The following notes cover the titles Helen Sykes presented at the AIS Annual English Teachers' Conference 2011. Helen gave two presentations - one on Asian texts and one on indigenous texts. The notes cover those two areas, plus some suggestions about texts related to sustainability and, at the end, some notes on some worthwhile recent publications.

Some of the annotations were provided by Deb McPherson and Ernie Tucker, as part of their joint presentation with Helen at ETANSW Conference 2011. Helen thanks Deb and Ernie for their permission to re-use their material here - and for the ongoing inspiration they offer to English teachers.

The list is as comprehensive as possible to make it clear that there is a whole range of solutions to ensuring that the cross-curriculum priorities are satisfied. The titles in each category are listed in alphabetical order. At the end of each section, there is an 'Extension text' section – texts that may not exactly meet the requirements of the category but will contribute to students’ understanding. For example, Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival* does not have specific Asian content but it is an essential text to know about when looking at the experience of migration. Many of these titles are also reviewed in the book, *Choices for English: books, films and other texts that work* (Cengage Learning Australia, 2009).

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### Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia


978192172022. This is a delightful picture book for young readers about traditional dance in Bali. Ayu learns the Legong, which is traditionally performed for the village by young girls on the night of the full moon. It is great to see this paperback reprint, making the book easily accessible in the classroom. **Recommendation:** This is a picture book for younger readers that can still be enjoyed by secondary school students. This would be a great introduction to a cross-curricular unit on traditional Asian arts, in cooperation with your Drama, Art and Music departments.

**Barry Noodles and DaKillerBs** by Hung Le. This is currently out of print. Aimed at boys in the Year 5-8 age group, this is a funny story about a young Vietnamese boy who arrives in Australia with no English but who quickly acquires a passion for AFL, enhanced with some moves inspired by Kung Fu. The text makes little sense to anyone unacquainted with this particular football code. The book is very Melbourne-centric. **Recommendation:** This humorous look at the migrant experience is suitable for wide reading for the Year 5-8 age group.

Recommendation: This could be a winner with an advanced Year 10. It has a great sense of urban/rural life and history from a Vietnamese perspective.

This is a non-fiction text written for an adult audience. Canadian Wong was a student in Beijing during the 70s, during which time she betrayed a fellow (Chinese) student to the authorities for harbouring western sympathies. She returns to a very different country thirty-three years later to try to find the woman she betrayed. This is a very interesting insight into the lifestyle of modern urban Chinese and the huge differences from just a couple of decades ago.
Recommendation: This would be best with girls in Years 10 or 11. The picture of contemporary China is insightful and interesting. You could add it to a selection of non-fiction texts for middle-secondary readers, as suggested in the Wide Reading Suggestions section below.

Bend it Like Beckham directed by Gurinder Chadha. 2002. Rating: PG.
This film explores the world of women’s football with humour and passion. Set in West London and Hamburg, the film follows two eighteen-year-olds who love football and join a local amateur women’s football club. Jesminder is a British girl of Indian Sikh background who struggles against her family’s traditional attitudes to follow her dream of playing professional football. Juliette ‘Jules’ Paxton is a white girl who has to combat her mother’s stereotypes about athletic prowess and lesbianism. The team’s coach, Joe, is a young man whose dreams of football stardom were shattered when he injured his knee, and both girls have a keen interest in him. The film’s title is a reference to the English superstar, David Beckham, and his skill at scoring from free kicks by bending or curving the ball in the air.
Recommendation: Use this excellent comedy in the Year 9 classroom to discuss cultural and gender assumptions.

This is an intriguing retelling of the Cinderella story, set in Northern China during the seventeenth-century Ming dynasty. After the death of her beloved father, Xing Xing appears bound to a life of servitude by her cruel stepmother. But she escapes another type of bondage, as it is her stepsister who must endure the terrible binding of her feet to make her more attractive to potential suitors. When a festival occurs, Xiang Xiang meets a prince and her life changes.
Recommendation: Use Bound with Year 7 or 8 as a great way to explore the ways authors can appropriate classic tales and revitalise and subvert them.

In many ways this is the same book that Gleitzman has been writing for years: a story told by an innocent first-person narrator (whether Pommy migrant kid, a mute or a cane toad) who has a sometimes achingly painful sense of responsibility for the family’s welfare. The narrator’s anxious and often ill-conceived attempts to improve the family’s lot lead to all kinds of comic disasters.
At their best, Gleitzman’s books achieve a remarkable tension between real sadness and laugh-aloud comedy. In this case, the narrator is an Afghan boy whose family are fleeing the Taliban and who become enmeshed in John Howard’s Pacific solution. Some adults will be uncomfortable with the apparently flippant treatment of such a subject, but I think it can be very successful in helping Australian kids understand that those demonised boat people are families not all that different from their own, with kids with whom they can identify. Alongside the humour, there is horror as well as sadness: women being executed in the soccer stadium in Kabul; pirates searching the refugees’ boat for young girls; Jamal’s fear that his parents have drowned; the news that they are not welcome in Australia. The humour is a blessed reminder of the resilience of human beings, even in the face of terrible inhumanity.

Gleitzman’s opposition to the Australian government’s treatment of the boat people is clear, but his anger is admirably restrained, limited to the occasional irony such as: ‘Thank goodness Australians are so good at thinking of others.’

**Recommendation:** Teachers will find this very rewarding for classroom study. It is a fairly easy read and could be used from Year 4 to Year 9, although most schools will opt for Year 7. It would be interesting to explore with gifted kids the advantages and limitations of telling the story differently, without the humour. It can be added to wide reading selections on refugees, humour, soccer, and other countries; see the Wide Reading Suggestions section below for a selection of titles for Years 7 or 8 about the refugee experience. Gleitzman’s novel could be linked with the film *Bend it like Beckham*: like Jessminder in the film, Jamal’s sister Bibi is a talented soccer player forbidden to play by her culture.


This accessible story begins on the Kokoda Track, where young, untrained Australians – without resources or leadership – are being stalked through the jungle by a much larger Japanese force. This is an important insight into the experience of Kokoda, but it is not just a war story. There are flashbacks to the young men’s lives growing up in Australia, with a focus on two brothers from rural Victoria and their relationship with the local bully. The younger brother, Murray, has long thought of himself as a coward, because of his inability to stand up to the bully, Sid. Eventually, there on the Kokoda Track, he finds himself alone with a wounded Sid and has to decide whether to abandon or stay with the bully who has made his life miserable for so many years. This is an insightful look at the nature of courage.

**Recommendation:** There is huge interest now in the experience of Kokoda, and this is a very accessible introduction to it for students. Boys will relish the war scenes, but because this is about relationships as much as it is about war, girls too will enjoy it. You could use it for whole class study with a mixed-ability group in Years 8 or 9, or add it to a wide reading box of war stories. Make up a unit on Kokoda, supplementing *Break of Day* with the non-fiction text *Kokoda Track: 101 Days* and the picture book *Photographs in the Mud*.


This is an easy-to-read novel for the Year 5 to 8 age group about two boys who run away from a violent home, believing that their depressed father will stop mistreating
their mother once they are gone. They have lived a comfortable existence in an Indian village in a two-bedroom house with a kitchen and a room in which to watch television. Unlike some others in their village, they have always gone to school, and they have always had shoes to wear. But now – at ages twelve and nine – they find themselves homeless on the streets of a large city, sleeping at night on a traffic island and scavenging through the rubbish for broken glass, in order to make enough money to feed themselves.

This is a realistic picture of the conditions of homeless children in India. The author is careful to expose the grimness of the life without traumatising young readers too much. She provides some hope at the end for the boys. The novel provides an opportunity for exposing readers to other worlds.

Recommendation: Use this alongside other stories that will open the eyes of Australian young people to the lives of children in other countries. See the Wide Reading Suggestions section below for ideas about other suitable titles for Years 7 and 8.


This is a newly revised edition in which the Australian main character's name is changed to Anna and the political focus is sharpened by moving the events to the period approaching the massacre in Tiananmen Square.

Young, handsome Chenxi has been appointed liaison person for 18-year-old Anna, daughter of an Australian businessman in Shanghai. Anna is living in China for a year to study traditional Chinese art. Sally Rippin obviously knows Chinese people well and selects her details to give readers not only the sensual experience of Shanghai but also the beginnings of an understanding of different attitudes to human relationships. Anna is increasingly infatuated with Chenxi and initiates sexual contact with him. She naively thinks that she can live more in harmony with Chinese culture with him. When her relationship with Chenxi develops, it should be clear to the young reader that Anna has learnt about Chinese culture at his expense.

Recommendation: The combination of the setting, comedy and romance make this a very accessible novel for a mixed-ability Year 9 class and both boys and girls respond well to it. This is still, by far, the best novel for adolescents about the Australian-Chinese experience, and beyond that is the interesting concept about the representation of Chenxi as the unknowable other and even as the male sex object. There is some selective swearing of the Australian but not the Chinese kind. The single sexual liaison is tenderly described.


This has been a popular class text, mainly in Years 7 and 8, although it has been used successfully with older classes of ESL students. It is the story of an Australian-born Chinese girl making a trip to China with her Malaysian-Chinese mum. The opening section, where the girl is in a plane heading for a 'home' that is totally unknown to her, in the company of a mother who is becoming more Chinese by the minute, strikes a familiar chord with many kids who have had the experience of being taken 'home' to the country of origin.

Baillie has used the device of a broken coin as an excuse to send his characters travelling around China: they are searching for the other half of the coin, held by
family members somewhere in China. We see a range of lifestyles in China: most interestingly, that of a two-thousand-year-old village that has scarcely changed through the centuries. And, finally, we see Beijing at the time of the Tiananmen Square disturbances. Baillie was actually there in Beijing at the time, and the final scenes of the book have a great deal of authenticity.

Recommendation: You can use this as part of a unit on countries or on journeys. Collect examples of other works by Baillie set in Asian countries for a worthwhile author study for Year 8. See the Wide Reading Suggestions section below.

Adeline Yen Mah is best-known as the author of the autobiography, *Fallen Leaves*, and its simplified, abridged version, *Chinese Cinderella: The Secret Story of an Unwanted Daughter*, which is widely studied as a non-fiction text in junior secondary. This is a novel for readers in Years 5 to 8, based on stories the author wrote in her childhood to escape her loneliness. It’s a kung fu adventure set against the background of Shanghai in World War II.

Recommendation: Use this as one of a selection of titles for an action adventure genre study for Year 7 or 8, as outlined in the Wide Reading Suggestions section below. There is a good range of titles all set in Asia.

This is a time-slip story: in a coma, the heroine of *Chinese Cinderella and the Secret Dragon Society* discovers a former life 800 years previously at the time of the Song Dynasty.

Recommendation: This is more historical novel than adventure, but it could be added to a selection of action adventure titles for Years 7 and 8, as suggested in the Wide Reading Suggestions section below.

This very useful text is widely used to meet the non-fiction requirement for Year 7 or 8. It’s a simplified, abridged version of *Falling Leaves*, about growing up as the unwanted daughter in a wealthy family in pre-revolutionary China. It is a fascinating picture of the culture and it also meets the need for texts from other times and places. It is also a very obvious example of the way the composer positions the responder: in this case, to see the character of the stepmother as every bit as evil as any fairytale stepmother.

Recommendation: *Chinese Cinderella* is very widely used in Year 7, but it is also used at Year 9 level with less academic classes. The full adult version – *Falling Leaves* (Penguin 9780140265989) - is often used in Years 9 to 10, especially with girls, alongside other autobiographical books set in China such as *Wild Swans* and *Mao’s Last Dancer*.

