) and strong degree of connection with those around her. In addition, I identified the bag's function as something 'transformative' (Rich, 1995, p.98) and generative which allows for continual progression rather than 'stasis' (Le Guin, 1989, p.169), foregrounding how women's bags become 'tool(s) of [their] femininity' (Chenoune as cited in Cox, 2007, p.8) to negotiate and determine their place in the world, often against rigid patriarchal traditions (Boyages, 2020, p.3). In my dissertation, I examined a range of texts in youth literature including iconic examples of bags such as Mary Poppins' carpet bag (P.L. Travers, *Mary Poppins*, 1934/2016), Katniss Everdeen's forager bag (Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* series, 2008/2011; 2009/2011; 2010/2011), Tove Jansson's Moominmamma's black handbag (Moomin series, 1945-1977), J.K. Rowling's Hermione Granger's magical beaded bag (*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, 2007/2013) and A.A Milne's Kanga's bag pouch (*Winnie the Pooh*, 1926/2016). In this paper, I will discuss my previous research in relation to the bag, in particular Hermione Granger's

magical beaded bag, extending my analysis of her bag as an embodiment of communal notions of the female experience, and a repository of her subjectivity.

The bag as an object of anthropological note and female experience extends to the modern day. Today, women gather everything they need to survive in the urban jungle, their bag operating as a complex memory container and marker of their belonging and status. Children's and Young Adult literature reflect this predominantly cultural and social hallmark of women carrying a bag, this practice operating as an influential platform in setting the scene for young people with respect to gendered behaviours and practices. According to Mem Fox, children's literature acts as an influential mechanism on children's minds, 'important influences that shape and reflect the politics and values of our society' (1993, p.656). Moreover, literature opens a 'map of possible roles and of possible worlds in which action, thought, and self-definition are permissible (or desirable)' (Bruner, 1986, p.66). Relatedly, children's literature is characterised by what Maria Nikolajeva calls 'aetonormative' frameworks where adult norms are imposed on children, often subconsciously (2010). The cumulative effect of these dynamics is that children's literature reflects the cultural and ideological practices which osmotically transfer to their readers, and which require care and scrutiny in their formulation. Most importantly, the bag as a



Image source: https://harrypotter.fandom.com/wiki/Hermione_Granger%27s_beaded_handbag?file=Hermione_Granger%2527s_beaded_handbag.jpg

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symbol in children's literature requires investigation and illumination to better understand what it reveals about its female owners.

The power of literature to educate and entertain is undeniable and becomes even more influential in the hands of a popular young adult series such as J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter* (1997-2007/2013). This internationally acclaimed book series presents a female protagonist who carries a bag with complex dimensions and conceptions of female experience. In *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007/2018) Hermione Granger carries a magical beaded bag which embodies her female experience as a scholarly young witch who displays foresight and intelligence. Far from being an expendable fashion item, Hermione's bag is one of magical dimension, a mobile 'survivalist kit' (Harris, 1997, p.124) and 'bottomless pit' (p.122) which serves the communal demands of the group including Harry Potter and Ron Weasley. Markedly, Hermione's bag contains a portable library, a tent, medicinal items, amenities, and changes of clothes for herself and the two boys, Harry's backpack (including his Cloak of Invisibility) as well as other important objects she collects along the way. Thus, despite its diminutive size, Hermione's bag exemplifies the huge load and responsibility she carries which eludes her male companions.



Moreover, close examination of the actual contents of Hermione's bag reveals a complex prism to interrogate female agency as set against traditional stereotypes of female work and load bearing, including the silent mental load. Consequently, the complexity of Hermione's bag is such that it is not entirely clear what her bag represents. On the one hand, her bag exemplifies the traditional stereotype of a woman's work – the mental load, pre-planning,

balancing different responsibilities – whilst on the other hand, it becomes a powerful symbol of her subversion of this stereotype, namely her foresight, intelligence, and agency which undermines the traditionally noble act of a man carrying a woman's things. The communal orientation and underlying care dimension of Hermione's bag spotlights the centrality of this concept as an integral feature of female experience. Within her bag, Hermione carries Harry's bag, changes of clothes and amenities for

the boys as well as a temporary home for the group. This raises interesting questions about Hermione's respective empowerment and disempowerment as compared with the boys, namely her 'independence' or 'interdependence' (Trites, 1997, p.83) and consequently the influence this has on her role as supporter or instigator in the trio's adventures.

Hermione's bag as a communal site of essential items reflects her role as an 'interdependent' party (Trites, 1997, p.83), a co-ordinator and provider of the key provisions. Thus, it is arguable that Harry and Ron are 'more dependent on Hermione than she is on them' (Dresang, 2002, p.231), her bag and its contents reflecting her greater 'analytical thinking', 'logic and "knowledge' (p.227). In this respect, Hermione's bag reflects her strong 'ethic of responsibility' (Gilligan, 1982/1993, p.171) in how she prepares for any number of contingencies. Hermione's bag exemplifies her 'natural caring' (Noddings, 2013) out of instinctive love as she is 'consistently pulling out essentials from [her] bag that save or make Ron's and Harry's lives comfortable' (Donaldson & Heilman, 2008, p.147). In many instances, these acts of instinctive care demonstrate Hermione's 'overwhelmingly matriarchal role' (p.147). Moreover, the boys' awestruck response to Hermione's amazing pre-preparedness accentuates her strength of character and respective empowerment whilst simultaneously hinting at her marginalisation and helper status. This marginalisation reflects the regrettable commonality of this treatment as a feature of female experience, extending to how Hermione's carrying of the bag (and by extension women more broadly) could be perceived as 'taken for granted female behaviour' (Bowen & Harstang, 1994, p.7), its tiny size pointing to the often silenced and forsaken dimension to this gendered task. Furthermore, Hermione's carrying of the boys' belongings could be perceived as reinforcing her status as 'helper, enabler and instrument' (Schoefer as cited in Wannamaker, 2006) of the boys' adventures rather than the 'primary adventurer herself' (Donaldson & Heilman, 2008, p.146). However, for the most part Hermione's carrying of the boys' things is an empowering image of her 'interdependence' (Trites, 1997, p.83) and the boys' relative dependency on her, inverting as mentioned the traditional stereotype of a woman having her things carried by a man. Consequently, Hermione 'distorts the traditional chivalric code' (Ridge, 2017, p.74), notable in how she carries Harry's rucksack as well as the boys' belongings within her own bag, demonstrating a powerful dimension to her female experience.

Hence, Hermione's bag is a poignant example of how female experience is characterised by care and nurture in servicing the needs of others, whilst also deeply personal. Hermione's bag exemplifies her life experience to date and

Above: Emma Watson as Hermione Granger in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* Image source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermione_Granger#/media/File:Hermione_Granger_poster.jpg

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her survivalist mode of thinking, the contents of her bag taking into consideration where she has been, what she has encountered and what she may combat in the future. Hermione's bag stands as a powerful 'bulwark against a hostile world' (Harris, 1997, p.124), embodying her personal and more universal female experience. Strikingly, Hermione's bag takes on a forager bag dimension as she not only packs essential items but collects useful objects along the way. This is demonstrated through her foresight in packing an extensive mobile library which reflects her knowledge of scholarly pursuit and understanding of the high value of literature. This scholarly dimension to Hermione's bag operates as a physical manifestation of her keen intellect and strong magical ability rather than in a more stereotypical sense, her bag facilitating the upkeep of her physical appearance. From the outset of the series, Hermione emerges as the 'intellect', the 'voice of reason' and the one who 'applies herself and excels the most in magical learning' (Bodinger-deUriarte, 2006, p.68). Books have operated as critical navigational tools for Hermione through the 'crossroads' of puberty (Brown & Gilligan as cited in Dresang, 2002, p.229) and in her relationship with the boys with Hermione having 'won the respect of Harry and Ron through her use of knowledge to solve many of the trio's difficulties' (p.227). As such, Hermione's packing of the mobile library, including forbidden books that she 'magicked out of Dumbledore's study after his death' (Croft, 2009, p.135) reinforces her foresight and understanding of what is valuable as well as her keen sense of justice to do whatever is required to get the job done. Consequently, this brave act which demonstrates Hermione's Gryffindor trait of 'daring' and 'nerve' also affirms her 'deep love of information and appreciation for its power' (Flaherty as cited in Croft, 2009, p.135). Hence at its core, Hermione's carrying of the books reflects her love and appreciation for literature which adds a distinctly personal dimension to her bag's contents whose value is somewhat concealed from others. This is further illuminated through Hermione's packing prowess which entails a meticulous sorting approach which she endeavours alone. Hermione creates 'two enormous piles' (Rowling, 2007/2013, p.93), sorting out which books 'to take with [them]...when they are looking for the Horcruxes' (p.95). This disciplined and deliberate approach eludes the boys, Ron's response being one of sarcasm:

'Oh, of course'...clapping a hand to his forehead. I forgot we'll be hunting down Voldemort in a mobile library' (p.95).

Whilst the boys' lack of understanding and appreciation could be perceived as a disabling force on Hermione's agency, it can also be viewed as a clarifying one, affirming both the instinctive and communal orientation of Hermione's bag as well as its operation as a repository of

her subjectivity. Hermione's bag emerges as a powerful symbol of her identity and experience as an independent, academically astute, and intelligent young witch.

Thus, Hermione's bag emerges as a 'portable manifestation of [a woman's] sense of self, a detailed and remarkably revealing map of her interior' (Merkin as cited in Feldman, 2014), that affirms the bag's significance as a female gendered object and embodiment of female experience. Consequently, at the heart of Hermione's bag is a space of 'contradictions' (Rich, 1995, p.102), an ambivalence and complexity which makes it difficult to clearly discern its meaning in terms of her respective empowerment and disempowerment. This lack of clarity forces the bag into a space of hybridity, Hermione's experience and identity influenced and reflective of both sides of this empowerment spectrum.

The bag as a 'key piece in the day-to-day construction of [a woman's] identity' (Laronche, 2011) becomes a powerful force and influential platform in children's literature. This is particularly the case in a popular series like *Harry Potter* where exploration of the bag as an artefact of female experience requires deconstruction and analysis to fully appreciate and understand its leading female protagonist. As such, having utilised Hermione Granger's bag as a case study in point, it would be limiting to relegate these anthropological objects to 'compliance within a gender stereotype' (Kaufmann as cited in Laronche, 2011) rather than 'biographical objects which can unlock associations with past events and emotions' (Twigg & Base as cited in Feldman, 2014) and which stand as complex personal items.

As Ursula Le Guin proclaims, the carrier bag story is the new 'life story' and one which needs to be told (1989, p.168). In this instance, the carrier bag becomes emblematic of the broader notion of the bag and the load borne by women, and what better way to tell the story than to open the bag and reveal what is on the inside. If we take a step back and look inside our own bags, we find reflections of our own individual experiences and communal bearings, evidence of where we have been and where we are going. Thus, the bag becomes a powerful metaphor for both personal and, more broadly, female experience. We plan, pack, replenish and store to survive, adventure, remember and transform.

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Slessor: On the shore between despair and hope

Peter Fleming, St Patrick's Marist College Dundas

In an episode of the PBS television series *Closer to Truth* entitled 'Why is There Something Rather Than Nothing?', host Robert Lawrence Kuhn interviewed scientists and metaphysicians, probing the question, how could the universe – *something* – have come out of *nothing*? This is a question which, depending on which side you come down, is liable to shape the person you are – beliefs, attitudes, actions – more perhaps than any other question in life you will face, because it also has embedded in it a deeper question: does the *something* have any intrinsic value? If you answer *yes*, you could be a person of faith. If you answer *no*, you might be a nihilist. If you answer, *I must ponder this more*, you might want to read the poems of Kenneth Slessor.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Slessor pondered whether our clearly transient physical existence was tethered to anything more lasting, or was our very consciousness, the human brain's gift to the universe, really just an instrument of torture, and all of us unwilling, and unwilling, victims. Slessor's poems create a vivid sense of place, but their real location is most often inside the mind, upon the horizon between the possibility of glory and the abyss of despair. A glimpse of this painful struggle comes towards the end of 'Wild Grapes,' when even the persona's most vibrant memory becomes subject to crippling doubt. He remembers 'Isabella,' whose memory, in the face of corrupting time and an otherwise lifeless place,

has lingered on
Defiantly when all have gone away,
In an old orchard where swallows never stir.

Slessor dwells on the memory, until his own powers of recall stumble on a critical point:

A girl half-fierce, half-melting, as these grapes,
Kissed here — or killed here — but who remembers
now?

It seems an innocuous failure, until one realises that if the mental recall of the most vivid life, the one which 'defiantly' lived on, is subject to such ephemerality, how are we to ascribe an enduring value to *anyone* – and, by extension, *anything* at all? This is especially tormenting to Slessor, who seems to project no inherent belief in a power beyond the human. And yet, the paradox is that, if anything, the growing existential rage Slessor displays in his work seems entirely predicated upon a gargantuan pride in humanity's potential – a belief that our prospects, all, should be so much better.

We see this paradox start to unfurl in 'Gulliver,' which addresses the captivity of the human consciousness inside the limitations of physical existence. The poem's thesis is built on a literary allusion to an iconic scene in Jonathon Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, an 18th century satirical work in which Lemuel Gulliver, a seaman, is

washed up on the shore of the island of Lilliput, where he is immensely gigantic compared to the local inhabitants, tiny people (Lilliputians) who, while he is still exhausted and unconscious from his struggle at sea, tie him down with hundreds of ropes – tiny ropes the size of hairs to Gulliver – their size, of course.

Through this literary allusion, Slessor insists that our human consciousness is deserving of a greater destiny than our physical existence allows. The tone created is one of bitter resentment. The persona in the poem rails against the multiplicity and banality of the physical forces which subdue his spirit:

I'll kick your walls to bits, I'll die scratching a tunnel,
If you'll give me a wall, if you'll give me a simple stone,
If you'll do me the honour of a dungeon—
Anything but this tyranny of sinews.
Lashed with a hundred ropes of nerve and bone
I lie, poor helpless Gulliver,

In a twopenny dock for the want of a penny,
Tied up with stuff too cheap, and strings too many.
One chain is usually sufficient for a cur.
Hair over hair, I pick my cables loose,

But still the ridiculous manacles confine me.
I snap them, swollen with sobbing. What's the use?

One hair I break, ten thousand hairs entwine me.
Love, hunger, drunkenness, neuralgia, debt,
Cold weather, hot weather, sleep and age—

Arguably, this resentment is born of a buried Romanticist vision of a better, more liberated human existence which should be possible but which an imperfect physical world makes virtually impossible to accomplish. The Romanticist philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau famously wrote, 'Man is born free but is everywhere in chains.' But there is a difference between the shackles of Rousseau and the confinements of Slessor: Rousseau meant that *social strictures* limit humans. Slessor's list of burdens are mostly natural physical ones and so drive deeper into the question of our very existence.

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We notice the monosyllabic force of the first clause which creates the fiercely angry tone: 'I'll kick your walls to bits'; and the angry edge of the sounds 'kick' 'bits', 'die', 'scratching' and even the hard 't' of 'tunnel'. But the dramatic contrast introduced by the word 'if' in the second line reveals a different truth: the persona's *powerlessness*, retrospectively turning his threats of the first line into empty boasting: human pride rails against human reality.

The tone is sustained by the antithesis: 'tyranny of sinews', awesome power contrasted with something small and by comparison banal. The persona's list of examples of the 'ten thousand hairs' that 'entwine' ('Love' etc.) is, here, a list of the depleting, discouraging forces that pain the human consciousness and Slessor adds a note of the ridiculous when the persona complains of 'Cold weather' and instantly juxtaposes a complaint against 'hot weather' – an amusing note which makes the reader ask, 'Could the persona ever be satisfied by anything at all?' Even the complaints take on a quality of banality. To the persona Slessor has created in the poem, *nothing* is good in this physical world. This self-pity which tips into self-mockery, through multifaceted listing, is markedly different in philosophy to, say, a similar list we find in Bruce Dawe's later, (1969) lovely poem 'Homo Suburbensis', where the ordinary is exalted as a common man stands in his 'patch of vegetables',

Burning, hearing vaguely the clatter of a disk
in a sink that could be his, hearing a dog, a kid,
a far whisper of traffic, and offering up instead

Not much but as much as any man can offer
- time, pain, love, hate, age, war, death, laughter, fever.

Dawe's list raises its own complexities about human experience but, by contrast to Slessor, the ordinary suburban man is presented offering up the experiences of life as a sort of noble sacrifice – and thus he becomes extraordinary in the universe.

To Slessor, the ordinary is an insult to pride. The very fact that we have bodies ('ropes of nerve and bone') is a crushing blow from the universe, and he adds self-mockery with the idiomatic phrase 'In a twopenny dock for the want of a penny'. Ours is a hopeless and ludicrously undignified situation. The point is reinforced by the antithesis of 'hair' and 'manacles' where hair (those lilliputian ropes), something weak, is changed to oppressively shackling 'manacles' in a dramatic reversal of imagery. This latter-day, Gulliver-like complainant is not protesting mountains, crevasses, earthquakes or floods: it is the lilliputian and inconsequential constraints of the cosmos which batter his ego's sense of spiritual entitlement.

The rhetorical question 'What's the use?' implies a moment of surrender; the poem moves from moments

of resistance to a sense of defeat – that is, defeat of the consciousness, or we may say, the human spirit. We do not know, from moment to moment across his life, if Slessor believed in a *spirit* independent of a body, but he certainly feels the furious rebellion of *consciousness* against the merely physical. Coming to the end of the poem we encounter an even clearer expression of the human problem as seen by Slessor:

I could break my teeth on a chain, I could bite through
metal,
But what can you do with hairs?
For God's sake, call the hangman.

The alliteration of 'break' and 'bite' as well as the forceful rhythm of that third last line contributes a dignified tone this time; the complainant is prepared to offer a damn admirable fight; however, the bravado merely contrasts with the final, arguably nihilistic surrender which ends the poem: 'call the hangman.' Only death, it seems, will end the suffering of assumed entitlement in the face of a niggardly universe.

This sense of entitlement, however, returns us to the paradox: is this feeling of cosmic hopelessness not in fact born of an ideal vision for humanity? What are our *deserved* prospects, in Slessor's view? The new Gulliver is incapable even of rising from the shore, let alone consummating a glorious destiny. Even the dire hypocrite Samuel Marsden, in Slessor's delicate hands, has a moment of (albeit ambiguous) inspiration beyond the imagination of the cosmically scuttled Gulliver:

Are there not Saints in holier skies
Who have been scourged to Paradise?
O, Lord, when I have come to that,
Grant there may be a Heavenly Cat
With twice as many tails as here—
And make me, God, Your Overseer.
But if the veins of Saints be dead,
Grant me a whip in Hell instead,
Where blood is not so hard to fetch.
But I, Lord, am Your humble wretch.

'Vesper Song of the Reverend Samuel Marsden'

This ending to the 'Song' pushes the representation of Marsden towards absurdity but may, at the very last moment, provide a coda of redemptive insight for the flogging parson. Slessor's Marsden desires to continue his whip-wielding ways even in Heaven, or if that is not possible, then in Hell. The poet's biting humour is at work here: surely the reader by now knows where, in Christian understanding, such a hypocritical person is heading! The absurdity is found in a phrase such as 'Heavenly Cat' where 'cat' refers to a cat-o-nine-tails lash, something redundant in paradise. The remarkable line 'But if the veins of Saints be dead' bears deliberate ambiguity. On the one

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hand, it is an absurd notion to imagine the veins of saints that are already in Heaven *not* being dead, suggesting theological confusion, not the only instance in Slessor's representation of the man. But the words also suggest a more disturbing possibility, in keeping with Slessor's own lack of religious belief: that the saints are *only* dead, and that there is no afterlife for them or for Marsden. In which case, the Hell Slessor mentions in the next line can only be the world, where already Marsden has easily proven that 'blood is not so hard to fetch'. Thus, Marsden's position as preacher and punisher is hell. This world of crime, sin, punishment and futility is hell. Marsden, in this reading, arrives at some degree of personal insight. The final line, isolated like a coda, underlines the possibility of Marsden's secret self-loathing. His self-description as a 'humble wretch' is classic Slessorian ambiguity: which word should have the greater emphasis? 'Humble', if taken uppermost (and seriously), suggests he has learned nothing, realised nothing and he is still the falsely pious hypocrite, insincere even to God. But when the reader focuses more on the power of the word 'wretch', heightened by being rhymed with "fetch" in the earlier line, then it may suggest a moment of spiritual honesty on the persona's part. He admits he is in a miserable spiritual state – unfortunate, despised, and beyond the reach of Grace. If this latter emphasis is the one Slessor intends, the poem does not end in hopelessness, for it is generally agreed that the first step towards any sort of spiritual or psychological redemption is the earnest recognition of our true state – a 'reality check'. The persona may have arrived at a turning point.

And yet.

And yet the poem ends, and so the persona ends. Slessor may have given us a turning point, but no turn takes place. Does the Vesper-Song end in a (by now) familiar shade of nihilism, or does it reveal a glimmer of light in the dark? Either way, it feels like an advancement beyond the horror that is the only horizon available to 'Gulliver'.

Slessor further explores the seeming betrayal of humanity by humanity's own consciousness in the remarkable 'Out of Time'. This poem reflects Slessor's belief in the delusion that we are in charge of our human experiences, no matter how hard we try to mythologise our self-importance in the universe.

The theme begins to be constructed in the title itself, 'Out of Time', which can mean, ambiguously, either an ecstatic moment which lifts the persona's consciousness out of the flow of time and offers a brief experience – or illusion – of eternity, or the end of life (literally, 'out of time') when the persona's life-time has been used up. But Slessor's examination of time in the poem is far more complex than this simple polarisation. The poem is structured into three Spenserian sonnets, each with three quatrains plus

a final couplet, where each quatrain develops or shifts our understanding of the human experience of time itself.

A further aspect of the poem's structure is critical to how we interpret Slessor's ideas; it is how the poem begins and ends: the concrete situation of a swimmer at sea, in danger of drowning, unseen by potential rescuers who go by heedlessly – a struggle to survive in the ocean. Slessor uses this circumstance as an allegory of all human experience of time. Time is represented in myriad ways: it sails by with joyful elegance like 'the hundred yachts / That fly behind the daylight' yet there is the morbid sense of existential isolation foreshadowed in the phrase 'behind the daylight', as if the yachts are dimensionally distanced from the swimmer. The joy of life cannot co-exist in the space of mortal awareness. In the second quatrain, time is a 'wave' which 'enfolds me in its bed'; 'bed' is again ambiguous: it can be something comforting, or it can allude to burial, a bed of soil. Time becomes 'the bony knife, it runs me through', a vicious weapon. But instantly the persona imagines his heart reassuring him, deceiving him ('Time flows, not you') it is the lie youth can tell itself of physical permanence. In the third quatrain, Time is personified: it 'takes', 'drills', 'drives', and Slessor develops the force of time through alliteration, yet still the common delusion persists. As the tide of time recedes, the 'weeds remain' – where 'weeds' connotes the bodily existence of the persona – an ugly image of hope if ever there was one!

Full of delusional self-confidence, the persona speaks to Time as if to a reasonable being, and the directive 'you must cry farewell' suggests the persona believes he has some power over the force of inevitability. When Slessor reaches the second of the three sonnets, Time has become sociopathic, 'Eager to quench and ripen, kiss or kill', the blunt alliteration marking the dangerous foe's irresponsibility and latent narcissism. In response to this vision, Slessor masterfully re-asserts human arrogance: no, says the persona, Time is like a fugitive, and must escape 'his fate'; Time is a lackey, a servant:

he must open doors,
Or close them, for that pale and faceless host
Without a flag, whose agony implores
Birth to be flesh, or funeral, to be ghost.

Time's authority is further weakened in Slessor's imagery, and becomes an unfaithful lover, having made himself too responsible to too many people. He is likened to a 'mistress', and it is a wonderful and effective paradox that there is no hyperbole in time keeping 'appointments with a million years': here Time is subservient to the demands of the universe!

This momentary vision of Time as a slave gives the swimmer and the personified present 'moment' the confidence to 'laugh'. In a beautiful image of indulgence,

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the swimmer floats upon his own confidence, superior to time itself: 'Leaning against his golden undertow.' But the third sonnet begins with a dreadful use of near-repetition. The very moment the line 'Leaning against the golden undertow' is repeated with the alienating exception of the definite article 'the' replacing the possessive pronoun 'his', the truth of mortality arrives: at sea, undertow is a deadly force. Even the sight of birds reminds him of the threat: they are 'hail-stone clear' and 'shadows flow'; although they reside in a place of sweetness, they are separated from the swimmer by a 'meniscus', the surface of the liquid water. A veil has separated the swimmer from the life that continues above him, as the daylight suggested a shield between him and the yachts at the beginning of the poem. The swimmer, drowning to a place out of time, is confronted by his own existential powerlessness. It is as if Gulliver who at least is able to contend with the forces of Nature while onshore, has been washed back out to sea, and must succumb to a foe incapable of being fought at all.

The moment's world it was; and I was part,
Fleshless and ageless, changeless and made free.
'Fool, would you leave this country?' cried my heart,
But I was taken by the suck of sea.

For a moment, the persona has an ecstatic experience of superiority over Time. The swimmer senses the potency of spiritual eternity: 'Fleshless and ageless, changeless and made free', but it is all part of a delusion. All the physical things of the world around him – 'fainter land', 'lighted beach', 'china sand' – belonged to his partner, the 'moment': all are now eternally separated from him. His heart returns to chastise him pointlessly when 'I was taken by the suck of the sea'. The brusque alliteration sounds the ignominy of his fate. It is a little like the collision of feelings a grandparent might have, one moment enlivened by the child, before pondering that the little life newly born will still be growing when she herself is ... what? Gone? *Nothing?*

In the final couplet, Slessor's truth appears, stripped of foolish delusion. Time is as heartless as the yachts which did not stop and did not care. Time, which seemed elegant and beautiful, is in fact merely indifferent. The lexical chain of 'down', 'dies' and 'rots' exposes what Slessor believes is the human folly of exceptionalism in nature. It seems as if the curtain of nihilism has finally and irrevocably closed over any hope to which Slessor might have, even momentarily, clung.

But then there is 'Beach Burial' and suddenly it seems as if the very shoreline of Slessor's philosophical geography has been radically reshaped.

In 'Beach Burial', Slessor sees irony in men sharing death as a result of a military confrontation in which they were momentarily on opposing sides. Unlike the previous

poems, Slessor's meditation on mortality here is a selfless one: where 'Gulliver' and 'Out of Time' offer personae who rail and resist, suggesting Slessor's own fury at human evolution's ultimate betrayal of human agency by which we are conscious of our natural supremacy but utterly unable to take charge of our mortal existence. Here, Slessor writes lovingly of the fallen sailors, finding nobility in mortal brotherhood.

As we know, the poem pertains to World War Two, and to Australian, Allied and German troops fighting in and around the Western Desert of Egypt. Camps on the Mediterranean Coast might often find the bodies of drowned men washed up on the beaches. Often only their uniforms lent any hint of identity and the men were buried, without discrimination, in the sandy foothills of the beach.

Whereas a poet like Wilfred Owen, in the earlier war, might have accentuated the violence of combat, 'Beach Burial' is one of the kindest poems set in war that one could imagine. Slessor begins his poem in a tone of compassion and calm peace: 'Softly and humbly to the Gulf of Arabs'. The rocking rhythm of the line 'At night they sway and wander in the waters far under' has a feeling of a lullaby, and it is possible Slessor intended no image to disturb the relatives of the men who may eventually read the poem.

Between the sob and clubbing of gunfire
Someone, it seems, has time for this,
To pluck them from the shallows and bury them in
burrows
And tread the sand upon their nakedness;
And each cross, the driven stake of tidewood,
Bears the last signature of men,
Written with such perplexity, with such bewildered
pity, ...



Kenneth Slessor, AWM. Source: <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/resources/media/image/awm-001830>

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Slessor employs his beloved musicality of language to evoke an elegiac tenderness. In the line, 'Between the sob and clubbing of the gunfire', he achieves both an onomatopoeic effect – 'sob and clubbing' sounds like the distant boom of cannons which is precisely descriptive – while at the same time suggesting the grieving personification of the gunfire, which weeps ('sob') for its own carnage ('clubbing'). There is a further near-assonance in the sounds of 'sob', 'club' and 'gun' which keeps harmony in the line and contributes to the compassionate tone.

Furthermore, Slessor seems touched to witness the charity of some unknown individuals who bury the dead; the harmonious echo of 'shallows' and 'burrows' further contributes to the tone of peace which attends the poem like a consoling perfume. But then Slessor – no sentimentalist – turns a small corner with the harshness of sounds in 'And tread the sand upon their nakedness' and the exposed helplessness of the men's mortality begins to churn disturbance in the soundscape of the poem. This disturbance grows in 'driven stake of tidewood'. The 'perplexity' and the 'bewildered pity' he attributes to the anonymous men who buried the dead is Slessor's own perplexity and bewilderment; so much so that, soon, he begins to doubt even the efficacy of his own instruments, words. In the third and fourth stanza, Slessor allegorises the possible ephemerality of language itself:

The words choke as they begin –

'Unknown seaman' – the ghostly pencil
Wavers and fades, the purple drips,
The breath of the wet season has washed their inscriptions
As blue as drowned men's lips,

Momentarily, we are returned to familiar Slessor territory: we recall the evanescence of memory in 'Wild Grapes' where people and experiences are forgotten by the movement of time. What will be left of our human experiences, he has pondered before – now, what will be left of these very words with which he ponders?

Slessor moves smoothly to his final meditation and delivers a brief humanistic sermon:

Dead seamen, gone in search of the same landfall,
Whether as enemies they fought,
Or fought with us, or neither; the sand joins them
together,
Enlisted on the other front.

To Slessor, the sailors, regardless of what national side they had represented in war, are also enlisted as human beings together on the common and shared horizon between existence in this world and the alternative, which to the atheistic Slessor is non-existence, *nothing*. The treatment of this mystery here is quite different from what we have encountered before in the poems.

In a self-entitled, self-absorbed way, Slessor's 'Gulliver' demanded a hangman as a form of ultimate rescue, with no apparent contemplation of the consequences of what he was asking for. Slessor's Marsden superciliously envisioned the afterlife as nothing more than an extension of the hell he endured here on Earth. Our last vision of the drowning swimmer (who is all of us) in 'Out of Time' – although he seems to be speaking from beyond the grave – is actually the remains of him here on Earth, rotting in an indifferent cosmos. They are all bleak endings, and bear witness to the human condition as a despairing tragedy.

This is not the feeling at the conclusion of 'Beach Burial'. For one thing, Slessor's respect for the sacrifice of the sailors prevents him from writing the poem in self-entitled rage. Their loss is neither imagined nor fictionalised: it is real, and yet it is ennobling. It is also authentically humbling. The care of those who buried them is also redemptive. It is as if the nature of the poem itself, which in this instance was reportorial, released Slessor from his own morbid fixation with the banalities of cosmic imprisonment. So many lives washing up onto the shore, small themselves but together immense in spiritual effect, seem to have inverted Slessor's perspective: the enormity of his Gulliver's self-absorption may have been the actual cause of that man's existential struggle, whereas the selflessness of a multitude of tiny warriors appears to release a vision in Slessor, if not of a divine universe, at least one which can draw forth – ironically and mysteriously – from an *actual* struggle, a sense of a shared universal peace.

In the PBS series *Closer to Truth*, host Robert Kuhn asked if *something* could come from *nothing* and, if so, did the *something* have intrinsic value. Much of Slessor's poetry seems to question the inherent value of the universe. Strangely, however, Slessor's poetic exploration of the problem was paused after 'Beach Burial' for quite some years and we can only speculate why; yet it is interesting to contemplate whether one dimension of his pause grew from what he had witnessed in the Gulf of Arabs, and what he had been able to make of it. Perhaps by the time he wrote 'Beach Burial', a more complex question may have presented itself to the poet: could *nothing* really be the destiny of *something* when, in the *something* of these men's lives, and even more so in their death, there could be found both love and beauty of such profound value?