This is even funnier than the author’s previous title, *Thai-riffic* – and, again, at times quite moving. The main character is an Australian
boy of Chinese background who is being forced to attend high-pressure coaching classes, when all he wants to do is draw cartoons. He is an engaging character, as is his persistent, misguided but well-meaning mother. The characters are perhaps stereotyped, but this is mitigated by the fact that the protagonist is struggling so hard to escape that stereotype.

Recommendation: This is delightful but may be a bit young for class set use at secondary level. The boy and his friends are in Year 6. Find an excuse for using it for wide reading anywhere from Year 5 to Year 8. It is great to have titles like this that reflect the multicultural nature of our society – and to have titles so wonderfully funny.

Divine Wind by Garry Disher. This is currently out of print. Disher graphically depicts life in Broome in the years 1938 - 1945 within the frame of the intense emotions, heightened by war, which transformed the traditional working and personal relations between Japanese, Aboriginal and European Australians. Disher’s laconic narrator, Hartley, admires his pearling captain father's sense of a fair go and contrasts this attitude with that of a squatter and a military adviser who are forming a local defence unit as a Japanese invasion seems likely: 'Your Abo is unreliable ... He'll guide the Japs through the bush ... You won’t find this written down anywhere, but if the Abos cause trouble we can shoot them, no questions asked.’ The father and son are removed from court when they question the arrest of an Aboriginal man. Similarly, after Pearl Harbour, they seek to defend their Japanese friends and employees, most of whom are interned - except Hartley’s girlfriend, a nurse and the daughter of a Japanese diver. Hart’s sister, also a nurse, is missing after the fall of Singapore. The Japanese are now ‘marked people in the town’, even though many of them have been born in Australia. Afterwards, Mitsy, despite her qualifications as a nurse, is interned, because after the Japanese air attacks on Broome, gaol is the safest place for her. Disher quotes a Department of Information radio broadcast: ‘The principle of White Australia shall never be overturned by armed aggression.’ Disher combines the pace of his wartime romance story with the authenticity of the setting and the complex and changing attitudes of the characters. The air attacks on Broome, especially the plight of those caught in the sea-planes out with the sharks in the burning waters of the Roebuck Bay after their rescue from Indonesia, is realistic, but without dwelling on the bloodshed. The riveting representation of these little-known episodes will suit those students who may be bored by how the textbooks write Australian history.

Recommendation: Both boy and girl average-ability readers in Years 9 and 10 will respond to this very accessible novel. The few sex references of the intercultural romance are well mediated when Hart and Mitsy become lovers. The tension on the friendship as war approaches leads into the action of the bombing scenes. While the novel is currently out of print, you will find inclass sets in many bookrooms.

This is Book 1 of the Dragonkeeper Trilogy, followed by Garden of the Purple Dragon (9781742030609) and Dragon Moon (9781742030616). There is also a pre-quel, Dragon Dawn (9781742030623).

This terrific series introduces students to a fantastic world set in ancient China. In Book 1 a slave girl called Ping rescues a dragon and flees across the country to escape the dragon hunters. In Book 2 Ping hides from her enemies near the Tai Shan mountains where she tries to care for the baby dragon Kai she has inherited. In Book 3 Ping seeks the Dragon Haven and Kai matures to become a dragon of many colours and leader of the dragons. Ping realises that she must end dragon reliance on humans. The three books deliver vivid characterisation, a richly imagined world based on Chinese history and culture and a fascinating relationship between humans and dragons.

Recommendation: Dragonkeeper works as a Year 7 class set, although it is best with girls. Include all four titles in an action adventure genre study for Years 7 or 8, as recommended in the Wide Reading Suggestions section below. Consider as well using the titles for an author or a fantasy genre study.

This is also published as The Two Pearls of Wisdom.
This is also published as Necklace of the Gods.

Eon is a girl dressed as a male, who is training to be a Dragoneye, one of the people who control the magical dragons of China. Goodman builds a wonderfully believable and intricate world as Eon is thrust into the heart of the imperial court when she becomes the Dragoneye of the female Mirror Dragon.

Recommendation: Love, loss, control, gender roles and power are issues to explore with Year 9, who should relish this outstanding fantasy duo. This is strong feminist fiction; make sure that your girls have an opportunity to explore it.

This is the adult version of the autobiography that is published for younger readers as Chinese Cinderella. The author re-visits her childhood in an affluent Chinese family, where she suffered continual emotional abuse as the unwanted stepdaughter. It is a fascinating picture of the impact on the family of the turbulent changes that came with the Communist Revolution. Many readers find it inspiring, as the author rises above the emotional abuse of her childhood to carve out for herself a successful career – first as a doctor, then as a writer – in the United States.

Recommendation: This works well as a class-set text with girls in Years 9 to 11.

Although this is obviously a little out of date now, it is a useful guide to films that you could use for this cross-curriculum perspective.

This non-fiction text is an account of an exchange of stories between a school in Kabul and a school devastated by bushfires in Kinglake. As writer in residence, Neil Grant encourages the traumatized Australian students to make contact with their counterparts in an international school in Kabul. Their contact leads to a great deal of writing, including fictional pieces in which they experience vicariously the lives of others.

**Recommendation:** This could be added to a wide reading selection of non-fiction texts for Year 10. It could also be a useful resource for teachers.

This charming story was Wang’s first published novel. Wang herself is third-generation Australian Chinese, and Mimi's longing to be accepted as fully Australian may have some echoes in the author’s own childhood. Through the gift of a set of pastels that enable Mimi to create a magical world, Mimi brings healing and harmony to her neighbourhood - and gains acceptance by her peers.

**Recommendation:** This is aimed at readers in upper primary school, especially girls.

This award-winning novel highlights the differences between Australia and China, especially in the perception of ‘ghosts’. The wonderfully-realised setting is the ancient Chinese water town of Wuzhen, with what Wang describes as 'its dark alleyways, great wooden houses standing in water, beautiful moon bridges and winding canals'. Australian-born Celeste goes to Wuzhen to spend time with her Chinese grandmother, a famous ghost-hunter, and becomes caught up in a terrifying adventure.

**Recommendation:** This is probably a bit young to use as a class-set novel in secondary, but it is a great read. Include it in an action adventure study, as outlined in the Wide Reading Suggestions section below.

Like *Boy Overboard,* this is quite short and simple and again uses humour to explore some confronting issues. In this case, it is the plight of asylum seekers in detention in Australia. Gleitzman is clearly successful because the book caused howls of protest that such issues were inappropriate for children.

**Recommendation:** This is suitable for Years 5-8. Use it in a selection of titles for wide reading about the refugee experience.

This non-fiction anthology is a very rich collection of true stories about the experiences of Asians in Australia – from ABCs who have been here for generations, but who still look Asian, to very recent migrants. All the stories are quite short – many are only three pages long – and they cover a diverse range of experiences and a wide variety of tone. There are stories of discrimination and prejudice that still obviously hurt, even when the memories are decades old, and
there are stories of comic misunderstandings. The stories are grouped under thematic headings such as ‘Strine’, ‘UnAustralian?’ and ‘Leaving Home’. Many of the stories are about the conflict that is felt by second-generation migrant children as they are torn between family values and traditions and those of their peers. There are many stories that show how language can divide as well as unite. Food and family traditions are frequent themes.

Recommendation: This is a rich resource for all students. It would be a worthwhile text to study in its own right in Years 10 or 11. It is a source of stories to use alongside other texts in a range of units of work on topics like family, migration, difference and diversity, school life. It is an excellent source of related texts for Belonging. Use it alongside other collections of life stories such as The Glory Garage: Growing up Lebanese and Muslim in Australia by Nadia Jamal and Taghred Chandab and Playground: Listening to stories from country and from inside the heart compiled by Nadia Wheatley.


This is a very significant book that should be widely available to young adult readers. It’s by a first-time author who has worked as a teacher of ‘difficult’ boys, and one of its strengths is that the fifteen-year-old male protagonist is someone that any teacher who has taught in the poorer suburbs of a big city will recognise. He’s just an ordinary kid – more motivated to do well at school than most, but not averse to the occasional bit of shoplifting or skylarking. But he is also a Muslim and, although British-born, has a Pakistani father. Post 9/11 he has been shocked to realise that even at home, in Britain, the fact that he is a young Muslim male makes him a threatening figure to some people. To the American authorities desperate to fight ‘the war on terror’, he is a suspicious character. While visiting family in Karachi, he is kidnapped from his aunt’s house and enters a nightmare world of interrogations, beatings, sensory deprivation, isolation, water torture, and forced confessions. He is finally incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay as an ‘enemy combatant’, without rights of any kind or any contact with lawyers or family. Although the story is told in the third-person, the reader sees everything through Khalid’s eyes and we sink into the nightmare with him, at times unable to distinguish between reality and madness.

This is very moving, especially at those times when Khalid is struggling to hold on to his sanity – for example, after days of being deprived of sleep and subjected endlessly to what seem to be nonsensical questions. His crime? Some of the American interrogators are convinced that he looks as if he’s in his early twenties – they dismiss as nonsense his claim to be fifteen. And he was playing an online computer game with his cousin and some others. Khalid is bewildered by his treatment, but another strength of the book is that he refuses to hate, knowing how destructive hatred can be.

Recommendation: This is an absorbing and affecting read for students in Years 9 to 11. While it is reasonably long, it is not a difficult read, and the reader turns the pages compulsively, anxious to know Khalid’s fate. It would be a fascinating companion piece to Doctorow’s *Little Brother*, which is speculative fiction about the response of the American authorities to another terrorist attack on American soil. There are so many parallels – two young men kidnapped, allowed no rights, humiliated and beaten – all in the name of keeping the world safe. But they are very different books in tone: *Little Brother* is a clever thriller where we enjoy the protagonist’s fight to defeat the powers-that-be. *Guantanamo Boy* is based on the experiences of real people whose humanity was ignored.

Canadian Karen Levine wrote this outstanding ‘faction’ text, following research by a Japanese, Fumiko Ishioka, the coordinator of a small museum, the Tokyo Holocaust Centre. Fumiko had asked numerous Holocaust museums around the world for some children’s artefacts that would help her to make the museum experience more effective for children visiting. She received, from Auschwitz, a child’s sock and shoe, a child’s sweater, a can of Zyklon B poisonous gas and Hana’s suitcase. The suitcase proved to be so effective that Fumiko was inspired to set off for Europe to visit several concentration camp museums to find out more about Hana. To her joy, she found drawings made by Hana at Theresienstadt and a list of names that might also include Hana’s brother, George. Ominously, there was a tick beside every name except George’s, and this did indicate that they had all been murdered. Could George be still alive? Indeed he was, and Fumiko traced him to Toronto. In the bittersweet ending, he came to Tokyo with another treasure: many photographs of Hana and his family. His side of the story fills in the gaps of Hana’s short life.

This was the sequence of the research, but Levine has reconstructed Hana’s brief thirteen years of life from being in the only Jewish family in a small town in Czechoslovakia to being separated from them, meeting George again in Theresienstadt, then travelling in a freight train to be gassed on arrival at Auschwitz. Interwoven with this, and accompanied with George’s photographs and Hana’s drawings, Levine tells the other story of Fumiko’s persistent search that brings it all together. Levine’s spare narrative gets the tone just right for this combination of joy, sadness and hope.

*Recommendation*: This is very accessible as an easy read for mixed-ability classes, Years 7-9. It is invaluable for those whose school is too far away from a Jewish Museum and it is a valuable text to support those who can take students on an excursion there. The text demonstrates how information becomes powerful when it becomes personal. Older students may be directed to the question of the relationship between the personal and the political. This text has relevance in our study of Asia, emphasising as it does our common humanity.


This is a charming ghost story set in modern Japan, although the ghost belongs of course to a distant past. Australian Hannah is spending three months in Japan with a Japanese family, each of whom is lovingly drawn. Hannah becomes friends with the daughter of the family, Miki, and together they stumble on an intriguing puzzle that must be told.

The eventual revelation of the connection between the ghost and Hannah rather stretches belief, but that is not important. The strength of the novel lies firmly in its depiction of Japanese culture through Hannah’s eyes, with all its oddities and wonders.

*Recommendation*: This is an enjoyable read for girls in Years 4-7. It is probably a little young to be considered for class set use in Year 7. It would work beautifully as one of a selection of action adventure wide reading titles, providing girls with an alternative to the many novels with a martial arts focus.
The Happiest Refugee could turn the tide of misinformation and fear about boat people and, linked with SBS's stunning series Go Back to Where You Came From, could form a transformative unit in classrooms in Years 9 and 10.
Anh Do is one of the most admired standup comedians in Australia. He also graduated in law from the University of Technology and made the films The Finished People and Footie Legends with his brother Khoa. His account of his journey as a boat person from Vietnam with his family is understated yet deeply distressing. His father was the captain and had to deal with the crew and passengers being terrorised by pirates. A pirate held Do's younger brother over the side of the boat. Towards the end of the journey they ran out of food and water. They were rescued and taken to a Malaysian refugee camp. They finally made their way to Australia as refugees.
Do tells his story with characteristic good humour and wonderful anecdotes about family and friends. His story makes a significant impact on the reader.
Recommendation: Consider this as a class set title for Year 10. You could also use it alongside Unpolished Gem by Alice Pung.

This has an Asian setting but it is strongly based in Chinese mythology. Chinese-born Jax migrated to Australia as a seven-year-old but is unhappy here, as his parents work menial jobs in consecutive shifts to survive. Jax has been marked as a baby by the sign of the mythical creature, Peng, whose role is to ensure that the balance of nature is maintained. In the northern Queensland rainforest, Jax meets a mysterious girl called Yu Yu who helps him in his quest to find Peng.
Recommendation: This is pure fantasy, unlike The Ghost in the Suitcase which combines the strong narrative about the paranormal with a vivid picture of Chinese life. It is suitable for readers in the Year 4-7 age group. Add it to an action adventure study, as suggested in the Wide Reading Suggestions section below.

Koly is obliged to enter a traditional Indian arranged marriage at thirteen; a few months later she is a widow, imprisoned in a kind of social limbo where she is lower than a servant in her husband's family. She is eventually abandoned by her mother-in-law in the holy city of Vrindavan, home to thousands of unwanted widows who spend their days worshipping in order to be fed by the monks. Koly is rescued by a charity that helps these widows (many of them very young) to earn their own living.
Koly is an appealing character and the story has a romantic ending that will please readers. The book is sensitively written and could lead to some vigorous discussion about the tension between traditional cultural practices and basic human rights.
Recommendation: This is a fairly easy read and could be used as a class set for less academic students in Year 7 and 8, especially for girls. Include it in a wide
reading selection of titles about the lives of children in other countries, as suggested in the Wide Reading Suggestions section below.

This is a superb collection of short stories. There are nine in all - some set in India, some in America – all related in some way to the experience of Bengali Indians. Many of these stories are about alienation and the longing for home. The stories are beautifully written, with a range of narrative viewpoints. **Recommendation:** This is probably best at Year 11 but it is worth considering for a talented Year 10 class. Students will relate to the characters’ experiences, while learning a great deal about how short stories are written.

This is set in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Jameela lives in a remote rural village in a wartorn country. Her life becomes impossible when her mother dies and her father remarries, with her new stepmother determined to marry her off. Thrown on her own resources, she eventually finds refuge in an orphanage. The novel is based on the life of a real girl and the orphanage actually exists. **Recommendation:** Use this with Years 7 and 8, especially girls. Make up a wide reading box about the lives of teenage girls in other countries, including *Homeless Girl, Spilled Water, Parvana, Torn Pages and Sold*.

This is a simple diary of two different students (one Australian and one Japanese) who recount their personal journeys as exchange students. What is engaging about these two diaries are the ways they explore the differences and similarities in the two cultures and countries. **Recommendation:** Use *Japan Diary* with Year 7 to get students writing their own journals and also to support tolerance and understanding of other cultures.

This story of four Chinese mothers and their four first-generation-American daughters has become something of a classic. Set in San Francisco and based on the mothers’ meetings for their regular game of mahjong, the novel explores the difficulties of migrant families coping with the inevitable changes in their children as they grow up between two cultures in a new world. **Recommendation:** This is a popular senior text that could be suitable for a mature class of Year 10 girls.

This American novel is set in Aceh in Indonesia, at the time of the 2004 tsunami. It follows the fate of two teenagers in the aftermath of the disaster: Muslim boy, Ruslan, searching for his missing father, and American girl, Sarah, whose family had been holidaying on a yacht just off the coast when the tsunami hit. Sarah is culturally insensitive and arrogant. The pair are thrown together by
circumstances and, despite their differences, Ruslan helps Sarah to care for her seriously ill younger brother. The climax of the story is their encounter with a frenzied media pack when they finally reach safety. The indifference of the journalists to the young people’s condition in their eagerness to get a good story is shocking, as is the clear message that the life of wealthy American Sarah is of much greater value than that of Ruslan or of the thousands of Indonesian children who have died. Sarah has learnt otherwise, her new understanding demonstrated by the fact that she insists on following local custom and dressing modestly for the media interview, in contrast to her contemptuous refusal to ‘pander’ to local sensitivities before the tsunami.

This is a moving story about the tsunami and its effects, as both young people search for their missing fathers against a background of devastating chaos. It is very much about the essential humanity that we share, despite cultural differences.

Recommendation: This is an excellent text for exposing students to an understanding that people of other cultures are not to be feared as ‘the other’ and that different cultural practices are simply different, not necessarily better or worse. This is suitable for use as a class set text for Years 7 or 8. Use it as one of a selection of texts about children from different cultures learning to understand each other, as outlined in the Wide Reading Suggestions section below. The novel could also be used as a companion text to Allan Baillie’s Krakatoa Lighthouse, about the tsunami in 1883.

This is a very readable account of the small Australian force that slowed and eventually stopped the advance of a much larger and more experienced Japanese army who were attempting to cross the Owen Stanley range into New Guinea. Like other non-fiction titles from this publisher, the story uses first-person fictional accounts (although often in the voice of real people) to introduce each chapter.

Recommendation: This is an excellent overview of this iconic event for readers in the Year 6 to 9 age group. Use it alongside the novel Break of Day and the picture book Photographs in the Mud.

Set in 1883 during the period of Dutch colonial rule, this is an exciting story of the eruption of the Krakatoa volcano and the subsequent terrible tsunamis. It is set in the small fishing port of Anjer, where the Dutch have built a stone lighthouse to guide the increasing ship trade through the strait. The protagonist, Kerta, is the young son of the lighthouse keeper.

Baillie’s research is impeccable and he describes the eruption from the first trembles, including the tourist trips taken by the Europeans to view the sights. They scorn the locals’ warning that something huge and dangerous is awakening. Research into the historical events is informed by an understanding of what happened in 2005. The final scenes of the devastating power of the water are unforgettable.

Recommendation: This is an excellent class set choice for Years 7 or 8. It has the excitement of the survival story and the sadness of the loss, as well as great insight into the nature of colonialism and its impact on both the rulers and the oppressed. It
could be used alongside *The Killing Sea* by Richard Lewis, which is about the 2005 tsunami. It could also be used as part of an Allan Baillie author study, as outlined in the Wide Reading Suggestions section below.

This is a novel about the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia that may still be found in many English bookrooms. Mang and his younger brother are separated as they try to flee the soldiers who are destroying life and society in Cambodia. Vithy has a dangerous and difficult task to find his way to the border to be reunited with his brother.
**Recommendation:** It’s thirty years since the killing fields formed the context of this moving story; many students in Year 7 and 8 will be unaware of this context and would benefit from reading and discussing this novel.

This romance is inspired by the experience of the author’s parents. Wang is third-generation Chinese Australian. Her protagonist, Mirabel or Lei An, is based on her Australian-born mother. At seventeen Mirabel falls in love with a young Chinese soldier who is briefly posted to Melbourne. JJ has to return to China where the civil war is raging. Mirabel, with her baby daughter, sets off against all warnings to a chaotic Shanghai to find him.
The strength of the novel lies in the vivid depiction of China in the early forties.
**Recommendation:** Girls in middle secondary will thoroughly enjoy this unusual romance and its courageous protagonist and will acquire a good deal of knowledge about Chinese history at the same time.

Based on true stories of Afghan girls now living in Australia, this is the story of a girl whose family is forced to flee Afghanistan. With her mother and younger sister and brother, Mahtab spends almost two weeks crammed under furniture in the back of a truck as they make the journey across the mountains into Pakistan. There follow lonely, isolated months in a shed, when their father decides to go ahead and find a home for them. Eventually, not knowing whether their father is alive or dead, Mahtab’s family risks the journey through Indonesia to an overcrowded, leaking boat that eventually reaches the Australian mainland. The welcome they expected, however, is not there.
This is an accessible account that enables young readers to experience the situation through Mahtab’s eyes. The emphasis is on the discomfort and boredom, as much as it is on the fear and loneliness. Worst of all for Mahtab is her ignorance of her father’s fate.
**Recommendation:** This is an excellent book for readers in the Year 5 to 8 age group. You could use it as a core text in a unit of work on asylum seekers, as outlined in the Wide Reading Suggestions section below.

This autobiography is absolutely wonderful and has been widely used in schools at senior levels, despite its size. This film tie-in edition is even bigger, with additional chapters added to cover the period from the publication of the book,
through the years of fame as a writer, to the release of the film. Despite its length, the book is very accessible. The author, born in 1961, grew up in severe poverty in China – one of seven boys in a family whose diet consisted often of nothing but dried yams. Selected by chance as a student in Madame Mao’s ballet school, he became a great dancer, eventually defecting to the West where he established an international reputation. About three-quarters of the book is about the years in China – in the family village and then in the ballet school in Beijing, and it is this part of the story that is so fascinating. It’s also a very positive story. The representation of the poverty of his childhood is memorable, but so is his picture of the warmth of a loving family.

There is no better example of literature from other places – and of other times, because there are many differences between the China of Li Cunxin’s childhood and China today.

The author, now a Melbourne stockbroker, has become something of a media star and your librarian will probably be able to access videotaped interviews with him. He is also often available to speak to schools.

A simplified and abridged Young Readers’ Edition is also available (9780143301646).

Recommendation: Use the Young Reader’s Edition in Years 7 and 8 and for mixed-ability classes in Years 9 and 10. Use the unabridged original edition for better readers in Years 9 to 12. This is strongly recommended for whole class study, or use it as part of a wide reading unit on other countries or other cultures, as part of a wide reading selection of autobiographies, or as a related text in an ‘Overcoming adversity’ unit of work.

Mao’s Last Dancer directed by Bruce Beresford. 2009. PG.

The film of Li Cunxin’s best-selling autobiography achieved that rare accolade for Australian films - box-office success in Australian cinemas. While the ballet scenes are probably the strongest in the film, the scenes in the reconstructed village of Li’s childhood are of great interest.

Recommendation: This can be used alongside a version of the autobiography (including the picture book version, The Peasant Prince) or as a film study in its own right, especially in Years 8 or 9.