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Investing in female voices: Teaching *The dictionary of lost words*

Madeleine Conn, Loreto Normanhurst

Let me give you, let me share with you, the City of Invention. For what novelists do (I have decided, for the purposes of your conversion) is to build Houses of the Imagination, and where houses cluster together there is a city. And what a city this one is, Alice! It is the nearest we poor mortals can get to the Celestial City: it glitters and glances with life, and gossip, and colour, and fantasy: it is brilliant, it is illuminated, by day by the sun of enthusiasm and by night by the moon of inspiration. It has towers and pinnacles, its commanding heights and its swooning depths: it has public buildings and worthy ancient monuments, which some find boring and others magnificent. It has its central districts and its suburbs, some salubrious, some seedy, some safe, some frightening. Those who founded it, who built it, house by house, are the novelists, the writers, the poets. And it is to this city that the readers come to admire, to learn, to marvel and explore.

Letters To Alice On First Reading Jane Austen, Fay Weldon

Akin to Weldon's fictitious Aunt Faye writing to her niece Alice on the importance of reading Austen, we English teachers are real estate agents.

We climb the great *Castle Shakespeare* and the edifices in its shadow, hauling up potential buyers one step at a time; we saunter through the back alleys, turning on lanterns as we go, and give tours of three storey, double-brick houses on the main drag. But where to lead them, now? How to entice our clients to return without us, through the back doors and trap doors, in search of the attic?

We consider the layout of each prospective property: how solid its foundations, how ornate or bare its furnishings, the view from the rooftop, where our buyers have already invested, and what they could be in the market for now.

The variable that has plagued me lately is the one concerning the builder.

Despite working in an all-girls school, blu-tacking a set of 'Badass Female Writers' posters to my classroom walls and keeping my students in my reading loop of Garner, Atwood and Rooney alongside Wilde, McEwan and Orwell, my students consistently default to *he* in their comprehension responses. Interestingly, among the texts offered for the Close and Critical Studies of Literature in the HSC prescriptions, female authors make up two of the seven composers offered in the Standard course, and two of the twelve composers offered in the Advanced course. As we know, it is in these modules that the module statements place emphasis on the study of 'substantial literary texts' and encourage students to make judgements on their ongoing 'value', 'significance' and 'integrity'. Therein lies an implicit message for our dear clients.

Considering our text choices are already layered in a fragile tower of course requirements, do we need to consider gender in our property portfolios?

To provide students with genuine opportunities to understand the *diverse ways texts represent personal and public worlds* as well as the *cultural assumptions* in texts, we should turn the volume up on a range of voices in our classrooms and explore these in the form of substantial texts. When we fall into the box-ticking trap of a poem here and a speech there, the message to students is clear: some perspectives are worth more of our time than others.

In the hope of inspiring the introduction of more female builders to our classrooms, below is a brief tour of a relatively new residence which is worth investing in for your Stage 5 classrooms. Before we step through the doors of this novel, it is worth noting that there are, of course, many impressive female estates in the city: their gates are adorned with copper plaques that read Austen, Bronte, Woolf, etc., who are well worth our time, and whose enduring value you will already be aware of and don't need laid out again here. Rather, this is a house that is both within reach of all our first home buyers and a worthwhile stepping stone for those on the precipice of the more canonical feminine monuments.

The dictionary of lost words by Pip Williams (2020)

Set across the span of 1886–1989, Williams' novel is about the power, and power imbalances, inherent within our language. Esme, the daughter of one of the lexicographers working on the first *Oxford English Dictionary*, collects words deemed unworthy for inclusion in the dictionary, a task which entangles her with women from all corners of the hierarchy. Esme's narrative collides with the women's suffrage movement and the First World War, though her inner world is the centrepiece in an unexpected and lyrical tale about the wonder of words and their place in shaping our experiences.

Investing in female voices: Teaching *The dictionary of lost words*

In this novel, words are both the concrete footings, dug down into the earth, and the ivy creeping up the brickwork. Words are played with, stolen, gifted, feared, discovered, debated, cherished and tugged into stories exchanged before the reader. The slips used to document words for the dictionary, and to collect words which won't make the grade, personify words as a tangible force. This force expands and contracts with Williams' protagonist; the naivety of Esme in the beginning is mirrored by the representation of words as magic: words hold the power to define ideas and identities. This representation evolves with Esme to an exploration of the way words can be paradoxically cathartic and inadequate as wartime and motherhood render words futile and men mute.

Through her motif of words, Williams presents her audience with a close-up of the way convention reigns over Esme and those who surround her. Williams' characterisation embodies the disparate ways individuals navigate the conventions of language: some value tradition, others practicality, some look to conserve, others to challenge. These disparate responses to language mirror the disparate responses to social convention; Williams skilfully presents a range of competing perspectives on parenthood, education, marriage, suffrage and authority as valid. She asks her audience to contemplate the tension between convention and change which emerges where these ideas intersect.

These different social institutions allow Williams to portray loss as a dynamic force which evokes both empathy and hope in the reader. Loss is manifested for Esme to traverse in ways we don't anticipate, and Williams' intimate narration makes us privy to the way loss seeps out of Esme's narrative to colour those who surround her. In a work of alluring symmetry, emotional loss is echoed by the loss of words. If students can peek into the living room through this window of loss, their understanding of the female experience will be expanded and complicated.

The progress of the dictionaries and their aftermath, both the official *Oxford English Dictionary* and Esme's *Dictionary of Lost Words*, run parallel to Esme's story and Williams cleverly punctuates the turning points with words which resurface with new meaning. *Bondmaid*, for instance, is the first word discovered under the sorting bench and pocketed by a young Esme in the opening pages of the novel. She sounds out each letter and describes the definition poignantly as a 'tangle of thread'. Years later, when the word is reported as missing from the OED, Esme comprehends the definition: *a slave girl or bonded servant, or someone who is bound to serve 'till death*. This definition disturbs Esme, who realises it applies to her own beloved maid, Lizzie, and claims the word 'shouldn't exist. It should be obscure and unthinkable. It should be

a relic.' In the final chapters, Esme understands that the loss of a word does not equate to the loss of the notion it represents. Esme rewrites the definition: *bonded for life by love, devotion or obligation* with a supporting quote from Lizzie herself, giving her agency for the first time in the novel. In this way, Williams cyclical treatment of words underscores her commentary on the intersection of language and reclamation.

Try this

- Have students determine their own purpose statement for the novel using the *idea, opinion, justification, qualification* process.

For example:

Idea: words

Idea and opinion: words are powerful

Idea, opinion and justification: words are powerful because they give meaning to experience

Idea, opinion, justification and qualification: words are powerful because they give meaning to experience, although some experiences render words futile.

Setting

The narrative moves between the Scriptorium, the library, the printing press, the theatre, the pub, the market, the kitchen and finally the infirmary, each of which comes to symbolise a different linguistic stakeholder. The way words are wielded and withheld in these spaces invites us to consider the way they shape and reflect power structures. The Scriptorium is crafted as a motif and marks the shifts in Esme's life.

Try this

- Compare the descriptions of the Scriptorium in the opening, middle and end of the novel.
- Have students write an analysis of this setting as a motif which traces the changes in Esme's worldview.

Structure

The novel is told chronologically and organised into six parts with a prologue and epilogue. Each part is named according to the section of the dictionary being put together in that time period. For example, *Part 1: 1887–1896, Batten – Distrustful*. The epilogue is a significant jump forward in time (60 years) and shifts the focus to the aftermath of the dictionary, and the issues with lost languages in Australia.

Investing in female voices: Teaching *The dictionary of lost words*

Try this

- Have students choose one section and write an analysis of how the title of that section extends or challenges the ideas explored within it.
- Have students write a paragraph which analyses how the epilogue influences the audience's understanding of one idea raised in the rest of the novel.

Epistolary structure

Letters are used to characterise the relationships in Esme's world and the ways these change as she does. She discovers letters between her father and late mother, she receives letters from her husband while he is at war and from her Aunt Ditte, a forward thinking, educated, unmarried woman who contributes to the dictionary. The letters Esme writes in return are alluded to but not included, an omission that enables Williams to converse with her readers directly about the issues topical at that point in the novel.

Try this

- Compare at least two letters from Ditte and have students identify the stylistic features employed by Williams to craft a distinctive character voice.
- Conduct a Socratic circle about one idea in the novel. Have students craft a letter from a minor character to Esme, taking care to craft a sustained voice and imagine that character's perspective on the topic.

Allusion

Williams draws on some purposefully chosen literary allusions throughout the novel. She references Chaucer, Dickens, Tennyson, Shakespeare, Brooke, etc., and the authority of these names, which often appear as sources for words for inclusion in the *Oxford Dictionary*, are contrasted with the names of the women Esme attributes her definitions to. Williams presents these names to incite an inquiry into why some sources are considered more authoritative than others.

Try this

- Discuss the significance of the disparate receptions to Tilda's performance of *A Doll's House*, which was cancelled after the opening night, to her performance of *Much Ado About Nothing*, which was a sold-out season.
- Revisit Ditte's letter in the chapter titled 'August 1901' and have students plan a response to the following question:
'All words are not equal' – Ditte Thompson.
To what extent does Williams' representation of language in the novel support this statement?



Two suffragettes, England 1900. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Collaboration

Williams offers a nuanced insight into the lives of women at the turn of the century from the unrest which fuelled the women's' suffrage movement in England to their everyday lives which the First World War loomed over. These contexts complement the Stage 5 History syllabus where *The Making of the Modern World* unit will offer students and teachers genuine opportunities to make meaningful cross-curricular connections.

Try this

- Discuss the significance of Gareth carrying the poems of Rupert Brooke to the frontlines and revisit his final letter to Esme. Have students turn this letter into a poem about experiences on the frontlines using the blackout poetry technique.
- Discuss which historical perspectives students think are most valuable, and why.
- Have students map Esme's narrative against a timeline of significant world events.

Extend

- Outline the concept of intersectional feminism and have students complete a Socratic circle which discusses the novel through this lens.

Conclusion

The literary city is vast and in a state of perpetual expansion. We all have our favourite avenues and go-to architects, but good real estate agents should stay on top of the market. I hope this has inspired an inventory of your current portfolio and shone a light on one prospective dwelling that offers a complex female perspective substantial enough to warrant a close study.

We need English, but do we need the HSC?

Raju Varanasi, John Fischetti and Max Smith,
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Across Australia and around the world new forms of summative assessment are emerging to gauge readiness for post-secondary opportunities for high school completers. In New South Wales, the Shergold Report on 'Learner Pathways' (Education Council, 2020) is one example. All educators support strong literacy and numeracy skills for students through year 12. However, with the STEM initiatives of the past decade, English teachers have wondered about the value of high school English, particularly senior English. Our study attempted to predict HSC scores for Year 11 students before they took their Year 12 courses. Our conclusion is that we do need English, but we do not need the HSC in its current form.

Our study encompassed ten years of HSC student data for about 10,000 students in one New South Wales school system across 14 HSC courses (Fischetti, Smith & Varanasi, 2020). We analysed 41 variables over a student's educational journey. Using machine learning algorithms, we ran multiple analyses of the data and found that 17 variables were more prominent (statistically significant) in accurately predicting Year 12 performance. Using students' demographic data, Year 11 attendance, Year 9 NAPLAN scores in all areas, Year 11 subject choices and Year 12 course selections, we were able to predict the HSC scores with an overall model accuracy of over 93%, using root mean square error (RMSE) as the accuracy measure (Varanasi, forthcoming).

Variables for past student data used in the model included are country of birth, number of siblings, days in Australia, attendance rate, number of suspensions, religious affiliation, gender, socio economic score of school (ICSEA); school attended; Indigeneity; disability; Year 9 Progressive Assessment Test (PAT) Reading score (in stanines); Year 9 NAPLAN Reading, Numeracy and Writing scores; language background; whether English Advanced or English Standard has been chosen as a level of study and other HSC courses selected.

We found we only needed 17 of the 41 variables available to predict HSC course results accurately at the completion of Year 12. These included a student's demographic and background information (such as how long he or she has lived in Australia and the school's ICSEA index), Year 9 NAPLAN scores in reading, numeracy and writing, their school, HSC subject choices at the beginning of Year 11 and Year 11 attendance.

What we learnt as insights from the study are:

- There is a strong correlation between English course selection and levels of achievement across the HSC: English Advanced students are very likely to do better in the HSC not only at English Advanced but also in

other HSC courses, even if their PAT reading levels are at lower stanine levels 4 or 5. We found that most students at a given stanine level in Year 9, who enrol in English Advanced, have higher HSC marks overall. If we include moderation and scaling effects (usually a multiplier for more difficult subjects), students are likely to end up with better ATAR too.

- Similar insights can be gleaned from NAPLAN Reading scores and performance in several HSC subjects. In science subjects such as Chemistry, Physics and Biology, and in humanities subjects such as Ancient History, Modern History and Business Studies, the HSC marks do not rise significantly with NAPLAN Reading scores beyond the same threshold score of 500. However, those who had above who chose Advanced scored better. In contrast, students with lower Year 9 NAPLAN Numeracy results do not get the same kind of boost in HSC performance if they opt for the more challenging Physics, Chemistry or Advanced Maths in Year 12.
- If students have done well in literacy aspects of their Year 9 NAPLAN assessments and if their attendance is good in Year 11, they are more likely to do well across all of their HSC courses. Higher reading proficiency propels students across all HSC scores whereas numeracy influences science and other mathematically based courses more.
- It is important to note that the model does not consider any of the Year 11 or Year 12 school-based assessments as input variables. The intent is to check if we are able to predict two full years ahead so that subject choice can be made in a more informed manner.

Hence, we can summarise that by the end of Year 11 we know almost with 93% model accuracy how well New South Wales individual students will perform on their state's senior school exams.

We need English, but do we need the HSC?

The model

The model is chosen from a packaged machine learning platform that uses validated algorithms for predictive analytics using advanced statistics and artificial intelligence to identify patterns that may be hard to recognise by humans from large data sets. As more and more input variables are added/deleted, the model is fine-tuned to make progressively more accurate predictions. This all happens real time, comparing the full raft of alternative statistical models, and at levels of speed and complexity well beyond scope of traditional predictive statistics (Shmueli, G. & Koppius, O, 2009)

Predictive analytics additively links and compares the effects of multiple data sources held by schools and school systems about the progression of students over time. These sources synthesise different kinds of data to reveal current and emerging trends and predict future performance. For example, the HSC master dataset is blended from several datasets from the student information system, assessment and reporting systems and some external data sources such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) and Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

The case for predictive analytics is not about 'measurement' just for the sake of comparison but about 'judgement' and driving the quality of the decisions and guidance we can provide to teachers in supporting their students (Mandinach, E. B. & Jimerson, J. B, 2016).

Future of HSC

The prime purpose of the HSC is to use the cumulative exam results to convert to a tertiary admission ranking (ATAR) that is used to facilitate university entry. But our data reveal we do not need the Year 12 examinations to determine the HSC results and resultant ranking to set students on their post school pathway. And for those who do not have university aspirations, the HSC is already irrelevant. In addition, there are now multiple ways to be accepted into university, including early offers, portfolios, and Principals' recommendations. These make the HSC increasingly redundant.

We believe predictive analytics give us a way to replace the current Year 12 structure with more personalised pathways, and that will help prepare the whole student for their journey into the future. For an increasing number of students, the HSC and the process leading toward it are barriers to active engagement at a pivotal transition period.

Why would we set that student up for failure without a radically different approach to help them be successful? We do not need the HSC to affirm their success in Advanced English. We can tell them and all of those vested in their pathways and triumphs after schools just what their HSC band will be well before they take the course and the exam.

We propose dramatically to revise Year 12 with the help of predictive analytics. Our intent is to allow flexibility for each student to get ready for the next phase of their learning during Year 12. This includes opportunities to use Year 12 to engage in real-world projects, formal apprenticeships, TAFE or university certificates, study abroad (when that can occur again safely), going deeper into advanced courses of interest and providing new supports to promote success without dumbing things down.

Instead of using Year 12 to prepare for the exams, students can use it for broadening their experiences and honing on life and career aspirations. This approach refocuses the final year to an individualised journey that better prepares young people for Year 13 — whatever that may be for them.

Personalised pathways are currently the exception rather than the rule. Through these focussed experiences, Year 12 students can build unique evidence about their skills, knowledge and passions that take them into their future.

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Tim Winton's *Island Home*: Intersecting Worlds, genres and perspectives in a romance between writer and place

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An ideal text for the rural school classroom

Winton's *Island Home* has proven to be an engaging and effective choice for students who themselves have spent formative years in a non-urban setting. His anecdotes about surfing and encounters with arresting wilderness environments are highly relatable to the students' personal lived experience and his recounts of childhood interactions with nature also resonate and spark lively conversations in the classroom. Furthermore, Winton's conversational writing style makes the text accessible and engaging for students who might balk at more cerebral non-fiction works. Students soon realise that discursive and persuasive prose can be every bit as evocative, captivating and powerful as imaginative writing. Examining how Winton moves from the particular to the general, from personal to collective issues, and from reflective musing to persuasive appeals, empowers students to harness their own voices as writers. It positions them to reassess the capacity of personal writing to drive communal change and promote action on the issues that they themselves hold dear.

An Australian Romantic?

Although *Island Home* would be a useful inclusion in any pattern of study for Extension 1 Intersecting Worlds, it works very well when considered after students are familiar with British Romanticism and the prescribed Wordsworth poems. Winton's apprehension of the Australian landscape undoubtedly echoes certain Romantic ways of thinking, although the author himself appears to feel somewhat conflicted about this. His memoir fluctuates between acknowledging Romantic influences and repudiating them. Students can use a table (Figure 1) to evaluate just how Wordsworthian Winton's thinking is.

Colonial angst and Postcolonial remorse

Winton's Romanticism is, however, tempered by other influences. Repeatedly, he echoes colonial sentiments that emphasise the perils of the Australian landscape, a country of climatic extremes and a myriad of hidden dangers. Chapter 5's encounters with a wolf herring that leaves him bleeding and a blue-ringed octopus whose 'main weapon

is a neurotoxin twelve hundred times stronger than cyanide' (p. 69) are good examples. Yet, unlike his colonial forebears, Winton's brushes with danger and death are infused with a tone of reverential awe rather than fearful disgust. He views them as evidence that our natural world is powerful and endlessly mysterious; it should never be treated complacently.

On another level, however, Winton's emphasis on the scale and force of the natural environment does echo artistic forebears like D.H. Lawrence, who betrayed an anxiety about the insubstantiality of Anglo-European Australian settlement. Lawrence's protagonist in *Kangaroo* famously muses that 'the vast town of Sydney... didn't seem to be real, it seemed to be sprinkled on the surface of a darkness into which it never penetrated.'¹ Similarly, Winton refers to the 'thin and porous human culture through which the land slants in, seen or felt at every angle'(p. 14) and asserts that:

... Modern Australia has always been a permeable, contingent settlement ... the land twitches and ticks, forever threatening to foreground itself and take over the show. (p. 22)

D.H. Lawrence and subsequent writers feared that Australian civilisation would be engulfed by a landscape that actively resisted the colonial presence. For instance, Lawrence depicts his protagonist, Somers, spooked by a walk where he apprehends a 'presence', the 'roused spirit of the bush ... bidding its time with a terrible ageless watchfulness' as it contemplates the 'myriad intruding white men'.² Randolph Stow's child character in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* envisages sand dunes rising to engulf the sleepy town of Geraldton, and the recurring motif of ruins ominously suggests that civilisation has been forced into retreat by a wild, untameable environment.³

Yet Winton's memoir largely subverts this colonial narrative, emphasising that it is instead the landscape that is imperilled by indiscriminate suburban expansion and commercial development. Metaphors of war and battle abound in his description of Perth's growth, where piles of felled trees smoulder 'like a sacked city' amid air that is 'black with diesel smoke' (p. 35). Winton furthermore asserts that 'the ancient, life-giving Swan River is slowly dying' (p. 36), and cites toxic algal blooms, mass fish kills and diseased dolphins as evidence. Students reading

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Chapter 2 can evaluate the effectiveness of the violent verbs and dystopian imagery to persuasively assert an environmentalist agenda.

Hybrid form, perspectives and purpose

Subtitled 'A landscape memoir', the hybrid nature of *Island Home* is central to understanding its persuasive impact in advancing an ecocritical perspective. Harris points out that Winton's generic conflation of the geographical and autobiographical modes 'serves his purpose of encouraging Australians to learn to 'see' in ways more attuned to concepts of land and place.'⁴ Though, in the past, Winton's work has been criticised as perpetuating a masculinist, Anglo-centric worldview,⁵ these accusations should not be wielded against *Island Home*.⁶ The memoir repeatedly seeks to integrate indigenous perspectives surrounding notions of 'country', and advocates for their increased prominence in the national consciousness. 'White' and

'black' perspectives in Western Australia were not always at war, as Winton highlights the role of Noongar warrior Mokare in drawing 'the clumsy invaders into a relationship of mutual respect' with the land (p. 74). Throughout his memoir, Winton cites Aboriginal philosophers David Mowaljarlai and Bill Neidjie, refers to ancient fire regimes, reflects on Wandjina figures and includes an extended personal portrait of Ngarinyin elder Paul Chapman. Winton explicitly acknowledges his own 'ancestral shame for the dispossession of this country's first peoples' (p. 184) and declares that Aboriginal wisdom is our nation's 'most under-utilised intellectual and emotional resource'(p. 189). Students can evaluate the extent to which there are 'inconsistencies in Winton's outlook', as Lucashenko contends,⁷ and whether such contradictions represent a flawed way of thinking, or an honest attempt to represent the amalgam of contending influences within the memoirist's background and experience.

Figure 1: Winton and Romanticism

Element of Romanticism	Wordsworth	Winton
Idealisation of childhood experiences of the natural world	<p>'Ode'</p> <p>'It is not now as it hath been of yore;— Turn wheresoe'er I may, By night or day. The things which I have seen I now can see no more.'</p> <p>'My Heart Leaps Up': 'The child is father of the man'</p> <p>'Ode'</p> <p>'Mighty Prophet! Seer blest! On whom those truths do rest, Which we are toiling all our lives to find.'</p>	<p>Ch. 3</p> <p>'on hands and knees, on their naked bellies, they feel it with an immediacy we can scarcely recall as adults ... that didn't just make the world more comprehensible, but rendered it intimate, even sacred'(pp. 46–7)</p> <p>'Once we acquire the agency of adulthood we seem to spend a hell of a lot of time seeking out the gifts and instincts of our powerless childhood. Peculiar that we should have to <i>learn</i> to relax, <i>strive</i> to let go' (p. 49)</p>
Nature apprehended through sensory experience	<p><i>The Prelude</i></p> <p>'Oh! many a time have I, a five years' Child ... Made one long bathing of a summer's day, Bask'd in the sun, and plunged, and bask'd again ... or cours'd Over the sandy fields, leaping through groves Of yellow grunsel.'</p>	<p>Ch. 3</p> <p>'I had a feel for the blossom time of the wattle, the up-close leafiness of lichen ... I grant these sensations the status of knowledge' (p. 47)</p> <p>Repeated references to sense memories throughout the memoir</p>
Solitary time in nature as conducive to artistic creation	<p>'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey' repeated references to 'seclusion'</p> <p><i>The Prelude</i></p> <p>'while the sweet breath of heaven Was blowing on my body, felt within A corresponding mild creative breeze'</p>	<p>'I was happiest poking about alone' (p. 47)</p> <p>Ch. 6</p> <p>University breaks spent in nature, fascination with hermits & fringe dwellers:</p> <p>'I was interested in spiritual retreat and contemplation in nature, and susceptible to romanticised notions of solitude' (p. 108)</p>

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Transcendent and spiritual experiences found in nature	<p><i>The Prelude</i> (stealing a boat)</p> <p>'a huge peak ... As if with voluntary power Upreared its head ... And, growing still in stature, the huge Cliff Rose up between me and the stars, and still, With measur'd motion, like a living thing, Strode after me.'</p> <p>Vocabulary: blessing, messenger, miraculous, consecrate, holy, priestly robes</p> <p>'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey' 'serene and blessed mood' 'we are laid asleep in body and become a living soul' 'I, so long, a worshipper of Nature ... with far deeper zeal of holier love'</p>	<p>Ch. 4 Epiphany on a surfboard, recognising the natural world as 'a live system': 'Half of a young man's rebelliousness is the quest for a worthy force, something large to submit to ... what I needed most was the feeling of being monstered by a force beyond my control.' (pp. 59–60)</p> <p>Ch. 9 Mummified wallabies in a high mountain cave – prompts meditations on mortality and eternity. Vocabulary: 'reverence' 'mystical' 'sacred', 'sacramental' 'priestly caste'</p> <p>Ch. 10 'we live on the most spiritually potent continent imaginable' (p. 181).</p>
Memories of experiences in the natural world as a restorative.	<p>'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey' 'The picture of the mind revives again ... with pleasing thoughts That in this moment there is life and food For future years.'</p>	<p>Ch. 6 'All the rest of the day I catch myself peering greedily at everything, cataloguing, hoarding country, provisioning myself for the pending voyage'(p. 102)</p>

Suggested student activities

Here are a few ways in which *Island Home* can be used to supplement the Literary Worlds common module, and / or to enrich core skills and concepts developed in the English Advanced course:

- Students can use *Island Home* to build their own confidence in textual analysis and annotation. Challenge them to annotate the essays as they would texts in an Advanced Paper 1 reading task section – encourage them to make note of the recurring motifs, specific sensory images and language techniques, shifts in tone and register to achieve a persuasive purpose.
- Ask students to use sentence structures from the memoir as scaffolds for their own writing about a memorable encounter with place. Winton's specific nouns, verbs and adjectives should be substituted with ones that evoke their own personal experience. This will help them to better appreciate the role of syntax in creating effective discursive and persuasive writing.
- Use extracts from the memoir as stimulus texts for practise Literary Worlds responses – apply sample and past examination questions to them and ask students to respond critically and / or creatively. Several of the essays explore Winton's profession of writing, making them ideal material for Literary Worlds and / or Craft of Writing practice tasks.
- Ask students to compose their own autobiographical piece following Winton's style, beginning with a personal anecdote about one of their own memorable encounters in the natural world, followed by a 'zoom out' that elicits more generalised observations on a related issue. By pinpointing where and how Winton achieves shifts in tone, moving between discursive and persuasive voices, students can become more adept at manipulating their own language for a desired effect.
- Flannery asserts 'the self-portrait of Winton that emerges from *Island Home* is of a loner, a meticulous and patient observer, and a dedicated writer who is deeply enmeshed in his local environment.'⁸
Choose an extract from the memoir as a stimulus for students to compose an imaginative portrait of the writer in his landscape. Students could retell one of Winton's personal anecdotes from an omniscient perspective, or from the perspective of another individual. This exercise will help them to consolidate their own perspective of Winton, his views, and the role of his experiences in the natural world in his writing. They could experiment with intertextuality, reframing some of Winton's observations and assertions about the environment in the reimagined context.

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Extension 1 Exam preparation – viewing the text through the lens of the Intersecting Worlds syllabus rubric

Divide the elective description into a series of areas for investigation and have students create a collaborative document where they can combine their thoughts on elective elements. Add more columns to facilitate comparisons with other prescribed and related texts.

Intersecting Worlds element	<i>Island Home</i>
Intersection of human EXPERIENCE with the natural world	<p>Memoir aspect of the text – opening vignettes about family life, past experiences and personal encounters with the natural world. These stories propel his text into its more didactic elements as they drive his desire for conservation and a more intuitive reciprocal attitude towards the environment.</p> <p>Winton's personal experiences help establish his credibility and authority to argue for environmental protections.</p>
Intersection of human ACTIVITY with the natural world	<p>Evoked in the discursive essays in each chapter following from the personal vignettes. These often consider how human settlement, survival and society have impacted the natural world – e.g. the expanding suburbs, whaling in Albany; also leisure activities – tourism, air and car travel, 4-wheel driving in sand dunes etc.</p>
Diverse conceptualisations of Nature	<p>Winton acknowledges the diversity of perspectives through invoking binary oppositions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Western perspectives vs Indigenous views; 'territory' vs 'country' • Colonial mindset vs modern environmentalist • Romantic, mystical reverie vs realist physical apprehension of the natural world <p>Winton's identification of a change in popular attitudes over time; his contrasting of past values to present ones: e.g. from nature as a commodity to be harvested, to its value as a playground to be consumed through leisure activities – e.g. sight-seeing, 4WD, boating, outdoor adventure tourism.</p>
Complex relationships with natural worlds – identify paradoxes and contradictions in human attitudes and behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modern Australian enthusiasm for 'outdoors' life – but ironically such adventure tourism is increasingly insulated from the natural world (road trips occur in airconditioned SUVs etc.)
Other elective statements?	?

Some related text suggestions

While the syllabus does not require related texts to overlap with the prescribed texts in terms of content or ideas, offering students a selection of short, manageable Australian texts can help consolidate their understanding of concepts they encounter in *Island Home*.

Robert Drewe, 'The true colour of the sea'

This short story within Drewe's 2018 collection of the same name is a work of historical fiction, featuring a 19th century artist who becomes marooned on a remote island off the Western Australian coast. The representation of the ocean within this and other stories in Drewe's collection will also enrich the experience of students studying Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*.

Judith Wright – *Collected poems*¹⁰

Winton quotes a line from 'The Surfer' as one of his epigraphs to *Island Home*, but many other Wright poems also provide rich pickings for Intersecting Worlds students. 'Child and Wattle Tree' echoes Wordsworth's Romantic communion and metaphysical absorption of the self within the natural world, while 'At Cooloolah' is a powerful representation of the disruption to this sense of belonging caused by bloodshed and dispossession. 'The Killer', 'The Bushfire', 'The World and the Child' and 'Eroded Hills' are also worth considering.

Peter Skrzynecki – selected poems from *Old New World*¹¹ and *Appointment Northwest*¹²

Skrzynecki's years spent in a remote one-teacher school near Armidale, NSW, birthed some quite distinctive

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contemplations on the intersection of wild and rural Australian environs. Poems such as 'Wollomombi Falls', 'Weeping Rock', 'Jeogla', 'Moonbi Hills' 'A Drive in the Country' and the four 'Styx River' poems explore mystical contemplations of time and mortality through encounters between the self and nature. Skrzynecki's memoir *Appointment Northwest* covers similar material and offers further insight into the figure of the writer in the landscape.

Endnotes

- 1 Lawrence (1923, 2011) p. 8
- 2 Lawrence p. 10
- 3 Stow (1965) p. 5
- 4 Harris (2017)
- 5 See, e.g. criticisms identified by McCredden (2015) at pp. 323–325
- 6 Although some have tried – see for example Mathews (2019), pp. 645–6, who cites Melissa Lucashenko and Jessica White.
- 7 See Lucashenko, Melissa. 'I Pity the Poor Immigrant' (2017) cited by Mathews (2019) at p. 646.
- 8 Flannery (2015)
- 9 Drewe (2018)
- 10 Wright (2016)
- 11 Skrzynecki (2007)
- 12 Skrzynecki (2014)

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Reading to Write: a parody homage to Emily Dickinson

Philipa Tlaskal, Kogarah High School

I Started Early – Took my Pen –
And visited the Page –

The final scene of the recent hit Netflix series *The Chair* has Joon Li step down as head of the English Department of fictional Pembroke University and return to the adoring circle of her literature students. In her hand is a copy of Emily Dickinson's collected poems.

'What's with all the dashes?' they ask. And she leans against her desk, book in hand and begins. She has lost the battle to maintain the integrity of a literature department against a Dean who lauds the most popular course at Pembroke: Creative Writing 101.

'They want to produce content for their blogs,' he says.

The look on Joon Li's face says it all: how will they do that without learning from the masters?