Li Cunxin (pronounced Lee Schwin Sing) was born in 1961, one of seven boys in a very poor family in China. By chance (his peasant status and ability to withstand pain were helpful attributes), he was selected to become a student in Madame Mao’s ballet school. He grew up to become a talented ballet dancer, and, after defecting to the West, an international ballet star. The contrasts of Li’s life from his poor family village, to the demanding ballet school in Beijing, to life as a famous dancer, and then to senior manager in a stock broking firm in Melbourne are fascinating. Students will find his descriptions of his family’s struggles to survive and their love and support inspiring.

Recommendation: Use this engrossing and very positive story with Year 7 to help them appreciate the conventions of autobiographical writing, to stimulate their own writing and to support their understanding of a different culture and country. The original version of Mao’s Last Dancer won The Australian’s Book of
the Year award in 2003. It has been reprinted more than thirty times, with a new extended film tie-in edition published in 2009 to cover the years since the publication of the book. *The Peasant Prince* is the picture book version.

**The Moonshadow series** by Simon Higgins. Random House Australia. The author describes this series of action adventure novels as being set in a ‘romanticised historical Japan’, loosely based on the period of the Tokugawa shogunate. Moonshadow is a teenage warrior, highly trained in martial arts, who survives a series of dangerous events. There is a fantasy element, with some characters possessing magical powers. The stories are fast-paced, with a strong emphasis on themes of loyalty and friendship. The books have a detailed Japanese glossary.

*Recommendation*: These are very popular with readers in Years 7 and 8, especially boys who are interested in the martial arts. They are an easier read than the *Young Samurai* series, and although they are fairly long the font is quite large. Add these to a wide reading selection of action adventure novels, as outlined in the Wide Reading Suggestions section below.

**Titles in the series in reading order:**
- *The Eye of the Beast* 9781741662832
- *The Wrath of Silver Wolf* 9781741664058
- *The Twilight War* 9781864719772

**Nine Hours North** by Tim Sinclair. Penguin, 2006. 9780143003762. 216 pp. This is set in Japan. The title refers to the flying time from Australia, but not the cultural distance. Adam is a fair-haired twenty-one-year-old Australian who teaches English at a language school in Nagoya. As a dedicated pushbike rider, he does not have a good opinion of himself, slumped in the train like the rest of the ‘salarymen’. His girlfriend, Sarah, also teaches but seems to take things much more seriously. When Marianne arrives to squash into their concrete block mini-apartment, Adam and Sarah’s relationship seems to be ‘sliding away’.

The pair look forward to their long promised pushbike tour to see the hidden Japan, but their increasingly different responses to life in Japan will separate them. They each transfer their repressed feelings into resentments about the rural Japan that they encounter. The mountain lake is overcrowded; a luxury mobile home with its satellite dish, microwave oven and screaming children parks next to their tent. Morning brings jet skiers and ‘the pre-dawn zeal of the camp-ground inspector’. The next night brings a storm, and they find themselves having ‘a you and me discussion’.

Adam has reached that stage of the trans-cultural experience that begins with the wonder at the perfection of the new culture, moves to fear and depression that you will never cope with it, and then moves to frustration and anger before, if you persist, you may progress to acceptance, as you begin to pretend that you’re one of the natives. Sinclair’s free verse mirrors this experience, projecting the collapse of the personal relationship on to Adam’s perception of Japan.

*Recommendation*: This is accessible and interesting for readers in Years 10 or 11 for its ironic commentary on an Australian young man’s experience as a gaijin or long nose, in Japan. Use it in comparison with the cherry blossom travel brochures and travel internet sites. Peter Carey’s *Wrong About Japan* is an
equally accessible non-fiction account of his similar experience in comparison to the experience of his young son.

This superb novel about the Australian-Vietnamese experience is based on the real-life experience of co-author, David Phu An Chiem. To write the book, Brian Caswell would listen to David’s true stories of his experiences. These stories were then fictionalised, using two main characters: a boy character based closely on David himself and a slightly older girl cousin.
The novel uses Caswell’s characteristic narrative: multiple voices moving backwards and forwards in time and space in a style very like that of cinema. The book is tightly structured. It presents the classic refugee story: the escape from Vietnam in the middle of the night, the encounter with pirates in the China Sea, the Malaysian refugee camp, and then the long hard years becoming established in Australia. It does not avoid the difficulties. We meet the Vietnamese gangs on the streets of Cabramatta and we see how dangerous they are. But we’ve also seen the origins of the gangs in the Malaysian camps, so although we are aware of the tragic consequences of their actions, we have some understanding of the gang members as well.
*Recommendation:* This was widely used as a class set in Years 9 and 10 and was also very successful with older ESL students. You may still want to use it in class sets. It would be particularly interesting to explore how the world of Australian-Vietnamese people has changed since the book was written, and how the experiences of more recent refugees are similar and different to that of the Vietnamese boat people. It would be interesting for students to read alongside *The Happiest Refugee.*

When her brother dies and her father is imprisoned by the authorities, twelve-year-old Parvana and her mother and sister are unable to leave the family home. Under Taliban law, women and girls are not allowed to leave home without a man, so Parvana, her mother and sisters must stay inside. Living in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime means that all the liberties we take for granted as free people are denied Parvana and her family. When their food runs out, they face starvation, so Parvana decides to try and support her family. She dresses as a boy, to make a living in the marketplace of Kabul, knowing that discovery could mean a beating, imprisonment, torture or death. Her courage in the face of crushing fear and repression is inspiring.
*Recommendation:* This is the first book of a trilogy. It is followed by *Parvana’s Journey* (9781865089997) and *Shauzia* (9781741142846). Use this novel and its sequels in Years 7 or 8. Asking students to imagine living in a country where women and girls are not allowed to leave the house without a man will allow for discussions about human rights and the treatment of women, in a context of cultural diversity and difference. A comparison with Islamic women’s experiences in Australia in such texts as *Does My Head Look Big in This?* and *The Glory Garage* would be important in establishing that prejudice knows no borders.
**The Peasant Prince** by Li Cunxin, illustrated by Anne Spudvilas. Viking, 2007. ISBN 9780670070541

This is the picture book version of *Mao's Last Dancer*. It is simply and lyrically told, using two main unifying symbols – the kite that the boy and his father are flying on the first double page spread, and the father’s story of the frog who wants to escape from the well.

*Recommendation*: You can use this with students in Years 4 to 8 who have not read any other version of Li Cunxin’s story, or you could explore with older students the way in which the long and detailed autobiography has been transformed into this visual medium.


This picture book tells the parallel stories of a young Australian and a young Japanese on the Kokoda Track during World War II. There is a very clever use of framing, mainly reflecting the domestic lives of the two men – lives that are very similar. At the end the framed photographs are found, stuck together by the mud of the track and the blood of the dying men. ‘War’s a mug’s game, hey?’ says Jack to Hoshi as they lie dying, and although they cannot understand each other they recognise their common humanity.

*Recommendation*: This is a powerful story about the consequences of war and is worth reading for its own sake, but you could use it as well beside other texts about Kokoda, such as Tony Palmer’s novels *Break of Day* and the non-fiction text, Peter Macinnis’s *Kokoda Track: 101 Days*.


This superb picture book has recently been re-issued in paperback, making it accessible for classroom use. Set in Burma, it tells the story of one of the generals coming to the village to bully and threaten the villagers. A brave protester succeeds in making the general look ridiculous. The resolution is very satisfying.

*Recommendation*: This can be read by primary school students but it resonates with readers of all ages. Consider using it for close study as a text in its own right. Use it as one of a group of texts about human rights abuses, including *The China Coin, Revolution is not a Dinner Party* and *Trash*.


This is a superb text for senior study. It is short enough and easy enough to be accessible to less academic streams, but the ideas explored will challenge your most talented students. The whole novel is a dramatic monologue. The speaker is a young Pakistani who has spent a lot of time in the United States where he had great success, first as a student and then as a businessman. But 9/11 changed everything for him. Here he is in a cafe in Lahore, talking to a stranger. Over the course of the afternoon and evening we learn his story, as he tells it to the stranger. We never hear the stranger directly, although we can guess at some of what he says and what he does from the narrator’s comments. The stranger is probably an American, possibly a military type, and he becomes an increasingly sinister figure as the afternoon progresses. Is it a wallet or perhaps a gun that is
in his inside coat pocket? What is his purpose there in Lahore? The tension mounts, climaxing in a violent but ambiguous ending.

*Recommendation:* I have had very positive reports of the success of this in the classroom. It allows for an intelligent exploration of issues raised by the ‘war on terror’: the simple good/evil, black/white dichotomies are questioned. It is mostly being used in Year 11, and in Victoria it is set for study for Year 12, but it is within the capabilities of a good Year 10 class.

**Revolution is not a Dinner Party** by Ying Chang Compestine. Puffin, 2008. 9780143303855. 244 pp.

The title is one of the quotations from Chairman Mao that Chinese school students in the 70s had to chant ‘lovingly’. There is an author’s note that, although this is fiction, a great deal of this story is autobiographical. I read along with the first-person narration of Ling from the age of nine to thirteen, as she reluctantly adapts to the fact that she is the only student without a red scarf. Her parents are doctors: her father, a surgeon, had been to the USA for medical education. When comrade Li comes to live in her father’s study, the naïve narrator at this stage wonders about her mother’s unusually stern looks when Mr Li is around, and why Mr Li cuts the power off frequently. After Ling’s dress, made by friendly Mrs Wong upstairs, is mocked as bourgeois, Dr Wong disappears, red guards come and trash Mrs Wong’s rooms, and events speed towards Ling’s own father’s demotion to hospital cleaner, then gaol. They live in traditional courtyard housing, where compulsory attendance at humiliation sessions, led by Li, increases, as the gardener, then Mrs Wong and her son, have their hair savagely cut, before being taken away to a labour camp. After burning the family photo albums and all American evidence, Ling’s father hides the photo of the San Francisco Golden Gate Bridge, because it is the one symbol of hope for his family’s future. After numerous and exciting events, Ling survives, and the family is reunited when the Red Guards fight each other after the arrest of Mao’s wife.

*Recommendation:* This is an easy read for most Year 7 students: the twelve-point font and generous spacing belie the length of the text that moves swiftly through the events that develop the character of Ling from innocent, wondering observer to street-wise survivor.


Sadako Sasaki was two years old when the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, on August 6, 1945. In 1955, at age 11, Sadako was diagnosed with leukemia, caused by radiation from the atom bomb. Sadako’s best friend told her of an old Japanese legend, which said that anyone who folds a thousand paper cranes would be granted a wish. Sadako hoped that the gods would grant her wish to get well. She started to work on the paper cranes and completed over one thousand before dying on October 25, 1955, at the age of twelve. A statue of Sadako holding a golden crane has been placed in Hiroshima Peace Park. Inscribed at the bottom of the statue is the prayer: *This is our cry, This is our prayer, Peace in the world.* Eleanor Coerr’s retelling of the Sadako story is a powerful and emotional one.
Recommendation: This simple tale of love and death, courage and hope can be read to a Year 7 or 8 class in a forty-minute period, and the aural experience can be a powerful one for the reader and the audience. Keep a few tissues handy and not just for the students! With such a quick read, students could be asked to write a journal response, make some paper cranes and research the background to the book and the plight of others affected by radiation sickness over the generations.

This is a moving story about the refugee experience from one of the UK’s best writers for children. Morpurgo was inspired by the story of the Australian sniffer dog that went missing in Afghanistan for 14 months. The dog he writes about was used by the British to detect explosives, but it disappeared after an attack and was presumed to have been killed. The dog turned up months later many hundreds of kilometres away in the caves where Aman, his mother and grandmother are trying to survive.

Aman and his mother make the terrible journey from Afghanistan to try to join relatives in England, including several days locked in the back of a truck with many others without food or water. The story is narrated by 15-year-old Matt, who becomes Aman’s best friend at school and who is horrified when, after six years living in the UK, Aman and his mother are denied refugee status, are arrested and are about to be deported. Matt’s narration is interspersed with Aman’s story, told to Matt’s grandfather in the visiting room at the detention centre.

*Recommendation:* Morpurgo achieves admirably his purpose of allowing young readers to understand that boys like Aman are just like them, not ‘the other’. This would make a great Year 7 class set. However, you may have to struggle against students’ initial assumption that the book looks a bit young for them. The font is a comfortable size and there are Birmingham’s wonderful illustrations, so that the format seems to be that of a book for younger readers. However, the characters are in their mid-teens and the content is perfect for junior secondary.

This companion volume to *Parvana* and *Parvana’s Journey* takes up the story of a minor character in the previous books. Shauzia escapes from a Pakistani refugee camp and tries to survive on the streets of the city. Deborah Ellis, who has worked in the refugee camps, provides a realistic picture of life in the camps and of children’s desperate struggle to survive on the streets. Shauzia is eventually taken in by an American family and exposed to levels of material comfort that she has never dreamed of, but there is a serious clash of values, particularly over the notion of ‘sharing’, and she is returned to the camp. As the novel ends, the Americans have begun bombing Afghanistan and Shauzia chooses to return to her homeland with a group of nurses.

*Recommendation:* For Years 7-8. This is a useful text for exposing students to lifestyles very different from their own.

In *Sold*, thirteen-year-old Lakshmi lives with her family in the mountains of Nepal. When the family falls deeper into poverty, Lakshmi is sold to work in a brothel as a prostitute. This first-person account is horrifying and difficult to read but does end with some hope when attempts are made to rescue girls from the brothel. This powerful text will make a strong impression on Year 8 students.

**Songman** by Allan Baillie. This is currently out of print. This absorbing adventure story is set in the north of Australia, long before European settlement. Macassan fishermen from the islands to the north regularly visited the coast and traded with the Indigenous population. An Aboriginal boy, Yukuwa, and his father travel to the islands with the Macassans in order to show them how to make bark canoes. Yukuwa is exposed to a whole range of new experiences - not only the superior technology of other peoples, but also the brutality of 'civilised' justice systems and racism. The reader sees this new world through the eyes of the boy. *Recommendation:* This is an exciting read for Years 7 and 8. It is also a cleverly imagined recreation of Indigenous life prior to European settlement and a critical look at the effects of colonisation.

**Soraya the Storyteller** by Rosanne Hawke. Lothian Books, 2004. 97807344407092. 176 pp. Soraya is a twelve-year-old Afghan girl whose family has been persecuted by the Taliban. Their attempt to find sanctuary in Australia results in a period in the Woomera Detention Centre, followed by an uncertain future in the community on Temporary Protection Visas. Like her father, Soraya is a storyteller, and it is her stories that enable her to make connections between the difficulties of the present and the traditions of her homeland. *Recommendation:* This is an accessible account, based closely on real experiences, of the asylum seeker experience during the years when TPVs were in place. It is aimed at readers in Years 7 and 8.

**The Spare Room** by Kathryn Lomer. UQP 2004. 9780702234774. 180 pp. This excellent Australian novel is about culture shock: the experience of a young Japanese man sent by his family to Tasmania to learn English. His homestay family are not quite what he was expecting. The tension between Akira and his Australian family is finally resolved when they discover that they have something very important in common: a shared grief. This is an excellent look at the experience of trying to learn to survive in an alien culture, with much humour based on strange Australian customs and the peculiarities of the Australian idiom. Despite being quite short, this is fairly mature in its appeal. It is both moving and funny. *Recommendation:* This works as a class set in Year 10. It is especially useful if you have students of English as a Second Language.

**Spilled Water** by Sally Grindley. Bloomsbury 2004. 9780747571469. 224 pp. This is a charming story of a young Chinese girl from a poor but happy family, whose life is transformed when her father dies. She is trapped first in domestic servitude in the apartment of a wealthy family who are looking for a wife for their mentally disabled son; then, when she flees, she becomes a virtual prisoner
in one of China’s many factories, making toys for the West, the youngest of a horde of very young girls working very long hours of ‘voluntary’ overtime in appalling conditions.

How can the word ‘charming’ be used about a story of such adversity? The girl has great courage and resilience and, in even the harshest of conditions, she finds friendship and sometimes even fun. This is a girl who refuses to be a victim. She remembers always her father’s words that ‘The journey of a thousand miles starts from beneath your feet.’ Her story is narrated in the first person and it is an appealing voice. There is even a happy ending. 

**Recommendation:** For Years 5-8, especially girls. It could be used for shared reading – as a class set novel, for group work or even for reading aloud. Although it is over 200 pages long, the print is large and the language accessible. Add it to a wide reading box on other cultures, on family or on journeys. Consider it as a title to explore concepts like courage and resilience. Consider also including it in a study of gender: it is because she is a girl that her uncle insists that the family can no longer support her after her father’s death.

**Spirited Away** directed by Hayao Miyazaki. 2001. PG.

Chihiro is a child who falls into a fantastic world and must find her way back to reality and rescue her parents as she makes her way from childhood to adulthood. *Spirited Away* is a complex film. It offers students from 7-10 an array of issues and cinematography for discussion, including a wealth of Japanese folklore, a critical commentary on environmental pollution, and an examination of nostalgia for the past against the reality and problems of a modern Japanese society. Kwok and McNight’s *Film Asia* devotes a chapter to it. The film won an Academy Award for best-animated feature.


Mortensen is an American who has a mission to build schools - especially for girls - in the most remote parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. He employs an interesting group of locals to assist him in his mission. He established a charity - the Central Asia Institute - about 17 years ago and works tirelessly promoting the cause. He told the story of how he was inspired to take up this mission in *Three Cups of Tea*, which is also available in a version for younger readers (see below). This sequel, aimed at an adult audience, provides a great deal of insight into life in remote rural areas.

**Recommendation:** Year 10 students with an interest in world issues will find this informative.

**Tales of the Otori** by Lian Hearn. Hodder.

Book 1 is *Across the Nightingale Floor* (9780733621291); Book 2 is *Grass for His Pillow* (9780733619878); Book 3 is *Brilliance of the Moon* (9780733619892). A prequel, *Harsh Cry of the Heron* (9780733621901), was added in 2007.

Written by one of Australia’s most eminent writers for children and published as adult books, these texts contain nothing that would worry teachers and librarians: the violence is effectively conveyed with carefully selected details entirely appropriate to the setting around the sixteenth century in Japan.
The opening of Book 1 is the most violent part, but it is superbly narrated in the persona of Timasu, a boy on the cusp of manhood and a member of the group known as The Hidden, who are 'forbidden to kill and taught to forgive each other'. He finds his village in flames and his people massacred. Worse for him, in his attempt to escape he caused Lord Iida of the Tohan clan to lose face. When he is pursued through the forest, Lord Shigeru of the Otori clan saves his life. Several of the pursuit group are killed, but one wolf-faced man loses an arm in his escape. Thus revenge is set up as one future development. Lord Shigeru is in grief for the loss of his brother at the hands of the Tohan clan in the feudal anarchy of the times. He is also separated from his love, the lady Maruyama, from another clan and they are both entangled in the web of inheritance vows, traditions and arranged marriages. Travelling incognito, Shigeru takes the boy to the Otori clan castle, renaming him Takeo as his Hidden name is too dangerous. There, Lord Shigeru declares that he will adopt the boy. Takeo is much too old now, at sixteen, to become accomplished in either the representational, literary or martial arts, but he will become a mimic who can attain a useful standard of practice. ‘A mad hunger for learning’ emerges in Takeo but something else will also transform his life, something unknown which ‘goes back to the time when magic was greater than the strength of arms’.

In Book 2, *Grass for His Pillow*, Hearn changes to a third-person narration that quickly draws the reader into the world of the warring clans of Japan and the parallel stories of Takeo and Kaede. Both characters are faced with apparently insurmountable conflicts that give exciting tension to the narrative. Kaede will either follow the traditional path and marry according to her father's selection of a suitable lord to prop up his failing estates or take up the more complicated inheritance which she legally can demand and rule in her own right. Takeo is strung out by the tension of his two inheritances: as the adopted son of Lord Shigeru and as the lower-class son who has inherited the mystic powers of the Tribe. *The Brilliance of the Moon* brings the trilogy to a close, perhaps in a darker mood. Takeo is predicted to face success after fighting five battles - four to win and one to lose - and will be safe from all except his own son. ‘Death comes suddenly and life is fragile and brief ... It was the fragility of life that made it so precious.’

*Recommendation:* While you will probably regard these as suitable for good readers in mid-secondary upwards, keen younger fantasy readers will also devour them for the tension and action. The series is read enthusiastically by fantasy fans of all ages. Consider using them as part of a fantasy selection of Asian-based titles for a wide reading unit for Years 9 or 10, as suggested in the Wide Reading Suggestions section below.


McCaughrean transports the reader with effortless ease to fourteenth-century Delhi, where the Hindus surprise the Mongols’ leader Tamburlaine by attacking with an army led by terrifying, unknown giant beasts. Rusti, a twelve-year-old, is ordered to take a young elephant prisoner: such is the arrogance of emperors! McCaughrean conflates the terror of Rusti and Kavi, the Indian boy mahout, with the terror of the young elephant Mumu, who lifts up both boys with her trunk.
and runs into Tamburlaine’s camp. There, amid the swirling dust of the plain and
the walls of one hundred thousand prisoners, ‘life was as worthless as a fly in a
jug of milk’. Rusti, now in charge of the emperor’s elephant, needs to save Kavi to
Teach him to look after Mumu. In the next attack on Delhi, Kavi, in turn, saves
Rusti. Their interdependence gradually becomes friendship.
Rusti disguises Kavi as a girl (a Mongol boy would rather die) and the two have
happy days, as Kavi teaches Rusti the skills of a mahout. Further adventures
come when the emperor’s chronicler discovers Kavi’s disguise. However, the
chronicler is conspiring to assassinate Tamburlaine, and all their lives are
threatened. There is a wonderful climax when the elephants perform for
Tamburlaine’s latest marriage amid the chaos of the assassination attempt.
McCaughrean is unafraid to comment on the different cultural values of the racial
and religious groups. Kavi escapes attention because foreigners ‘all look the
same’. When Rusti’s brother dies, his wife has to marry him. Finally, Samarqand
is a city where all nationalities live, and Rusti learns from the chronicler the
inter-racial secret of his birth.

**Recommendation:** This superb writer has won every major award for children’s
books. The continued pace and tension of the Mongol wars and Kavi’s
endangered life in disguise, set against the personal intrigues of Rusti’s family
and the chronicler, ensure that the ideas in the text are always accessible but do
not ever detract from the action. The book is almost an easy read for reluctant
readers, who may well be drawn into the reading by their enchantment with the
elephants. It is a great Year 7 class set. Use it with related texts about children
from very different cultures learning to understand each other, as outlined in the
Wide Reading Suggestions section below.

**A Taste of Cockroach** by Allan Baillie. This is currently out of print.
This is a terrific collection of Baillie’s stories, almost all set in South-East Asia.
They are all fiction, apart from the introductory story about Baillie’s trip as a
young man, recently disabled, into the mountains of Nepal and his dilemma
when offered by a village elder, as a welcoming courtesy, a drink of water that he
knows is highly likely to be quite dodgy.

**Recommendation:** This collection is a great resource for this cross-curriculum
priority and is worth looking for. You will use the stories across Years 7 to 10.