While a parody is 'an imitation of the style of a particular writer, artist, or genre with deliberate exaggeration for comic effect,' this writing task does not have malicious intent. Its purpose is that of Hunter S. Thompson when he typed out the entirety of *The Great Gatsby*. He said that he wanted 'to feel what it feels like to write that well.'

Thompson's intent echoes Joon Li's feelings about our need to go back to other writers – very much in line with what I believe to be the impetus of the module Reading to Write. Through imitation we begin to feel the cadences of the author and the possibilities of writing as we enter a new role: we begin the process of moving from the role of reader to the role of writer. We parody and, in so doing, we pay homage as we learn from the masters. It was with this in mind that I developed a lesson for my Year 11 students using Emily Dickinson's poetry. One of the secrets to a good writing experience is a good reading experience which Dickinson certainly offers us.

My parody homage task invites a deep engagement with an Emily Dickinson poem, 'I Started Early, – took my Dog –' which involves a young woman's shocking experience with the sea, even though the iconic American poet never saw it herself. Unlike Dickinson, my students at a girls' high school close to Bondi Beach have regular and, in many cases, intense personal experiences of the sea. I began with an adaptation in a different mode – an animation¹ – which I suppose we may also regard as an imitation. A See/Think/Wonder thinking routine² can be used as a pretest of poetic devices they remember and lead into a discussion of the possible interpretations of the poem. The Poetry

Foundation³ also has a useful guide to the poem. Students enjoy her short sentences, dashes and slant rhyme ('Tell all the truth but tell it slant') and the freshness and humour of her poems that bely their vintage. She treats the themes of death, immortality, fear and pain but she treads lightly.

After drawing parallels between our lock-down life and Dickinson's largely isolated existence, a cloze of the original poem is introduced either on paper or online where they are freer to manipulate her verse. The brief is to manipulate the poem to reflect the personality of the Year 11 writer.

The end results were very good as students added their own personal stamp on the original text. By imitating, students engaged intimately with the whole text at the level of word, sentence, stanza and even punctuation.

I want to close with an example from one of the students – a keen surfer – and I think she got the Dickinson tone just right.

Original – 'I Started Early – Took my Dog' –

Substitute your own words for the underlined ones.
Maintain the rhyme.

I Started Early – Took my Dog –
And visited the Sea –
The Mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me –

And Frigates – in the Upper Floor
Extended Hempen Hands –
Presuming Me to be a Mouse –
Aground – upon the Sands –

But no Man moved Me – till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe –
And past my Apron – and my Belt
And past my Boddice – too –

And made as He would eat me up –
As wholly as a Dew
Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve –
And then – I started – too –

And He – He followed – close behind –
I felt His Silver Heel
Upon my Ankle – Then My Shoes
Would overflow with Pearl –

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Until We met the Solid Town –
No One He seemed to know –
And bowing – with a Mighty look –
At me – The Sea withdrew –

Student parody version

I started Early – Took my Board –

I started Early – Took my Board –
And visited the Sea –
The surfers on the Green Waves
Came out to look at me –

And Life Savers – in the Tower
Extended Helpin' Hands –
Presuming Me to be a Grommet –
Aground – upon the Sands –

But no Wave moved Me – till the Tide
Went past the simple Rope upon My Leg –
And past my Wettie – and Bikini
And past my Top Knot – too –

And made as He would eat me up –
As wholly as a Dew

Opon a Pandanus Sleeve –
And then – I started – too –

And He – He followed – close behind –
I felt His thundering Silver Heel
Opon my Aacle – Then My Suit
Would overflow with Pearl –

Until We met the Solid Town –Bondi
No One He seemed to know –
And bowing – with a Mighty look –
At me – The Sea withdrew –
And I was free to surf
upon the shallow shores

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/pe08.rla.genre.poetry.emilystart/i-started-earlytook-my-dog-by-emily-dickinson/>
- 2 http://www.pz.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/See%20Think%20Wonder_2.pdf
- 3 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69411/emily-dickinson-i-started-early-took-my-dog->



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The positives of remote learning: A teacher experience

Christine Sams, Scots All Saints College, Bathurst

Zooming through the sky was something superheroes did when I grew up. Now that wonderful onomatopoeia has taken on a life of its own in relation to schools and technology, with Zoom and other remote learning platforms hosting a different style of superhero: teachers working from home.

There are teachers who focus on the many daily challenges of using technology to teach students, often focusing in on the weaknesses or occasional failures relating to remote learning. This is unsurprising and often understandable, given the pace of the change that has occurred. However, I am not one of those teachers. If anything, one of my colleagues was somewhat surprised when she asked me gently over the phone how remote teaching was going and I replied, almost hesitating to admit it out loud: 'I'm really enjoying it.'

A few months after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic last year, renowned educational expert and Laureate Professor at University of Melbourne John Hattie said in a podcast interview with the NSW Department of Education:

It's kind of like an unplanned experiment as we've asked teachers to take on an incredible load and switch to a new way of teaching ... I'm pretty optimistic that we're going to make a full recovery from this, and in many cases, there is going to be even some benefit from what's happened.

More than one year on, Hattie's words have been ringing true in my household. Of course, I would prefer to be working face-to-face with all of our wonderful students, particularly the Year 12s who have been heroic in their own right. However, there have been at least five key benefits of working from home while teaching eight classes of secondary school students via my computer.



Unsplash image by Nick Morrison

In no particular order, these are the best parts of remote teaching:

1. Improved ICT skills

This is a no-brainer but you definitely need a 'yes-brain' to adapt to new technology with enthusiasm. English teachers of all ages and experience – some who were previously hesitant about online platforms – have adopted and used the latest forms of technology to access their virtual classrooms, staff meetings, mentor meetings and other school events. Zooming is a way of life and, yes, it may have been a Year 10 student who initially told me to use the 'sound-share' button for screen-sharing but with a few tweaks it has been an invigorating experience to keep up with the pace of change. All teachers are realising now the power of ICT-based learning. Surely it will continue to form the basis for an increasing amount of interactive activities when we are all back face-to-face (or should that be mask-to-mask?) in the classroom.

2. Presentation skills

Do you ever have those mornings where you have a half-eaten breakfast, you are in a rush to drop your child to the bus stop while juggling a handbag, a laptop and three envelopes of marked papers and you are not entirely certain whether your 'matching' work jacket is the black one or the navy one because you grabbed it so fast out of the cupboard? Just asking for a friend, as they say. Okay, so we all like to keep pretty organised most of the time and most teachers I know are on top of their schedules. However, I surely cannot be the only English teacher in lockdown who has had more time to work on their presentation skills – both in appearance and manner – while running my virtual classroom. There is nowhere to hide when you are running a lesson for 25 students and even if the students turn up looking a little more tired than usual for a Monday morning, you need to be polished and prepared. Teaching onscreen has been a fantastic reminder of how much presentation counts – and I have taken more time with it, simply because the time is there. It feels good to be as well-presented as possible, not only in the online word but in the real world too.

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3. Behaviour management

I love all of my classes, I really do. It has been a wonderful discovery while teaching to realise that each class has its own distinct personality. However, as all teachers know, sometimes those classes with more 'exuberant', 'loud' or 'active' personalities can lead to challenging situations in terms of behaviour management. What is truly extraordinary about teaching online is just how much the class dynamic changes on screen. Depending on any given lesson, the loud kids seem a lot quieter. Shy kids are speaking up. Students who seem to coast along are suddenly determinedly sending over their work and seeking lots more teacher feedback. Others who tend to shine in both environments are happily allowing time for others to bring their voices to the fore too. This has a wonderful and noticeable impact on the positivity and the connectivity of the teaching.

4. Lesson pacing

As a born chatterbox, I am one of those teachers who needs to carefully remind myself that the students need *time* to do the work. Teaching via a computer screen has amplified the need to be very aware of timing and structure in relation to all lessons. Of course, it is very important to have a platform for teacher-to-student discussion but teaching remotely has also given teachers

an opportunity to measure their speaking time versus the activities provided in class. It means work can be moderated – either intensified or reduced – depending on the student group. I have no doubt the insights gained from my lessons conducted online will influence the pacing of my classroom activities when I return to the school environment.

5. Teamwork

One of the highlights of remote teaching has been the level of teamwork between colleagues in our English department. We have a wonderful group of teachers and while we all work together generally throughout the school year, the ways in which colleagues have pulled together to assist each other with resources and tips for various lessons has been truly heartening. Without the well-meaning distractions of a fast-paced school day on site, we have also taken time to say 'thank you' a lot more often to each other too which has been really uplifting. It is certainly something I hope to do more of once we are back at school.

So there you have it. There is not a piece of Lycra in sight but a list of all the terrific things that have come from zooming our way into an unprecedented era of education as English teachers.

Bravo to us all.



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Discursive Writing: Or, how not to tame the shaggy beast

Jane Sloan

Mary Cappello points out that non-fiction is a genre 'that allows for untoward movement, apposition, and assemblage, that is one part conundrum, one part accident, and that fosters a taste for discontinuity.' (*Lecture*, 1)

I imagine this may be deeply appealing to apprentice writers, as it is to me and no doubt to others who struggle, for whatever reasons—in my case, because of a memory hole that sucks away the stringy matter of connectivity—to maintain sufficient focus to neatly weave together a couple of threads or to forge a cohesive argument.

Freed from the strictures of the formal essay, we're given the license—if we are able to permit ourselves—to track our wayward thoughts the way one would track the spoor of some animal in the wild, intent not on capturing it, but rather being attentive to the clues and signs of its passage. (And I think it no accident that one of the great practitioners of the art, Annie Dillard, has spent decades closely observing the creatures whose world she shares.)

But as we well know, tracing the meander of our thoughts is no easy feat; in sloughing off the tight skin of reasoning and proof, who knows what we might encounter.

Each time I read Hugh Raffles's 'My Nightmares,' a perfect excursion from munificence to horror, I shudder. To tell you that I use it when teaching anaphora, cumulation, inclusive pronouns, antithesis, pace and parallelism, is perhaps to confess to an attempt to contain my own fears.



Bee swarm: Source: <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/39/Essaimage-02.JPG>

Here's how it begins:

For a long time I thought only of bees. They crowded out all the others, and this book became just for them. A book of bees in all their bee-ness. All the physical capacities, all the behavioural subtleties, all the organisational mysteries, all the comradeship. All that golden beeswax lighting up the ancient world. All that honey sweetening medieval Europe. All those bees, timeless templates for the most diverse human projects and ideologies. Bees took over.

But then a plague of winged ants invaded my living room, and after they left I began thinking of locusts and then beetles—all those beetles!—and then caddis flies and crane flies and vinegar flies and botflies and dragonflies and mayflies and houseflies and so many other flies. [...] And I remembered what we all already know: that insects are without number and without end, that in comparison we are no more than dust, and that this is not the worst of it.

There is the nightmare of the fecundity and the nightmare of the multitude. There is the nightmare of uncontrolled bodies and the nightmare of inside our bodies and all over our bodies. There is the nightmare of unguarded orifices and the nightmare of vulnerable places. There is the nightmare of foreign bodies in our bloodstream and the nightmare of foreign bodies in our ears and our eyes and under the surface of our skin.

There is the nightmare of swarming and the nightmare of crawling.

[...]

(*'My Nightmares'*, 201–2)

You can see why I've quoted at length and, of course, it doesn't end there.

Mary Ruefle's *Madness, Rack and Honey*, one of the most brilliant and breath-taking discursive collections I've read, has a chapter titled 'On Secrets' where she points out that 'the human mind hides from itself.' (90) But rather than implying this is an impediment, in acknowledge those deeper concealments, she can then go on to cast out threads, like a spider spinning its sticky silks then flying with the breeze - much like the spider in Jonathan Edwards's marvellous letter of 1723, which he describes 'turning his taile into the wind to dart out a thred . . . , by and by the Spider lept into the air, and the thread mounted her up swiftly.... I found the Air filled with young

Discursive Writing: Or, how not to tame the shaggy beast

and old sailing on their threads, and undoubtedly seizing Gnats and other Insects in their passage; there being often as manifest signs of slaughter, as leggs, wings of Flyes &c. on these threads, as in their webbs! The letter also contains a diagram showing precisely how the spiders release the threads from their spinnerets.

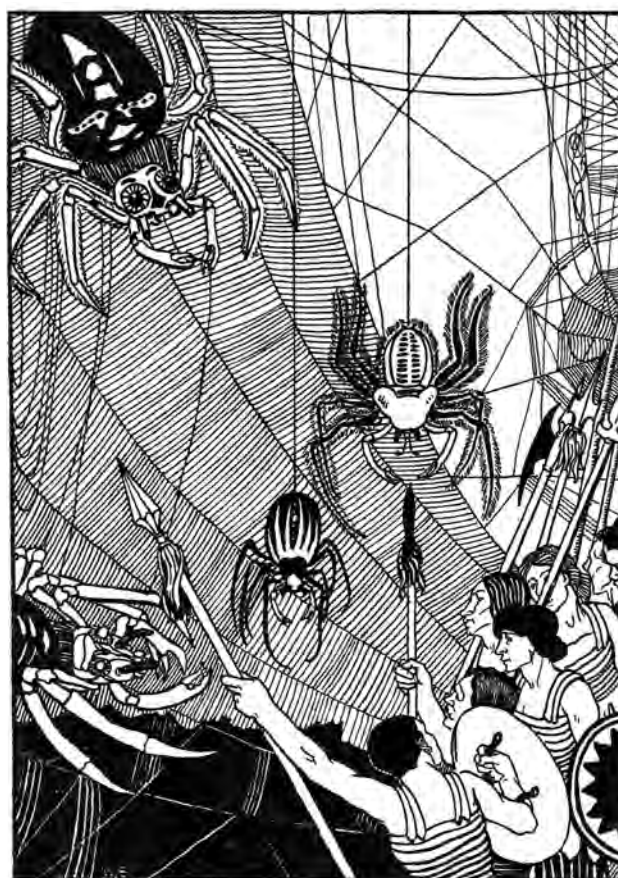
Might this be something we desire in our discursive writing: dropping, swinging, catching, spinning, flying?

When discussing discursive writing, I sometimes use the metaphor of the trawling net—its structure akin to a web’s—because, weighted and heavy, as it is drawn across the ocean floor, it is indiscriminate in what it captures: fish, invertebrates, crustaceans, coral. Destructive though this practice is, the comparison is helpful because it allows us to envisage how the mind works. Once there’s an inkling of inspiration—from a conversation overheard, an encounter glimpsed, a few words in a newspaper, a line from a song, a scene framed by the window of a car, bus or train—all sorts of associations occur, but the trick is to take the time to inspect and ponder what’s caught in the net rather than pre-emptively tossing things back into the water thinking they’re ugly, inedible, ridiculous, or unprofitable.

As Steve Minot reminds us, ‘Written with a special concern for language,’ (*Literary Nonfiction*, 1) this genre foregrounds voice and style and is much more about disciplining the sentence than it is about controlling the subject matter. I find teaching discursive writing invaluable because the personal essays I often choose bear so little resemblance to the formal essays we compel our students to write in order to succeed in their exams which, in their turn, bear little to no resemblance to the literary criticism to be found in either the academe or the public domain that I wish we aspired to.

What a surprise it is when we read Charlie Fox’s ‘Self-Portrait as a Werewolf’, which takes the form of ‘a dumb fan letter’ to his ‘dear Beast’ (‘Self-Portrait’, 16), a creature familiar to many of us from all manner of representations. Intimate, chatty, Fox looks back to his past to explain his obsession, to the ‘fear speedballing with wonder’ and being ‘electrified inside’, which he identifies as ‘the monster feeling’ (‘Self-Portrait’, 16) he compulsively sought after when reading, looking at comic books, and watching films.