**Thai-riffic!** by Oliver Phommavanh. Puffin Books, 2010. 9780143304852. 191
pp.
Lengy (Albert Lengviriyakul) is of Thai heritage but it’s not something he boasts
about. He’s underwhelmed by the clever name his parents have given to their
restaurant (Thai-riffic!), by the fact that he is the main guinea pig for Dad’s curry
recipes (when he would much rather eat pizza), by the need to help out in the
restaurant each night and to spend weekends letterboxing the district with
promotional flyers. He tries to sabotage the Year 7 feast to celebrate cultural
diversity by adding so much chilli to the dishes his parents cook that he is sure
no Aussie will be able to eat them. It’s only when he is persuaded to help his
friend Rajiv with a school project about Thailand that he realises that being an
Aussie Thai can be cool.
Recommendation: This is a high-interest title for readers in the Year 4-7 age group. Boys especially will enjoy the humour. It’s a warm story about family, friendship and community and a celebration of Australian multiculturalism.

This is an inspirational account of the successful establishment of schools in some of the most remote regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan.
Recommendation: This is suitable for Years 7-8 non-fiction class study.

This is the second book in the magnificent Temeraire series, set in an alternate world based very closely on that of the Napoleonic Wars. In Book 1 the strong bond between Captain Will Laurence and the dragon Temeraire is established, and together they have been part of an army of dragons defending Britain against Napoleon. But the dragon's egg had been intended by China as a gift to Napoleon, and in the second book Laurence and Temeraire are forced to travel to China, to the imperial court of the eighteenth century. Although this is fantasy, there is much to fascinate the reader in the depiction of the court and in the Chinese worldview, so different from that of the British. The British, for example, have never been able to accept that the dragons' intelligence is superior to their own: in China, dragons - especially the rare Celestial dragons like Temeraire - are treated with proper respect.
Recommendation: This is a great read for mature fantasy fans, Year 9 upwards. You could use it as part of a fantasy wide reading unit, as outlined in the Wide Reading Suggestions below.

This impressive novel is a perfect class set text for Years 7-9. Set in the Philippines, it is narrated by multiple voices, including those of three young boys who make a meagre living scavenging on a huge tip in Manila. The tip is their home as well as their workplace. One day one of the boys discovers a bag, containing an identity card, a key and some money. The money is very welcome, but it soon becomes clear that the bag is much more valuable than it appears, when hordes of police descend on the tip offering large rewards for its recovery. The bag holds a deadly secret and the boys’ decision to solve the mystery propels them into a very dangerous situation.
This is a breathtaking thriller with wonderfully appealing characters. The surprising ending is astonishingly right.
This will give students insight into the lives of the very poor in third-world countries and the impossibility of social justice in corrupt regimes. It will also give them an appreciation of the possibilities of multiple narration.
Recommendation: I would use this with a Year 8 class, but it will work with bright Year 7s and it would be a satisfying text for those Year 9 students who might not cope with something longer and more difficult. It is a fairly easy read. It begs to be accompanied by some research into the lives of children growing up in intense poverty. It also lends itself to an investigation of the consequences of
stereotyping people: these kids have been labelled ‘trash’. This is an outstanding novel, ideal for use with the Australian curriculum.

This is vintage Baillie: an exciting adventure story set against the background of a troubled South-east Asian country – in this case an Indonesian island where the army is ruthlessly suppressing the local independence movement. Pat has joined his father in a search for treasure in the many wrecks off the coast. The action is exciting and the danger deadly but this is much more than just a boys’ adventure story. Baillie’s characteristic narrative technique is perfect for the exploration of what motivates people to take life-threatening risks. He moves backwards and forwards from third-person narration into a kind of stream-of-consciousness style that allows the reader to slip into the mind of the main character. There is also a strong sense of history and its influence on the present, with Pat’s vividly imagined stories of what might have happened to the people on board the ancient wrecks.

*Recommendation*: This is an excellent class set novel, especially with boys in Years 6-9.

Always entertaining and often humorous about the migrant experience, Alice Chung’s memoir contributes to our understanding of the Chinese experience in Australia. ‘This story does not begin on a boat’, she insists in the opening sentence, and the reader is plunged into the Footscray markets in Melbourne, ‘the loudest and grottiest in Australia’. Alice represents her mother as a shouter rather than a talker and enjoys telling comic stories against her in her role as the constant harbinger of doom and the amused observer of the ‘white ghost’ European Australians, like a scientist observing slides under a microscope, exclaiming ‘Wah!’ at their ‘vomit food’ and the ‘round red-headed demons’. Pung often uses present tense liveliness to dramatise family events and tensions. She uses italics to give the reader her thoughts about her very mild rebellion in getting a ‘skip’ boyfriend. ‘You’re like his third world trip … his substitute exotic experience.’ Does he like her, just to spite his parents? She feels like ‘Woody Allen in a black wig.’ However, there are more tender reminders about adjusting to life in ‘paradise’ after surviving Pol Pot’s rape of Cambodia. Her mother suffers black clouds of depression, boredom and frustration about learning English and being dependent on her daughter. Alice becomes the go-between in the war between mother and grandma. This role leads to some time leaps and compressions, as old wounds from the past are revealed. Mum finally finds that her fierce bargaining instincts can be reversed to help her become a successful salesperson in her husband’s white goods franchise.
Alice, too, suffers depression, being mute at school and adopting her ‘rubber mask of a face’. Fearful of her end of school results, she wins a Premier’s Prize and heads for Law study. After her brief rebellion, there is a tender scene where she breaks up with her boyfriend to resume her role as ‘dutiful daughter’.

*Recommendation*: This is a prescribed text for HSC, but that should not prevent you from using it at Year 10 level. Both European Australians and those with Asian parents enjoy this entertaining and humorous memoir. It is a valuable book written from the Chinese point of view and one that is brave enough to go beyond memoir into not so gentle satire.
The Vermonia series by Yo-Yo. Walker Books UK.

Titles in reading order:
- Quest for the Silver Tiger
- Call of the Winged Panther
- Release of the Red Phoenix
- The Rukan Prophecy
- The Warriors’ Trial
- To the Pillar of Wind

This is an authentic manga series of adventures, presented in unique hardcover formats. They are graphic novels to be read, as in Japanese, from the back to the front and, on each page, from right to left. There are full colour inserts and gateway foldouts that provide teasers to following episodes. Doug, Jim, Naomi and Mel are faced with a series of life-threatening challenges which they can overcome only by releasing their inner warriors. The series has web support, including online games with clues to be found in the stories.

Recommendation: Students in Years 5-8 who have become fans of anime movies will embrace these with enthusiasm.


Strongly based on the author’s research into the real experiences of asylum seekers in Australia, this is the fictional story of teenager Gulnessa and her family, who flee Afghanistan after their father is taken away by the Taliban. The family spends years of boredom and uncertainty in a remote detention centre in Western Australia before finally being granted temporary protection visas. The story is told in the first person by Gulnessa, a courageous and empathetic voice. The nightmarish memories of the family’s experiences in Afghanistan and of the traumatic journey to Australia are told in flashback. The book gives real insight into the experience of asylum seekers and can be disturbing. How many Australians, for example, knew that the guards in Australian detention centres were instructed to address the inmates by number, not name?

Recommendation: Sadly, this will be read mainly by girls, because of the female protagonist, or by boys who are already politically aware. It is perhaps a little too long for use as a class text in mixed ability classes, but be sure to read it as extension reading in Years 7-10 for any unit of work on refugees or on other cultures. See the Wide Reading Suggestions below.


The Woman Warrior is a semi-autobiographical text, based on Kingston’s life and her family’s experiences in China and America and interspersed with Chinese myths and legends. The stories in the book weave between the real and the surreal, beginning in China with the tragic suicide of Kingston’s aunt after bearing an illegitimate child, and ending with Kingston’s childhood experiences in California. As the first child born in a new land, she struggles to reconcile her home life with life outside its confines. The inspiring tale of Fa Mulan, a legendary Chinese woman warrior, is adapted by Kington as she places herself in the mythical account of the woman who raises an army to overthrow a corrupt
regime. We also hear the story of Kingston’s mother’s training as a Chinese doctor and another aunt’s journey to America to find a separated husband. 

**Recommendation:** While *The Woman Warrior* has been traditionally taught to Years 11 or 12, it is worth considering for a class of mature girls in Year 10.


This is an exciting series of action novels that appeal especially to boys in Years 7 and 8 – particularly boys who are interested in martial arts. They are set in seventeenth century Japan and, while they make no claims to historical accuracy, they are based on some real people and events. The main character, Jack Fletcher, is a British boy stranded in a country that is deeply suspicious of strangers. His survival depends on the warrior training he has received. The fight scenes – and there are plenty of them – are superbly described and the action moves at a breathless pace. The books have a note on sources (including some quite sophisticated quotations and many haiku), a Japanese glossary and a guide to pronouncing Japanese words.

**Recommendation:** These are substantial reads that may tempt some readers to stretch themselves. Add them to a wide reading selection of action adventure novels for Years 7 or 8.

Titles in the series in reading order:
- *The Way of the Warrior* 9780141324302
- *The Way of the Sword* 9780141324319
- *The Way of the Dragon* 9780141321288
- *The Ring of Earth* 9780141332536
- *The Ring of Water* 9780141332543


What a fantastic introduction to ancient Chinese history! Alison Lloyd and Terry Denton are a great team and this account of the real (and bloody) first emperor of China (258 -210 BC) will have no trouble engaging students in Year 7.


This is a compelling and disturbing read. It is set in Kazakhstan, in a vast toxic desert that was once the Aral Sea and the home of a thriving fishing community. Dams built for irrigation in Russia have destroyed the sea and consequently the community. Most people are unemployed, living desolate lives in crumbling Soviet-era blocks of flats. Sixteen-year-old Alexi survives by recovering the metal from the booster rockets that fall back into the desert after being launched from a distant cosmodrome. It is dangerous work, the rival gangs even more lethal than the radioactivity to which boys like Alexi are exposed. Many of the inhabitants are ill, like Alexi’s young brother Misha. A nurse at the inadequate local clinic tells Alexi that he must get Misha away from the deadly environment. They journey to Moscow, in search of medical help, and find the urban desert even more desolate and deadly than the environment they have fled.

The story is told in the first-person by Alexi and we come to care deeply for the brothers and the tragedy of their lives. Alexi’s courage and resilience are impressive. Many of the scenes, especially early in the novel, are very exciting
and will hold readers’ attention. Few Australian young people will have any idea that children elsewhere are living lives as desperate as this. Few will have encountered examples as stark as this of the consequences for human lives of environmental degradation.

**Recommendation:** This could be used as a class set in Years 9 and 10, especially as the core of a unit of work on the environment, but I think it is too sad for that: opening students’ eyes to the reality of others’ lives is one thing, but focussing on it day after day for several weeks might be too much. Instead, include the novel in wide reading selections on themes like the environment, other cultures, or survival. Make sure that students have opportunities to talk about the book.


In his delightful mix of travel story and information, Carey is frustrated by his ‘inability to even break the skin of this culture’ but his perceptions are sharpened by the ease with which his reticent twelve-year-old son, Charlie, moves with the electric culture of Japan. Living with his son in New York, he thought of himself as chaperone but, in Tokyo, the roles are reversed. To sharpen this change, he adds a fictional Japanese friend for Charlie, Takashi, aged fifteen, and the Japanese equivalent of Charlie’s NY cool. Takashi lends Charlie a mobile phone and immediately he is texting away with an alarming rapidity to organise their visit. Charlie is able to master the incredibly dense Tokyo subway map and guide his father through threatening ticket machines. Charlie’s fascination with manga and anime is his connecting powerline to Takashi who reveres the animator Tomino.