Taking seriously the idea that ‘monsters cause trouble, they disturb definitions, they discombobulate what we think we mean. All of which is brave and wild, not to mention something like art’s task’ (‘Self-Portrait’, 21), Fox plays fast and loose with register, reference, and confession in his freewheeling paean to the transgressive possibilities the beast inspires. He tracks it through the thickets of contemporary pop culture back through to Nosferatu and Dracula, and then to those fairy tale and mythological figures who came before them, hiding deep



Spider battle, William Strang 1894 illustration
Source: Wikimedia Commons

in the shadows, and who underpin our depictions of what we find both fearful and desirable: the misshapen, the vulgar, the ferocious, the mysterious, the unknown, the transformative. In doing so, he shares with us the many pleasures that come from welcoming confusion and wildness rather than facing down or trying to master what disturbs and discombobulates. In this, he reminds us of what the best kind of writing is: an encounter with the Other, be that the creature in the woods or the shaggy beast within.

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Writing creatively and effectively

Tess Moon, William Clark College

There are lots of ways to teach creative writing, and it's important to stress to students that while stories certainly should contain key ingredients, there isn't one perfect formula for crafting a narrative.

However, for students who struggle to get their heads around the abstract or the 'looseness' associated with writing creatively, it can be challenging to understand how textual concepts can and should work together to tell a compelling tale. I have found that younger writers often stare at a creative prompt for an eon before despairing that they 'don't know how to start'.

We don't want to restrict students' freedom to approach imaginative writing flexibility; however, there are certainly step-by-step processes we can teach students as a launch pad for building confidence in knowing how to start every time. Once they've mastered the recipe and are familiar with the ingredients, then students can start to experiment with the order.

The following is a step-by-step process I designed for my Year 8 class, studying a Fantasy/Steampunk novel and learning to write imaginatively in the genre.

For example:

How to start writing: setting, narrative perspective, genre, imagery.

Setting should be its own character, alive, textured, and bursting with possibility. Opening a narrative with a concrete **where** is essential for young writers. For those who struggle to visualise, choose a visual stimulus to work from and consider: what kind of mood / atmosphere / personality can be inferred about the setting from the image? The personality of a setting can be decoded by observing the following criteria: *colour, lighting, the time of day*, and the *activities and events* of the scene. Students can make a few bullet-points on each element and then discuss in pairs to build ideas. These bullet-points can then be used to structure a clear opening description of the setting.

Mention **what** the setting is (i.e., a city) early on. Bring it to life through metaphor or simile or personification instantaneously. Use the third person to do this.

STRUCTURE OF THE STORY	EXAMPLE
Where is the story happening? (Suggest mood/ atmosphere and personality through a metaphor)	<i>The city was a grumbling hive of activity.</i>
What can be seen? (Consider colour, lighting, time, activities and events)	<i>The afternoon crept towards evening, much in the same way that the season crept towards winter. Industrious chimneys puffed plumes of smoke into a sky mottled grey and heaped with clouds. These were the colour of bruises, blue and purpling. Above the city reared the central clocktower, its turrets sprouting several steel tubes and gears. An airship chugged through the sky slowly, like a whale in the sea.</i>
What can be smelled or/ and heard? Action through senses: allow the verbs to do the work	<i>Noise filled the city. Motorbikes rumbled, coins tinkled between hands, and conversation hummed. There was also the usual clanking and clonking of machines and factories doing their work of turning the world metal. The city smelled like its usual perfume, of burning metal, soot, and chimney smoke.</i>

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Once setting and perspective has been established in the opening line, the next step is to describe what can be seen. The tendency for younger writers is to muddle descriptions of the senses into a few short sentences, which often truncates writing. To tease out the setting further, it's helpful to describe visual imagery first (the visible world) and particularly toy with lighting and colour to explore the vibrancy/mood/atmosphere of the location. Then, shift the descriptions to the aural and olfactory (the invisible world) to continue building the setting's personality profile. Ensure that whatever mood established is maintained; in the model above, the muted colour palette of bruises (blue, yellow, purple) complements the industrial activities described in smells and sounds, generating an image of a busy, battered, mechanised world. The **what** of these visual, aural, and olfactory descriptions should also clearly establish genre – in this case, the clocktower, tubes, machines, airships and clanking denote the Steampunk genre.

You might like to have a quick library interlude here with students looking at the opening of different books to see if they start with setting. They can share different settings with each other and discuss how the setting anticipates the rest of the novel and its genre.

Improving writing: pace, connotation, imagery to create the right mood

After writing the first draft of the opening, it's time for a re-edit. Compare and contrast these two examples of an opening:

Example 1

The city was big, wide, and noisy. There was lots of traffic on the roads, and plenty of wagons and motorcars that sent smoke into the air. The sky above was grey and cloudy. In the middle of the city there was a clocktower, which had an old flag and was dirty.

Example 2

The afternoon crept towards evening, much in the same way that the season crept towards winter. Industrious chimneys puffed plumes of smoke into a sky mottled grey and heaped with clouds. These were the colour of bruises, blue and purpling. Above the city reared the central clocktower, its turrets sprouting several steel tubes and gears. An airship chugged through the sky slowly, like a whale in the sea.

Both describe the same scene, however the first is slower in pace while the second is vibrant and energetic and filled with detail. Verbs are the steam-engine of a sentence: the predominant verb in the first passage is 'was' signalling a static description but in the latter example, verbs such as 'crept', 'puffed', 'reared' and 'chugged' are dynamic and

achieve a brisker pace. Readers learn as much about a world, a character, or a situation from how it *moves* than how it looks. Adjectives are okay, but should be chosen for specific purpose, and too many may bloat sentences and lag the pace but as we can see in example two the adjectives complement the verbs and add detail. A 'grey and cloudy' sky is instead a 'mottled grey and heaped with clouds'. The clouds are personified, becoming the 'colour of bruises, blue and purpling'. The adjectives become part of the metaphors and convey so much more than the familiar 'big, wide and noisy' adjectives of the first example.

When it comes to word choices, it's vital to consider whether the connotations they conjure are consistent with the genre and world being created.

Look at this second example describing a Victorian gothic house.

Example

The sky was grey and cloudy, and the house stood tall and proud, like a soldier.

What's working

Setting is obvious through the adjectives 'grey' and 'cloudy'. Uses a simile.

What's not working

'Grey and cloudy' suggests an ominous scene which is in sharp contrast to 'like a soldier'. It also connotes that the house has something to do with the military, which from the genre, is inconsistent. 'Stood' is a basic verb.

Example

The stormy skies were a mottled grey, and largely blotted out by the towering house. Its roof, a broken crown, scraped the sky.

What's working

This setting is about mood. Participles 'mottled', 'blotted' and the verb 'scraped' are hard, negative and effective in crafting personality of the setting.

What's not working

The 'crown' metaphor conveys a shape but also connotation of monarchy – suitable for a Victorian gothic scene.

And this third example:

Example

The ship was broken and shattered, with raggedy sails and masts as tall as giants.

What's working

Setting is obvious through the adjectives 'shattered' and 'broken'. 'Raggedy' echoes the 'broken' description and is followed by a simile that conveys height/size.

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What's not working

The simile suggests power which contradicts the description.

Example

The sunken ship was half submerged in the sandy depths of the sea. Cold light streamed through the water from above, and occasionally, at the passing of a lonely fish, the ragged sails waved in the depths like they once had in the wind.

What's working

Situates the object in tangible setting: it's underwater!

Selective adjectives, e.g. 'lonely' connotes isolation neglect. Carefully selected verbs, e.g. 'waved' act as a pun to capture the movement of the waves. The opening sibilance creates an atmosphere of quiet.



When discussing the differences between these examples, the first thing students often notice or comment on is that the better examples contain 'more

detail.' But as the deconstruction demonstrates, it's not just about **more** details but the **right** details.

Introducing a character

After the world has been fashioned, it's time to bring a character into it. A similar formula can be also be applied here. This is where writing in third person limited or omniscient becomes even more important, as it allows young writers to sidestep the mistake of *telling* their reader all about the characters' internal thoughts and feelings, and instead *showing* the reader their most salient attributes of personality. Criteria for introducing a character include:

- They need to be interesting and in the scene for a reason
- When describing physical appearance, zoom in on something unique.
- Focus more on how a character moves. We learn more about someone from their mannerisms than their appearances.
- Get them doing something in the scene to provide a sense of what they're like.

The following table gives some examples of interesting characteristics

A birth mark	A scar	Six fingers	Freckles	Green eyes	A long nose
A toe ring	A beard	Long eyelashes	No eyebrows	Painted nails	A piercing
A stutter	Squeaky voice	Glasses	Lisp	A high-pitched giggle	Smell of salt
A low voice	Spots	Blonde hair	Shuffling	A wheelchair	Different coloured eyes
Waddle	A missing tooth	Smell of perfume	Tattoo	A strange ring	Braces

Descriptions of characters should aim to reveal something about their **personality, motivations, or values**.

Charles Dickens' 'Uriah Heep' from *David Copperfield* is a fantastic example of how specific visual details and movement conveys motivations; his serpentine, jerky movements offer distinctive characterisation:

I saw a cadaverous face appear at a small window on the ground floor (in a little round tower that formed one side of the house), and quickly disappear. The low arched door then opened, and the face came out. It was quite as cadaverous as it had looked in the window, though in the grain of it there was that tinge of red which is sometimes to be observed in the skins of red-haired people. It belonged to a red-haired person—a youth of fifteen, as I take it now, but looking much older—whose hair was cropped as close as the

closest stubble; who had hardly any eyebrows, and no eyelashes, and eyes of a red-brown, so unsheltered and unshaded, that I remember wondering how he went to sleep. He was high-shouldered and bony; dressed in decent black, with a white wisp of a neckcloth; buttoned up to the throat; and had a long, lank, skeleton hand, which particularly attracted my attention, as he stood at the pony's head, rubbing his chin with it, and looking up at us in the chaise. – Chapter 15

Saying this, with a jerk of his body, which might have been either propitiatory or derisive, he fell into step beside me." – Chapter 39

Raising his great hands until they touched his chin, he rubbed them softly, and softly chuckled; looking as like a malevolent baboon, I thought, as anything human could look." – Chapter 39

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See the deconstruction below:

Element of Heep's personality	How it's represented in his looks	How it's represented in his movements	How it's represented in his speech
Poor/lower class	He is clean shaven (probably to keep away lice) and wears rough clothes of cheap material	He is very jumpy and jerky - he's used to having to bow to people richer and more important than him	He uses a lot of informal English, suggesting he's from a lower class, and lacking education
Greedy/manipulative	He's described as having no eyelashes or eyebrows, which instantly makes him seem strange and inhuman/untrustworthy	He 'slithers' about, as though he's always worrying about getting caught doing something (such as listening at doors when he shouldn't)	He always refers to himself as 'Oh but I'm so stupid' and 'I'm just an 'umble man' to try to divert people's attention away from how cunning he is
Hateful/malicious	He has a 'skeleton hand' and dresses mostly in black (symbolic of evil)	He always stares at people without blinking and rubs his chin (as though he's thinking of how to best use them)	He sarcastically calls people 'sir' a lot, which revealing his resentment at his lower social status

Devising three main motivations or values for a character and brainstorming how these might be manifested through movements is a fun exercise. Then, use these ideas to structure the character's introduction in the scene.

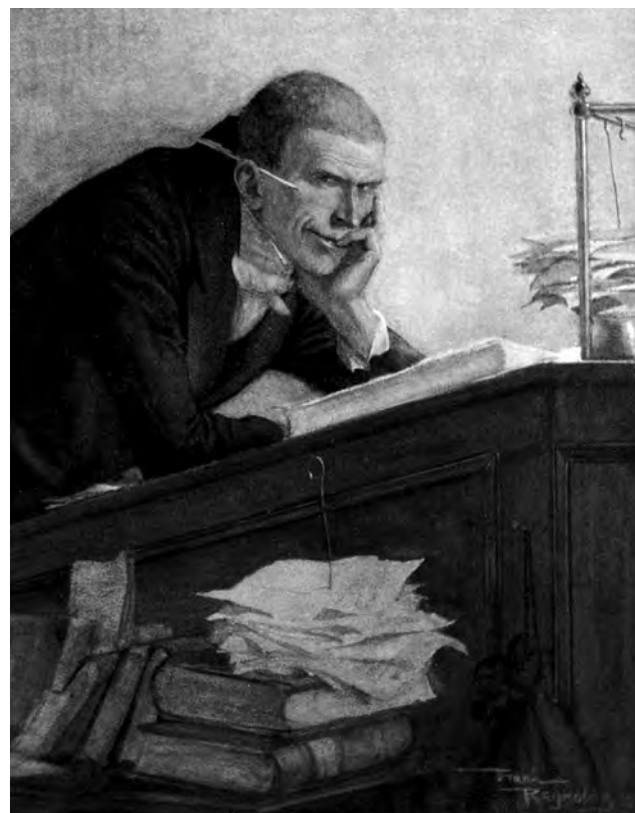
Structure of the story	Example
The character/s is/are in the scene for an interesting reason	<i>Standing atop the clock tower was a short figure, robed in a full-length brown coat. Anyone in the city would have recognised the badge pinned to her breast: the symbol of the bounty hunters.</i>
Interesting details; additional emphasis through a sentence fragment	<i>As the evening wind picked up, it ruffled the hem of her coat, revealing tan trousers, a loose blouse and no less than ten or so leather straps roping a diverse arrangement of weapons to her chest, back, and hips. Pistols, daggers, and a bizarre looking crossbow. Her hair was black as a crow's and cut into a jagged sort of boy-cut that exposed her ears; they were pointed ever so slightly.</i>
Focusing on how the character moves	<i>She gripped the flagpole with a gloved hand, and crouched with confidence, surveying the city. Scrunching her nose against the smoke, a small smirk curved over her lips. She'd spotted him. With her free hand, she fumbled around in her pocket and snapped open a telescope, which she then stuck against her left eye.</i>
Get them doing something in the scene to provide a sense of what they're like	<i>Her telescope veered slowly, like the eye of a falcon watching prey from the crest of a cliff. Then, she snapped it closed and jumped to her feet. She hurled her coat to one side, revealing a pair of mechanical wings attached to a motor; these began to whirl with the hum of life and then she knelt, and sprang into the air with practised ease.</i>

Writing creatively and effectively

The principles of the right details also apply here: a simple, salient detail contextualises the character's role in the world, (e.g., the bounty hunter badge), pinpoint the choice of dress (which reinforces genre whilst conveying personality), integrates a unique feature that sets them apart (the ears), while verbs demonstrate the character's movement. Again, being specific with the choice of techniques is vital for conveying the right meaning: in this case, the character is a bounty-hunter, so the simile comparing her to a falcon reinforces she is the predator in this situation, and her motivation is to hunt. The verbs keep the pace and demonstrate her confidence (and perhaps arrogance).

Final comments

So now you have the beginnings of a narrative. Setting and character are in play: conflict is for another article. Even though these are only two of several steps in opening a narrative, it's essential that students are given time to write them, workshop changes, and deliberate over every choice at the sentence level. The more practise they can get practising these suggestions (and applying them to diverse visual stimuli and a range of genres), the more familiar they will become with the fact that writing is a **purposeful process**, and the more confident they will be in knowing how to **start** writing, every time.



The character of Uriah Heep in Charles Dickens' David Copperfield. 1910 artwork by Frank Reynolds. Source: Wikimedia Commons



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TRY THIS:

Creative writing checklist

Heather Kroll

Imaginative writing self-editing checklist	Work on	✓
Have you shaped your response to the prompt/question?		
Have you created a title that emerges from a pivotal scene / notion?		
Fundamental Skills – Do you have ...		
opening sentences that hook the audience's attention?		
consistent tense and number?		
consistent and effective narrative voice? (3rd person allows scope)		
deliberate paragraphing?		
long sentences to speed up the pace, short sentences to slow the pace?		
varied sentence openings?		
varied sentence length and style? (Read aloud to check)		
super charged verbs and nouns /avoid adverbs and adjectives		
only details that progress the plot or explain a character?		
Impactful tone – cultural refection/ critique / notion/ opinion/ attitude?		
Place – have you considered ...		
the main character fitting or contrasting with the setting?		
senses to develop reader immersion?		
convincing cultural and physical setting? (if needed)		
tangible elements that convey intangible aspects of culture? (such as folk music playing on a transistor vs radio vs an iPod)		
'telling detail' at crucial moments – zoom in/ slo-mo?		
drowning in detail? Is less detail needed in places to move the action on?		
effective figurative imagery – personification, extended metaphor, synaesthesia?		
'gaps' for the reader to fill, or is the description overworked and bogging down the plot?		
Character – Have you considered ...		
the reader caring about the main character		
dialogue to progress plot/ reveal characterisation?		
secondary characters who reveal aspects of main character in attitude or dialogue?		
short flashback (if needed) to explain the backstory to attitudes or actions of the main character with appropriate segue into and out of the flashback?		
internal conflict leading to believable growth/ change in the main character?		
other types of external conflict?		
conflicts intentionally resolved or unresolved?		
aspects of appearance only if it reflects personality? (Unless it is poison - ignore food!)		
restricting any dream unless your character is Alice or Neo?		
and		
is/are there (a) tangible object(s) to symbolise (a) key notion(s)?		
targeted and well-crafted figurative language?		
Purpose / theme		
What is the message that you want readers to take away?		
Have you held up a mirror to reflect on and/or critique your world?		
Have you read it aloud (no joke) to hear the rhythm of the sentences and catch any errors?		