Takashi dresses in a pristine way that reminds Carey of an anime character and the ‘visualists’ who dress up and cruise the streets. He observes that a manga frame continues the Japanese tradition of the art of the moment such as in a haiku.

The visit ends with Carey concluding that he cannot access Japanese culture but Charlie seemed much happier.

**Recommendation:** This brief trip to Japan should be very popular and useful for your students and should assist them to develop their visual literacy. Manga loving boys will painlessly gain more substantial understanding by enjoying this book. As a bonus, the book’s elegant design and illustrations pay tribute to Japanese traditions: anyone who has hesitated to open an exquisitely packaged Japanese present will know what I mean. A recommended companion text is *Nine Hours North*, an Australian verse novel about living in Japan.


This picture book is a beautifully told story of a little Afghan girl taking the perilous journey that so many others have taken in the hope of finding freedom. The story moves from the frail fishing boat to Ziba’s memories of home, giving the reader a rich picture of the world that she has come from, including the fear and danger. There are warm memories of her father but it is only her mother on the boat with her. Did he perish in the fighting, or has he gone on ahead of them? Ingpen’s paintings are as always stunning, capturing the warm ochre tones of the
Middle Eastern background, the huge expanse of the sea and the wonderfully expressive faces. Sadly, people like Ziba and her mother are still being demonised in this country. That is only possible if they are thought of as being alien and different – ‘the other’. This succeeds in enabling the reader to see the world through Ziba’s eyes. Recommendation: Use this as a related text in units of work about the migrant experience or about refugees.

Wide reading suggestions

A wide reading study: action adventure novels with an Asian setting

There is a wonderful diversity of action adventure novels with Asian settings, perfect for a wide reading Unit for Years 7-8. You will find titles that will suit both girls and boys and readers of quite different ability levels. Most of these are high-interest titles and many come in series with multiple titles. If you provide a good range, you will find students reading voraciously.

Set an assignment that does not punish kids for reading. Have students, for example, work in groups to produce a rehearsed reading of the most exciting scene from a chosen novel, with sound effects and background music. You might also like to ask students to do some research to find out to what extent the book they have read is based on real conditions in the country and time in which it is set. A number of these titles involve fantasy elements, but many of them have an imagined world that is firmly based in a real historical world.

Titles to choose from (all of which are annotated above) include:

- The Young Samurai series by Chris Bradford
- A Ghost in My Suitcase and The Hidden Monastery by Gabrielle Wang
- the Moonshadow series by Simon Higgins
- Tales of the Otori trilogy by Lian Hearn
- Eon and Eona by Alison Goodman
- Chinese Cinderella and the Secret Dragon Society and Chinese Cinderella: The Mystery of the Song Dynasty Painting by Adeline Yen Mah
- the Vermonia series by Yo-Yo
- the Dragonkeeper series by Carole Wilkinson.

Try to include in your selection all the titles from each of the series, to encourage students to read multiple texts. It might make sense to have several copies of the first book in each series, and then one copy of each of the sequels.

A wide reading study: children around the world

There are some wonderful novels for Years 7 and 8 about children in other countries - books that will help Australian students understand how privileged we are. You could confine your selection to books set in Asia or widen the selection to countries anywhere. You will find annotations on the titles set in Asia in the notes above, but the other titles listed are worth considering as well. Suitable texts to choose from - all of which are fairly contemporary - include the following:

- Bitter Chocolate by Sally Grindley, about the conditions of child cocoa workers in Africa
- Torn Pages by Sally Grindley, about AIDS orphans in Africa
- Spilled Water by Sally Grindley, about child factory workers in China
• Parvana and Parvana’s Journey by Deborah Ellis, about conditions for girls in Afghanistan under the Taliban
• Ellis’s companion story, Shauzia, about an Afghan girl refugee in Pakistan
• Ellis’s novel, The Heaven Shop, about the children who have been orphaned by AIDS in Africa
• Homeless Bird by Gloria Whelan, about the plight of young widows in India
• Trash by Andy Mulligan, about the lives of children scavenging in the rubbish tips of Manila
• Eoin Colfer’s Benny and Omar, set in Tunisia
• The Wild by Matt Whyman, the grim story of two brothers growing up in the poisoned wilderness of Kazakhstan
• Diego, run! and Diego’s Pride by Deborah Ellis, about a boy whose parents have been wrongly imprisoned in Bolivia for drug smuggling
• No Safe Place by Deborah Ellis, the story of three adolescent asylum seekers from very different backgrounds who are at the mercy of people smugglers as they try to cross the English Channel (see annotation in the Extension Texts section)
• Mahtab’s Story by Deborah Ellis, about a girl and her family forced to flee Afghanistan.

An author study: Allan Baillie
Baillie has a background in journalism and he has travelled extensively, especially in South-East Asia, which he uses as the setting for some of his most successful writing. Unlike most other books for young people, his work often reflects the political situation: the unrest of separatist groups in Indonesia in Treasure Hunters, the bullying of the Burmese generals in Rebel!, the suppression of democratic movements in Tiananmen Square in The China Coin. Against these settings he writes engaging and exciting stories that work particularly well with students in Years 7 and 8.
Base an author study on the picture book Rebel! and the novels Little Brother, Treasure Hunters, The China Coin and Krakatoa Lighthouse. Two out-of-print novels are worth tracking down: Saving Abbie, about the destruction of the forests in Borneo and the subsequent threat to the survival of orangutans, and Songman, about the experiences of an Australian Aboriginal boy - pre-European settlement - who sails north with the Macassans who have for centuries visited his homeland. Try to find as well the excellent short story anthology, A Taste of Cockroach - also currently out-of-print. Almost all the stories, and they are a quite diverse collection, are set in South-East Asia.

A wide reading study: the fantasy genre
If you have students in Years 9 and 10 who love fantasy, make up a wide reading unit with Lian Hearn’s Tales of the Otori and Alison Goodman’s Eon and Eona. Add to these titles the second volume of the wonderful Temeraire fantasy series, Throne of Jade, set in the political intrigues of Imperial China in the eighteenth-century.

A wide reading study: non-fiction titles set in China
This would work best with a mature Year 10 - especially with girls, as a majority of the titles have female protagonists. Begin with the very accessible - although very long - Mao's Last Dancer. Add Falling Leaves, Wild Swans and The Woman Warrior. Amy Tan's Joy Luck Club is relevant, as is the contemporary Beijing Confidential.

A wide reading study: the refugee experience
You could confine this to refugees from Asia or widen it to include refugee stories from anywhere in the world. There is an excellent range of titles for Years 7 and 8, including: Gleitzman's Boy Overboard and Girl Underground, Gleeson's Mahtab's Story, Evans' Walk in My Shoes and Hawke's Soraya the Storyteller. All of these are about asylum-seekers coming to Australia, as is the beautiful picture book, Ziba Came in a Boat. Other excellent titles about the refugee experience include Ellis's Shauzia and No Safe Place, and Michael Morpurgo's Shadow.

A wide reading study: friendships across cultures
Texts that are appropriate for Years 7 and 8 include Eoin Colfer's Benny and Omar, Crusade by Elizabeth Laird, Camel Rider by Prue Mason, Tamburlaine's Elephants by Geraldine McCaughrean, The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas by John Boyne, The Killing Sea by Richard Lewis and The Girl with No Name by Pat Lowe.

Extension texts
These are texts that are not about Asia, but will enhance your teaching of texts that meet the specific Asian requirement of the curriculum.

The Arrival by Shaun Tan. Lothian Books, 2006. 9780734406941. 128 pp. There are few schools not using this stunning wordless text. Although there are no specific Asian references, it is a magnificent exploration of migration and of culture shock and could be used as an extension text.

The Island by Amin Greder. Allen & Unwin 2007 (2002). 9781741752663. Greder's confronting picture book tells the story of a vulnerable human being on a fragile raft who is washed up on the shores of an island. The islanders don't want him; he is 'the other', someone to be feared. While post-Tampa readers read this as the story of asylum seekers trying to find refuge in Australia, this was written before that incident. Greder was thinking of his native country of Switzerland. Again, there are no specific Asian references but the text is completely relevant to any attempt to help students understand cultural difference and diversity.

Mirror by Jeannie Baker. Walker Books, 2010. 9781406309140. Baker's amazing picture book tells, through her trademark collage, two parallel stories: one of a suburban Australian family and one of a Moroccan family in a small village in the desert. This is all about differences and similarities across cultures.

No Safe Place by Deborah Ellis. Allen & Unwin, 2011. 9781742374109. 192 pp. Ellis is a Canadian writer whose activism has taken her to many parts of the world where children are in danger. She has written about children in countries
like Afghanistan and Palestine. Her \textit{Diego} books are about a boy whose parents are in prison in Bolivia and \textit{The Heaven Shop} is about children orphaned by AIDS in Africa. \textit{No Safe Place} is about child refugees. The story begins with fifteen-year-old Abdul from Baghdad, who has finally made it to Calais and is attempting to make the dangerous crossing to England. His path crosses those of two very different and equally vulnerable children: Rosalia from the Roma people of Romania and Cheslav who, as an orphan, has been educated in a military institution in Russia. Each has different reasons for fleeing and each has been deeply scarred by their past. All of them have learned not to trust others. This is an intriguing adventure story where the young people’s resourcefulness and persistence enable them to triumph against the odds. Because this is fiction, there is a ‘feel-good’ ending. The ending for the real-life young people on whose experiences this story is based is rarely so easy.


This follows the author’s successful first novel published the previous year - \textit{Does My Head Look Big in This?} – which was almost a Lebanese Muslim Alibrandi. Important though that first book was, because of the insight it gives into the experience of being Muslim, Lebanese, female and Australian, this second book is much stronger and will allow all teenagers to identify with the main character, who suffers the usual teenage angst of feeling different from her peers. Jamilah has become Jamie, has dyed her hair blonde and wears blue contact lens in order to turn herself into someone she thinks is more acceptable to her peer group. The process of her journey to self-discovery is entertainingly told.

\textbf{Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures}

\textbf{ABC website} - \url{http://www.abc.net.au/indigenous/education/default.htm}

This website provides information about ABC programs on Indigenous topics. It’s worth keeping an eye on it to alert you to programs that may be useful for your classroom, but there are some helpful resources in the archives as well. Special topics dealt with are reconciliation, the stolen generations, the apology, and the NT intervention. There are also lots of useful links.


This very useful anthology focuses on poetry that is about the relationship between blacks and whites in Australia. There is an excellent introduction by Elizabeth Webby outlining the changing attitudes of white Australian writers and the eventual appearance of Australian Indigenous voices. Many of the poems published here, especially those of recent writers, are ones that you won’t find in other anthologies. There’s an exciting selection of contemporary works, as well as some classics. \textit{Recommendation:} You will draw on this regularly in your teaching, from Years 7-12. A class set would be a good investment.
This sequel to My Girragundji is an easy but engaging story of an Aboriginal teenage boy in danger of forgetting the ways of his people. Only by listening to the old people and respecting the old ways can he stay strong.