Building a culture of reading across K–12

Catherine Phoon, Queenwood School for Girls

Parents and carers play a major role in fostering reading habits among their children. They are the first and main port of call for the promotion of student learning potential by encouraging the development of daily reading. In the early years, teachers and parents/carers work hand in hand to develop reading skills. However, as students move through the primary grades, the amount of time spent reading for pleasure declines (Merga, 2015).



Pleasure reading is defined as a personal experience that involves materials that reflect our own choice, at a time and place that suits us (Clark & Rumbold, 2006, pp.6–7). A decline in pleasure reading is usually a result of poor communication between the home and school, with neither group promoting reading for pleasure to students (Merga, 2019). When parents and carers believe that their child is reading for pleasure at school and teachers feel that students are reading outside of the prescribed texts at home, the situation becomes one of ‘orphaned responsibility’ (Merga, 2019).

Why the concern?

The relationship between reading for pleasure and comprehension, vocabulary and fluency development is positive (Krashen, 1993). In fact, it has been stated that when children read for pleasure and get hooked on books, they acquire, without conscious effort, nearly all of the so-called language skills (Krashen, 1993). In contrast, students who do not read in their spare time are at risk of losing academic ground even if they are not a struggling literacy learner (Campbell and Farstrup, 1993).

Studies on the reading habits of children by Clark and Rumbold (2006), The National Reading Panel (2000) and National Endowment for the Arts (2007) found that reading for pleasure declines around the age of thirteen and fourteen.

Reading is clearly a skill that needs to be promoted in schools.

The project

With all these studies in mind, the Queenwood School for Girls implemented a whole school sustained silent reading (SSR) programme titled *Just Read* for students from years K–12 to develop a culture of reading and build stamina. SSR is defined as a period of uninterrupted silent reading for pleasure not connected to any assessment or other outcome (Krashen, 2006). Accordingly, *Just Read* students were not required to finish their selections, write a book report or complete a follow up task. The study itself focused on adolescents without sufficient literacy skills to comprehend texts at their level of schooling.

Background and context

Queenwood is an independent non-selective girls’ school located in Mosman (Years K–6) and Balmoral (Years 7–12). We currently have approximately 14% of our student population receiving learning support intervention to address literacy needs, and this is implemented using a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework.

In 2018, we conducted a pilot study regarding the reading habits of girls at our school and found that 28% of Year 7 and Year 9 students were reading for pleasure less than once a week and that 10% were not reading books at all.

We found that as students moved through their schooling, the amount of time spent reading for pleasure or indeed at all dropped off. This is in line with national as well as overseas data, indicating that many teenagers do not read beyond their prescribed texts.

I found these figures staggering because we invest a considerable amount of time and resources into teaching students who are slow progress readers how to read. These same students need to maintain their reinforced reading to enable their decoding skills to keep pace with comprehension.

The pilot study results were the catalyst for our school to adjust the entire K–12 timetable to introduce 20 minutes of daily silent reading with the hope that a Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) program would encourage a stronger reading culture among students.

Building a culture of reading across K–12

Research indicates that *all* students are at risk of *aliteracy*, which means having acquired the skills needed to decode text but neither the will nor desire to read regularly (Nathanson, Pruslow and Levitt, 2008). Apart from the usual lack of motivation associated with teenage years, we also recognised the impact of technology on the way that students engaged with a text, with skimming and scanning becoming the norm as opposed to engaging with print on a deep and meaningful level.

If students who are not struggling literacy learners stop reading for pleasure then what hope do our students with learning difficulties and/or impairments in reading have? Students who have poor literacy skills struggle to develop their reading comprehension skills and vocabulary which leads to poor advancement of effective reading strategies (Guthrie and Davis, 2003) while those enriched with language become more enriched as they are given more time to engage in reading (*The Matthew Effect*, Stanovich, 1986). After teaching students to read, how do we get them to continue to read?

Roughly 15% of students in our school have a specific impairment in reading. These students present with decoding and fluency issues that directly impact on comprehension, vocabulary development and overall attitude towards reading. Consequently, when we decided to implement a whole school sustained silent reading program, there was some concern that the gap between our efficient learners and those who have poor literacy

skills would only widen. My research therefore focuses on the impact of this project on reading comprehension and vocabulary for slow progress readers. I was also particularly interested to see whether a cost free intervention could affect these students in such a way that they could enjoy reading and look forward to 20 minutes of SSR every day, developing a habit of reading for pleasure.

To determine the impact of the effectiveness of these timetable changes, we collected pre and post data. In November 2019, we surveyed Year 3 -11 students through an anonymous survey collecting on their motivation to read as well as measuring specific literary skills through Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) reading and vocabulary assessments.

Reading behaviour

Initially, we conducted observations of students known to Specialised Programs and observed the following reading behaviour:

- randomly turning a page
- pausing for only a few seconds on a page before turning over
- blankly staring at the same page for a few minutes
- falling asleep
- non-reading like behaviour.

Reutzel, Jones, Fawson and Smith (2008), assert that struggling readers will not be able to benefit from silent reading without instructional support such as extra time for expression in both oral and written form and with teacher feedback on what they have read. I was concerned that this would be problematic for our slow progress readers; however, Merga (2015) asserts that recreational reading can improve engagement in learning through improved literacy outcomes. The emphasis in recreational reading is on self-selection of reading material – a practice that offers students a sense of self-empowerment not experienced when texts are assigned to them. .

A key component of *Just Read* was that our teachers and staff modelled reading habits that we wanted to develop in our students. Therefore, at the same time each day, the entire school population downed tools, and engaged in reading a self-selected fiction text.

Scaffolding

1. Book talks – we created a ‘safe’ space for teachers and students to talk about what books they were reading – without judgement. Once students were aware that no comprehension test or analysis would take the stage, they started to open up and share what they



Building a culture of reading across K–12

were reading. The book talks were student led and modelled by teachers. Students were allowed and encouraged to have opinions and respectfully dislike characters or the book itself.

2. Reader advisory – selecting a book is not an automatic task: students were taught how to choose a book and when to reject it. I observed librarians having informal chats with students and learnt that the students were also taught when to give up on a book.
3. The Student Advisory Committee provided a student voice in the process. Adjustments were made along the way based on feedback from the students.
4. The Junior and Senior School Libraries offered 'Click n Collect' to allow ongoing student borrowing during COVID.

Borrowing rates

Research suggests engagement is multifaceted which means it takes cognitive, behavioural and affective attributes to be engaged in reading on a deep and meaningful level (Guthrie et al., 2012, p. 602). Students who were previously identified as reluctant or non-readers were analysed to identify any changes in borrowing behaviour. The school librarians played an active part in the project through their reader advisory role. The school librarians spent time with students, so they could learn more about the individual; for example, finding out how a girl spends her free time, what television shows she is watching, what interests she may have and what kind of personality traits she may or may not have.



Results

We found that pre and post implementation (of *Just Read*) borrowing rates for students identified as non-readers improved. Analysis of six students with a Specific Impairment in Reading showed that at the beginning of the project they were borrowing a book a day, seemingly only for the SSR time slot. Perhaps they had the following perception: *if I borrow a book and look like I am reading, then I won't get into trouble.*

At the end of the project, five of these students were borrowing a fiction book, on average, every 2-3 weeks. Follow up on these students revealed they gave up on pretending to read. One student told me that she 'gave in because this is the new timetable and there is no point fighting it'. This same student started visiting the library more as she found the reader advisory service to be positive and helpful. Another student told me that the more she read the more enjoyable reading became.

Results

Analysis of the PAT data for reading comprehension captured in November 2019 and November 2020 indicated 10 points of growth for the students at the 5th percentile; in other words, the tail end moved up.

With regards to qualitative data, 12 girls who receive learning support intervention were interviewed and offered these comments:

When we first started Just Read I hated it because I do not like reading but after a term I started to enjoy it because I became used to it.

I became so interested in seeing what everyone else was reading, even the teacher, because you don't get to see that very often.

I feel so relaxed at the end of Period 4 because we have been allowed to read just for the fun of it and there is no pressure to talk about the book either.

I started to enjoy reading because I was allowed to choose my own book. The librarians were so helpful in helping me select a book. Sometimes I had to wait for my friend to finish a book because it was so popular. We didn't do spoilers either as that would ruin our chance of enjoying the book.

I loved being able to escape from the real world of hard lessons and the more I read the more curious I became, that's if I had a really good book of course. I only returned two books to the library that were not very enjoyable. I did try though before stopping and borrowing another book.

Sometimes if I had a bad morning I would forget about it after Just Read because the characters in the book were nicer.

Building a culture of reading across K–12

Where to now?

The development of reading habits and skills is not limited to childhood or adolescence, it is a lifelong process.

When teenagers use class time just for reading, some find, for the first time, that books have more to offer than they thought.

Just Read will continue at Queenwood as students and staff continue to develop a culture of reading through daily SSR of self-selected texts.

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TRY THIS: Lost and found

Kira Bryant

The inclusion of found items in a piece of writing can bring a fresh perspective and allow the writer to venture into new territory. Writers sometimes find themselves caught in a loop of repetitive words and phrases with a reliance on clichés and an uninspiring description in an effort to complete a task results in a piece as difficult to read as it likely was to write!

Try the methods below to encourage students to approach their writing in a different way. The activities are based on the idea of 'lost and found'—a treasure hunt of just the right word, phrase, or sentence that will invigorate a piece of writing and inspire a tired writer.

Book Spine Poetry

Have students peruse the library collection to find intriguing words and phrases to use in their writing. Students could be divided into small groups and be sent to different sections of the library to find interesting extracts. Alternatively, an alphabetised fiction section could provide inspiration for students who could use the spelling of their name to collect titles from the corresponding letter of the alphabet. Students could be asked to write down the titles verbatim, peruse blurbs for an interesting collection of words, or open the book at a random place and take note of the fragment under their fingertip.

Encourage students to find and use the extracts from the texts they find around them. This will require them to skim read and make a decision about what collection of words they like best which are both excellent tools to develop their reading comprehension skills. Both activities can be completed with a range of different texts both online and off. Try asking students to draw on posters on the classroom walls, sentences from their workbooks, or previous assessment submissions.

Treasure Hunt

Draw on the ease of internet search engines by asking students to collect five words or phrases from different websites. This is where internet advertisements, *Wikipedia*, and all sorts of webpages really come into their own with interesting and unique offerings. Students could use their finds to create found poetry (you may wish to ask students to draw on a few more websites to do this) or use the five extracts as prompts when writing a short story. Students may find it easier to use their prompts in their writing if they are themed in some way – if they are writing about a Food Technology class, for example, they could search for a recipe, the types of food they have cooked in class or at home, menus for places to eat out in their local area, the place where they would like the story to be set. Alternatively, completely random prompts from a range of websites can be fun and really push writing into new places. Students may find it tricky to choose just a fragment from an entire webpage so a demonstration of the process may be useful.

Depending on the confidence of your class, you may wish to let them follow their interests while they look for extracts or you might decide that structure is necessary. Reinforce a maximum of 5-6 words to ensure students are searching for interesting phrasing.

Search Suggestions	Search Suggestions – narrative structure
1. A place to visit	1. A setting
2. Favourite season	2. An indicator of time – a song or television show from the year their story is set
3. A precious object	3. A significant object that will be the protagonist's talisman or a motif in the story
4. A type of food best eaten in summer	4. A song lyric – to support characterisation
5. A television show watched by children	5. A place to eat -

Example extracts and story:

1. took the brownie
2. crinkly paper bag
3. hubs of waterside life
4. world's most valuable
5. Sydney's harbour

I looked over at the table next to me where my little sister sat. The crinkly paper bag sat between us, the world's most valuable possession resting inside. Well, not really, but it was super delicious. Would she notice if I reached into the bag and took the brownie? Probably. She was only 5 years old, but she was super observant and loved to share her knowledge. In her annoying way, she caught my eye and began her lecture. 'Sonya, did you know that Sydney's harbour is a hub of waterside life. The species include...' I couldn't listen to her anymore. My stomach growled.

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Reviews

Reviewers: Renee Carr, Mel Dixon, Michelle Hasking,
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Please see the end of this section for a summary of texts considered by reviewers as suitable related texts for the English 7–10 and Stage 6 syllabuses.

PROSE FICTION



Dragon skin

Karen Foxlee

Allen & Unwin, 2021

ISBN 9781760526108

Karen Foxlee is the multi-award winning author of the popular Young Adult novel, *Lenny's Book of Everything* (reviewed in *mETaphor* Issue 2, 2020). Like many of her

other novels, *Dragon Skin* offers a poignant and visceral representation of life in a small, rural Australian town in a manner that is both humorous and heartbreaking. Foxlee's writing beautifully captures the unique ability of fantasy to safely guide a younger audience through an exploration of mature and sometimes confronting themes.

The novel foregrounds the beauty of the Australian landscape, reminiscent of a time when children explored in waterholes under the watchful eyes of a small community which is both eager to be in everyone's business yet won't interfere for fear of breaching privacy. The main protagonist, Pip, is an unconventional young girl who lives with her single mother and her mother's emotionally abusive partner. The novel piques the reader's interest almost immediately as Pip hears the voice of her mysteriously missing best friend guiding her through the challenges of secretly raising a baby dragon. Foxlee maintains tension throughout the novel as we seek to uncover why Pip's best friend has disappeared, how she will nurture the dragon and whether her mother will gain the courage to rescue both herself and her daughter from their oppressive situation.

This novel is best suited to a Stage 4 or lower Stage 5 audience in terms of the level of language and the inclusion of fantasy elements. Thematically, there is a focus on friendship, particularly overcoming diversity in order to be of service to something larger than oneself. However, Stage 5 students, particularly more reluctant and/or less experienced readers, would benefit from the richness of the literary techniques whilst also engaging with the more mature themes of domestic violence, parental abandonment and the challenges of self-sacrificially letting go of someone or something in order to allow it or yourself to thrive.

The novel is 325 pages long but thoughtfully arranged in three Acts, allowing the teacher to engage in a close study of sections that are particularly relevant to the readership. There are also many elements of narrative that are explored in simplistic ways such as flashbacks, the intrusive voice of a missing character, a three act structure and beautifully constructed sketches at the start of each act and symbolically at the start of each chapter. While some Stage 5 students may balk at the idea of a young girl raising a dragon, they will soon be engaged by the beauty of Foxlee's writing and the exploration of more mature themes. **RC**



Huda and me

H. Hayek

Allen & Unwin, 2021

ISBN 9781760526023

A rollicking adventure story, H. Hayek's debut novel *Huda and Me* tells of the jet-setting escapade from Australia to Lebanon of nine-year-old Huda and her twelve-year-old brother Akeal in search of their parents. The

pair are escaping their Aunt Amal, a family friend brought in to babysit the pair, and their five siblings, while their parents return to Lebanon to look after the children's ill grandmother. And while the Aunt gleefully promises the children 'two glorious weeks together,' it quickly emerges that she intends the pleasure to be all hers. Lengthy lists of chores are allocated to all but the baby of the family to tend to her every need, from chauffeuring her day and night to baking endless treats: tasks so taxing that attending school is no longer an option for most of the children.

It is Akeal and Huda, however, who bear the brunt of the Aunt's abuse. Akeal's day begins at dawn cleaning chicken poop and ends close to midnight massaging his aunt's balding pate. Huda's day similarly spans everything from bathroom scrubbing to massaging her Aunt's bromodosis-troubled feet. Is it any wonder that the pair hatch a daring plan to purchase two tickets to Lebanon with their Aunt's credit card and take off to find the parents?

Narrated from Akeal's often anxious point of view as Huda instigates the plan, we quickly find ourselves barracking for the pair as their quest takes them across the world to

Reviews

their parent's homeland, a place they have often heard of but never visited. Overall, *Huda and Me* is an easy, page-turning read that is strengthened by the warmth and humour of its characters. And whilst we witness the casual racism Muslim children face from their Australian peers, we are gently invited to recognise its absurdity when more unites than divides children of different cultural backgrounds. It's a good read for Stage 4 readers. **FR**



The Magnolia Sword: A ballad of Mulan

Sherry Thomas

Allen & Unwin, 2019

ISBN 9781760876685

Sherry Thomas, perhaps best known for her *Lady Sherlock* series, brings her lush world building and formidable female protagonists to historical China in *The Magnolia*

Sword: A ballad of Mulan. The novel engages the reader from the opening sentence, drawing us immediately into a battle with a mysterious, masked opponent:

“Hua Xiong Di, it has been a while,” my opponent murmurs. In the feeble light, his shadow is long, menacing.

The tension between the two is palpable, as is the mutual respect and the undercurrent of romantic interest. The character of Mulan herself is crafted with an endearing combination of courage, defiance, humour and vulnerability. The relationship between the two protagonists is perhaps the healthiest romance I have seen in young adult fiction, with genuine mutual respect, support for each to achieve their own goals, and a basis in friendship.

Combined with the richness of the settings, explanations of cultural rituals and detailed intercultural disputes, the world building creates an evocative and intriguing backdrop to this retelling of a traditional story. Bilingual elements add to the richness of the text: the repetition of Mandarin words and phrases allows them to be remembered and reused throughout.

Amidst this compelling background, the novel engagingly explores the familiar conflict between family, community and individual desires, expectations and responsibilities, a path we all navigate but that is perhaps most intense during the teenage years. Students will be able to relate to these challenges, and to the well-drawn characters. At times the pacing is a little slow, and the explanations feel a little obvious, however these minor disadvantages would be advantages in the context of a classroom reading, where there may be gaps of time between reading sections of the novel.

Best suited to a Year 8 or 9 cohort, the novel will create valuable discussions of characterisation, context, relationships and style, whilst also being a genuinely enjoyable read. Highly recommended. **MH**



Klara and the Sun

Kazuo Ishiguro

Allen & Unwin, 2019

ISBN 9780571364886

A few months ago I found myself wandering through the book section of the department store, looking for something uplifting and thoughtful when I came across this speculative

fiction novel by Nobel Prize winner, Kazuo Ishiguro.

I am happy to report that it was a good purchase.

Now I smile pleasantly whenever I walk past the novel perched on my coffee table, not quite ready to put it on a bookshelf, although it has already been read. For me, this is a sign of a thoughtful piece of fiction with the reader in mind.

Narrated from the perspective of the eponymous Klara, a machine-learning solar-powered artificial intelligence ‘AF’ (artificial friend), we learn to perceive the world through her experiences and organic data collection. She perceives things in angular, layered geometries of ‘boxes’ and ‘tiers’ until she can understand the context and purpose of the objects and their relationships with greater complexity. The sole focus of her creation and existence is to support the ‘lifted’ (genetically enhanced) young girl for whom she has been purchased from a department store, not unlike the one in which I purchased the novel. It is kind of an AI bildungsroman in six parts.

Klara teaches us much about family relationships, blossoming young love and gratitude as she helps the reader to wonder about the possibilities of a non-threatening future in which AI has a place in enriching our lives. She develops a sweet and endearing sense of spirituality and learns to pray in her own way to reach beyond the limitations of her world. In this way, her characterisation achieves a dual purpose of considering human nature and immersion in realities of an imagined future, conventional of the genre.

Klara’s relationship with young Josie, Melania Housekeeper, Rick and the Mother who looks at her distracting ‘oblong’ device frequently, offers a fly-on-the-wall observation of human connection, distraction and growing desperation. As Klara observes, we invest in her personal growth with a sense that we have been in her position of naivete and desire for her successful

Reviews

integration into the community, though her joy only comes from ensuring the success and health of Josie, like a parent, but more so. There is also an awareness of her disposability as a commodity bought in a store. She is replaceable. Personally, I felt uncomfortable about how much I loved the character of Klara and felt a great sense of catharsis at the conclusion of the novel, despite my misgivings. This positioning is a delicate balance which Ishiguro has achieved for the reader, and one that is worth sharing with students. What kind of feelings and thoughts might they have towards Klara?

“You’re my AF. So we must be good friends, right?”

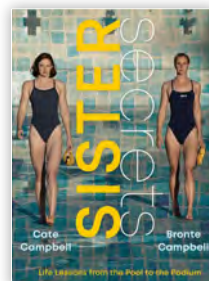
But there was no smile in her voice. It was clear she wished to be alone to get on with her sketching, so I left the room to stand outside on the landing. (p110)

The novel is set in middle-class America and explores working class limitations through Josie’s friendship with her school friend, Rick, highlighting the disparities of class and wealth, an increasing concern as technological advancement seems to widen the gap. Both families are single-parent with absent or deceased fathers. The setting expands across a not-too-distant-future nondescript urban and semi-rural (utopia?). I place the ‘utopia’ classification in brackets, as life seems to be enhanced by the presence of AI, but an underlying unease permeates the reality of living with AI - its benefits and unintended consequences - which develops the slow-moving conflict of the novel. The complication of Josie’s illness opens up the opportunity for class discussion on the ethics of technological innovation and how future-set literature can envision and reconsider a reality before it arrives.

For those of you familiar with the author, the hallmark Ishiguro sense of longing, ambiguity and incompleteness (*Remains of the Day*, *The Artist of the Floating World*) develops the story. Character thoughts, motivations and actions are realistically and loosely connected to allow the reader enough room to engage sincerely with the characters and ideas. The language and premise is accessible and at 307 pages, digestible within a class setting.

This novel is clearly appropriate as an Extension 1 level text, but it also offers much for Stage 5, in offering an alternative or complement to the more popular Dystopian genre which encourages students to think deeply about an undesired future, but not about possibilities that seem more likely, placed in the ordinary everyday. **VR**

NON-FICTION: AUTOBIOGRAPHY



Sister secrets: Life lessons from the pool to the podium

Cate and Bronte Campbell

Allen & Unwin, 2021

ISBN 9781760525910

Medal winning swimming sisters Cate and Bronte Campbell take turns penning their stories in this book. Structured as a chronological series of anecdotes, the multimodal autobiography is not designed to be read in one sitting, but rather to be dipped into. The sisters write about a number of themes, including their motivation to swim, training, coping with injuries and setbacks, racing, and dealing with publicity. The heavy focus on providing life lessons can be didactic at times, but the book rises to the occasion in evocative and engaging descriptions of the tension prior to racing, the intense focus during a race, and the euphoria of winning.

The language is accessible, and the parallel narratives provide an entry point to discuss voice, character and perspective. The high-quality photographs throughout the text, and engaging use of different fonts, sizes and colours create a high impact text to draw in reluctant readers. Exploring themes of resilience, loyalty, family, and conflicting responsibilities, the text is appropriate for Stage 5 students, and would also be particularly relevant to English Studies Module E: Playing the Game, where it could be paired with media texts to explore representation and context. Students could also use the text as a model for autobiographical writing.

A suggested approach is to study extracts of the book in class, with the option for engaged readers to read more at home. This is the type of book that would be regularly picked up if displayed in a library or class reading shelf with its engaging layout, famous subjects, and glossy photographs. A good pick for reluctant readers. **MH**



Gentle and fierce

Vanessa Berry

Giramondo, 2021

ISBN 9781925818710

Many of you will know of Vanessa Berry’s work with zines, offering original text and images in a small publication that emphasises the human nature of creativity and doesn’t depend on advanced technology to produce or share. Like her zines, *Gentle and fierce* brings together text and

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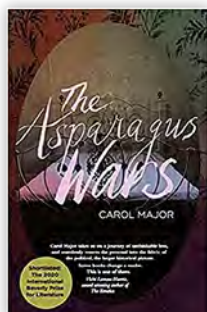
images but in this instance words are the driver, not images with extended personal essays capturing moments in her life, each accompanied by a monochrome image.

The book displays Berry's usual sensitivity, with the focus being on the nexus of life stories and the animal world - whether it is a butterfly, a stuffed bear, a spider, a snail, a bird, a horse or even a porcelain animal. In one story, the animal is a mink coat of a great grandmother: a coat which represents so much but stands against contemporary and Berry's own values, and yet that coat sums up an important connection to the past. In another, the focus is on an insect such as the fly, whose presence marks many occasions from one year to 'the next year' to 'the year after ... then the next year ...'. The paragraphs progress through time and experience with the fly marking its presence on a wine glass, approaching a puddle of melted ice cream, creeping over squashed cheeses - you get the idea.

We realise that Berry is an acute observer of her world, that she thinks deeply, and that the smallest aspect of life that we may ignore or overlook attracts her attention and becomes translated into something bigger. In her introduction Berry tells us:

I realise how gentleness and ferocity thread through the stories of my life, which are as much the stories of connections with others, human and human, as mine alone. Examining my experiences, turning them around and into new configurations, I envisage them radiating into a web of life. Within this animals are always present, sometimes quiet, sometimes insistent, but always there.

Her writing is well structured, with ideas presented in beautifully expressed and varied sentences. This book is worthy of your attention for your own enjoyment or if you are looking for some good writing samples for Reading to Write to support students in their own writing craft. **MD**



The Asparagus Wars

Carol Major

Spineless Wonders, 2021

ISBN 9781925052664

Families are like nations - sometimes at peace, other times at war - and, as in any war, moments of heroism are counterpoised with their opposite: cowardice and failings. That's the

conclusion Carol Major's compelling memoir *The Asparagus Wars* invites us to consider; drawing parallels between World War I as it played out in France and a mother's battle with her daughter's debilitating muscular dystrophy and eventual bowel cancer, while negotiating the complexities of modern families.

Major writes her epistolary tale as a series of letters to her deceased daughter whilst staying in a small cottage in a village in the Marne Region of north-eastern France for two weeks in late 2017. As she writes, her host believes she is compiling a history on World War I. She is not, but her visits to local historical war sites, and particularly her interest in Section E in the Oise-Aisne American Cemetery (a place where 'bad soldiers' - the ones 'blindfolded at dawn' - were buried), interweave her biographic memories recalled in the letters, which in turn frame how Major sees herself, at least at pivotal points in her life. Like the 'deserters [and] cowards' buried in Section E in graves without crosses, she recognises that she also proved 'too frightened to stay and fight' at a moment of crisis, deserting her own family like a 'bad soldier'.

The letters are an attempt to understand those pivotal moments that seem like gordian knots even in recollection, contextualising her various desertions with both pathos and raw honesty. As she writes in an early letter explaining her intent, 'I am trying to locate the flash points, trying to come to grips with how wars begin.' Those flash points correlate to the moments of desertion and loss that move the narrative forward. There is the son the seventeen-year-old Major gave up for adoption after giving birth in Canada as 'one of those teenagers in a home for unwed mothers.' Here she describes how her hands were fastened in straps during the labour so she would not 'interfere with the doctor, and a nurse asks her if she hadn't 'done enough damage already?'

There is her decision to leave behind her two young children when she fled her failing marriage in Sydney, returning to her own family in Canada on a trip funded by a fellow university student with whom she had had an affair, and who became her second husband. Taking her children then seemed impossible when her husband hid the children's passports in a cereal box and gave her 'name at airports as someone who might try to spirit ... away' her children. But nonetheless, the escapade resulted in a financially-lopsided custody battle that she compares to Menelaus' pursuit of Helen in the Trojan War and which ultimately left Major reduced to 'an access parent with visiting rights,' as her mother-in-law took over looking after her children much of the time for years.

There is finally her abandonment of her dying daughter's bedside for a month, following a breakdown of sorts after her second husband leaves, declaring that despite fathering their two sons that he had never loved her but 'only came [to Australia] for an adventure.' In a kind of about-turn, her first husband invites her back to be there for the daughter they had together and who doesn't have much time left. It is a final desertion and one that, after

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her daughter's death, paradoxically leaves her feeling deserted and bereft like 'an unlikely soldier who discovers herself miraculously standing when everything else is blown away' and left asking 'Was it me who mistakenly detonated the bomb? Was the shattered landscape all my fault?'

Towards the end of her memoir, Major recalls a war memorial in Staffordshire, England, approved by Tony Blair's government in 2006. There, three hundred and nine wooden stakes stand behind a blindfolded soldier in honour of the disgraced World War I servicemen who were executed by firing squad simply for being 'too frightened to stay and fight'. The memorial recognises that

whatever their failings that 'it was clear all these men had been victims of war'. It is an understanding that Major, writing letters under a flickering light at the kitchen table of a French gite, brings to the desertions of her own life – desertions in complex personal battles that were marked as much by love as anything else.

Ultimately, however, it is the raw honesty of Major's memoir that allows her, and her reader, to reframe her 'bad soldier' desertions as the decisions of someone who was also a victim of circumstance, as perhaps we all are. Hers is an unfinished life story that well worth the read for senior students, including those studying English Extension 1 Elective 2: Worlds of Upheaval. **FR**

Syllabus links and suitability as related texts

This summary has been designed to assist you in making informed selections for teaching and learning in the classroom.

STAGE	TITLE / AUTHOR	FORM	THEMATIC STRANDS / TEXTUAL CONCEPTS	RELATED TEXT / CCP
4	<i>Dragon Skin</i> by Karen Foxlee	Prose fiction (novel)	Coping with Loss Diversity Friendship Parent/Child Relationships Character Narrative	Difference and diversity; Ethical understanding
4	<i>Huda and Me</i> by H. Hayek	Prose fiction (novel)	Character Narrative Representation	Intercultural understanding
4/5	<i>The Magnolia Sword: A ballad of Mulan</i> by Sherry Thomas	Prose fiction (novel)	Relationships Loyalty Bravery Character Context Style	Intercultural understanding; Ethical understanding
5/6	<i>Sister secrets: Life lessons from the pool to the podium</i> by Cate and Bronte Campbell	Autobiography	Perspective	English Studies Module E: Playing the Game
5/6	<i>Klara and the Sun</i> by Kazuo Ishiguro	Prose fiction (novel)	Character Genre Style Technology and social constructs	Extension 1: Literary Worlds

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6	<i>Gentle and fierce</i> by Vanessa Berry	Non-fiction / autobiographical essays	Connotation, imagery and symbol Intertextuality Style Connection with animals Empathy Environments: urban and natural Personal history	Year 11 Reading to Write
6	<i>The Asparagus Wars</i> by Carol Major	Nonfiction / memoir	Loss Terminal illness Relationships Family History English Textual Concepts: Authority Style	English Extension 1 Elective 2: Worlds of Upheaval.

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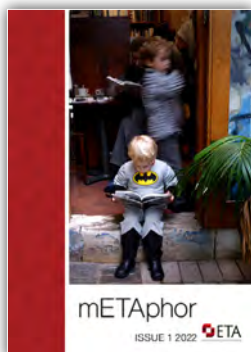
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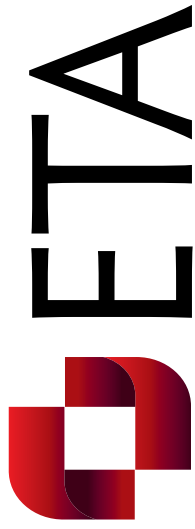
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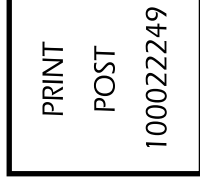
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