Leah Purcell is a multi-talented Australian from the Goa Gungurri Wakka Wakka tribe. She is a successful film, television and theatre actor, singer, director and playwright. She persuaded several Aboriginal women to have a frank and open conversation with her about their lives. Black Chicks Talking is the result, an exuberant exploration of the diverse lives of a group of Aboriginal women. The book delves into the lives of nine women from various backgrounds who've become leaders in the fields they've chosen to excel in. Among those interviewed are well-known women like Deborah Mailman, Frances Rings and Rachel Perkins. Others such as Cilla Malone, who grew up on a mission in Queensland and overcame her substance abuse, Liza Fraser-Gooda who began the Jinnali modelling company and Kathryn Hay who was crowned Miss Australia, demonstrate the depth and breadth of the communities they come from. And there's one common thread that unites them all; they're all black, strong women. Recommendation: Use this fascinating text with Year 10 to explore Indigenous perspectives and gender issues. It's written in an interview style of question and answer, with Purcell's questions written in italics. She does make contributions and commentary as the interviews proceed. The candour of both interviewer and subjects makes it seem as if you are in the room with them as the conversations take place. A DVD of Black Chicks Talking is also available.

This is a further title in the gallery of books - for both young adult and adult audiences - about the wreck of the Batavia in 1629. Based on thorough research and the diaries of the Batavia's captain, this is an absorbing account of the wreck and the subsequent conflict, leading to the terrible deaths of so many. Hayes has chosen to tell the story mostly from the viewpoint of the eighteen-year-old cabin boy, Jan Pelgrom. Pelgrom and a young soldier, Wouter Looes, are eventually marooned on the coast of Western Australia. Hayes uses nineteenth-century accounts of Aborigines in the area having European characteristics to speculate on the fate of the two after they were marooned. Almost half the book is a very credible, fictional account of Jan and Wouter's attempt to survive after they are marooned and of their contact with the Indigenous people. Recommendation: This is a well-written novel that could be considered for class set use for Year 8.

This accessible text focuses on Freeman's running career and is clearly aimed at inspiring others to emulate her hard work and success. Her identity as an Indigenous Australian is not particularly an issue, but she does record that
moment at the Commonwealth Games in Canada when she chose to carry both the Aboriginal and the Australian flags - despite having been criticised by the Australian Commonwealth Games Federation President. She records her sense of pride in showing the Aboriginal flag, as an inspiration to Indigenous young people.

The book is illustrated with frequent black and white photographs, as well as having a colour-photo insert.

Recommendation: This short and simple autobiography could be used as a non-fiction text for Year 7.

**Bran Nue Dae** directed by Rachel Perkins. 2009. PG.

*Bran Nue Dae* deals with the dispossession of Aboriginal people and land and injustice and inequality, but it also finds new territory in which to explore Aboriginal identity. *Bran Nue Dae* is a musical which celebrates being Aboriginal in a wickedly humorous manner. It's full of sight gags (the pointed bone incident), exaggerations (Geoffrey Rush's caricature of the German priest), movement and colour. Perkins said she wanted the film to 'uplift and move people and make them laugh.' Jimmy Chi said that he 'hoped *Bran Nue Dae* would bring about change.'

*Bran Nue Dae* is about a teenager called Willie (Rocky McKenzie), growing up in Broome, an old pearling port in Western Australia in the 1960s. Willie is keen on Rosie (Jessica Mauboy), but his pious mum wants him to become a priest and sends him away to a boarding school in Perth run by Father Benedictus (Geoffrey Rush). Willie misses home and Rosie and decides to rebel. He runs away and begins the trip back home, aided by Uncle Tadpole (Ernie Dingo). The two get a ride with a hippy couple (Missy Higgins and Tom Budge) and journey north.


Known as Barramundy, the first-person narrator of this story is living with trauma from his past. His white mother refuses to tell him the identity of his father and he does not know whether his brown skin means that his father was Indigenous. He and his mother have lived a nomadic and unsettled existence, and the job at the Top End Croc Jumping Cruises gives him a sense of belonging for the first time in his life. Jeffrey's characterisation is strong, with a gallery of unusual and credible people. The choice of setting Barramundy's story against the background of the crocodile cruises is inspired, with a wonderful climactic moment when the boy falls into the crocodile-infested waters. Barramundy's present is haunted by memories of child abuse. These memories are quite explicit, as are his first positive sexual encounters with the girl who works in the cafe, Sally. Most schools will find the explicitness uncomfortable for classroom use. The novel has a great deal to offer readers, however. The narrative is compelling and the reader is absorbed by Barry's quest to understand his origins. The knowledge when it comes is horrifying, but Barry finds the strength to deal with it and the resolution of the novel is satisfying and credible.

Recommendation: Most schools will not be able to use this as a class set novel but try to find opportunities for recommending it to mature readers in Years 9 and
10, especially boys. Many readers will identify with Barry’s inarticulateness. It would be good for them too to discover his ultimate resilience and maturity.

This wonderfully accessible story can be read at any age, but it was widely adopted for class sets for Years 7 and 8. It is an intensely moving story of a boy who was taken from his mother because he was light-skinned; she had tried unsuccessfully to trick the Welfare by darkening his skin with charcoal. This is stunningly simple and beautifully illustrated with charcoal drawings by Mark Sofilas. The image that has stayed in my mind is that of the feet of the men marching into the camp at dawn to take the children: an image that is loaded with the sense of threat.

*Recommendation:* In my opinion, this is one golden oldie that is worth topping up – because there are so few titles about Indigenous Australians that have such an impact on kids who have little knowledge of Indigenous Australia, and because there is always a dearth of titles that are both simple and emotionally powerful.

Set in rural Western Australia in the 1960s, this is a reminder that the golden age of Australia’s past was rather tarnished. It is about the pervasive racism of country towns of the time. It begins with a stunningly moving prologue recording the brutal death of a young man. The young man has been the town heart throb, attracting both the innocent Sandy and her older, worldlier sister Marianne. Sandy and Marianne’s father is the local country cop and Billy, because of his Aboriginal heritage, is off limits. The tragedy that is foreshadowed in the prologue is inevitable.

*Recommendation:* Girls in Years 9 and 10 will find this moving and disturbing. This could be used as a class set with a mixed-ability Year 9 class. Use it alongside other titles with Indigenous subject-matter, such as Moloney’s *Dougy* trilogy or Phillip Gwynne’s *Deadly Unna*. Particularly for mature girls in Years 9 and 10, make up a selection of titles from around the world about the racist attitudes of the sixties: include Hesba Brinsmead’s Australian title *Pastures of the Blue Crane* (the only one of these that was written in the sixties) alongside titles from the American south such as Mary Ann Rodman’s *Yankee Girl* and L. M. Elliott’s *Flying South*, Linzi Glass’s South African novel *The Year the Gypsies Came* and Denise Gosliner Orenstein’s extraordinary *Unseen Companion*, set among the displaced Inuit young people in Alaska. Good readers could also try Kathryn Stockett’s adult novel *The Help*, set in Mississippi in the 60s.

The novel is set in a coastal town in South Australia. It follows a year in the life of fourteen year-old Gary ‘Blacky’ Black (leading up to the football grand final and the summer after) and his friend Dumby Red, one of the local Aboriginal boys. Blacky tells the story in a humorous, laconic voice. His family of three sisters and three brothers, a heavy-drinking, hard-hitting father and an exhausted mother live in the ‘the Port’, where the whites, or Goonyas, live. Dumby lives out at ‘the Point’ with the Nungas. The divisions in the town are deep, but football brings
them together. Dumby’s tragic death and the racism involved in it lead Gary away from his father and the prejudice and intolerance of the town. 

*Recommendation:* Use this powerful and confronting novel with students in Years 9 or 10. Its depiction of rural youth, its easy dialogue (which includes some strong language) and important issues - which include racism, justice, death, courage, family and friendship - make it a valuable text for close study. It is especially successful with boys.


Set in Darwin, this is the story of a troubled teenage boy - Damien - and his relationship with the violent father ’88’, whom he hardly knows. Damien’s Mum is Indigneous, and although ’88’ has returned to live with her again, his attitude is offensively racist, especially to some of the locals who have nurtured Damien and given him some knowledge of his Indigenous heritage. Despite a rocky start to their relationship, there is finally some understanding between Damien and his father, as well as some growth on Damien’s part to self-esteem.

*Recommendation:* The intended audience is boys in Years 9-10.

**Dust echoes:** website for Aboriginal myths at [http://www.abc.net.au/dustechoes/default.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/dustechoes/default.htm)

*Dust echoes* is a bewitching series of twelve animated dreamtime stories from Central Arnhem Land. The series tells us tales of love, loyalty, duty to country and Indigenous custom and law. The stories were originally recorded as audio and then interpreted as short animated movies.


What a glorious book this is – savage and thoughtful, funny and profound, it explores the lives and secrets of many people in the small mining town of Corrigan. I was riveted from Charlie and Jasper’s opening trek to the secret glade, where Laura Wishart is hanging, through to Jeffrey Lu’s triumphant cricket debut and the revelations about Laura’s death.

Jasper Jones is set in a small Australian town in the 60s. The Vietnam War is on, the draft is happening; racism and fear of the unknown permeate the town. Three ‘veg’ and meat are on the table, except at Charlie’s best friend Jeffrey’s place, where his mother cooks delicious Vietnamese food. Jeffery Lu is a remarkable creation – optimistic, ebullient and undefeated, even by the ignorant and bovine racism he encounters.

As an Indigenous boy, Jasper knows only too well that the police will regard him as the obvious suspect in Laura’s death, and both Charlie and Jasper have little confidence in how the justice system would treat him.

*Recommendation:* Jasper Jones is one of the ‘must buy’ books for any English Department. It would make a great companion text to study in Year 10 with *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Ros Moriarty is a white woman who married an Aboriginal man from the Yanyuwa people of the Gulf of Carpentaria. John lives in two worlds, the public service world of Canberra and the country of his ancestors. He and Ros and their children journey regularly to his country where Ros builds close bonds with the Borroloola women of Law. Her desert journal chronicles a range of stories that give deep insight into the Aboriginal experience.

**Recommendation:** Extracts from this text could be useful in Year 9 and 10 classrooms when students are exploring Indigenous culture and it could also prove a valuable senior text for the Area of Study: Belonging.

**Maralinga, the Anangu Story** by Oak Valley and Yalata Communities with Christobel Mattingly. Allen & Unwin, 2009. 9781741756210. 72 pp.

Maralinga is a wonderful text created by the Aboriginal community and author Christobel Mattingly that details the history of the Anangu people and the horror of the atomic testing that took place on their land.

The text begins with the Dreaming story of the land, explains the importance of water and bush tucker and then leads into the invasion and the coming of the railway. Photographs begin to be used, backgrounded and surrounded by the beautiful illustrations. Individual stories are told in the context of the establishment of the mission, the destructive environmental effects of the railway and the expulsion of the Anangu people from their own land. Then the bombs came. A 1952 memorandum to the Prime Minister from senior scientists stating that no inhabitants would suffer injury from the effects of the atomic explosions is placed against the testimony of so many people who suffered from the fallout and contamination. It was not until 1984 that Anangu land transferred back to the original owners and only in 1995 that the British government paid some compensation for their contamination of the country. The final chapter, ‘We have survived’, continues the use of individual stories and statements that bring the lives of the Anangu people to our attention. A glossary guides students to the pronunciation of Pitjanjatjara language used in the story and a map shows the geographical location of many of the places mentioned.

**Recommendation:** This is a picture book that many schools will purchase for a class set for Years 7-8.


The tragic deaths of four members of his family led Boori (Monty) Pryor to be part of an education program for Australian schools. Boori is a storyteller, and the stories he tells are about what we have been and what we can become. He invites readers to get to know the place in which they live and to ask the people who have lived there the longest for their advice. His extraordinary optimism and tolerance can be traced through his vivid stories about his Aboriginal culture, traditions and people.

**Recommendation:** Use this moving and gracious book with Year 8 to investigate the conventions of storytelling and Indigenous experiences.

Honesty and openness are the mark of the confidence of contemporary black writers, and the outstanding quality of the winner of the Children’s Book Council of Australia award for younger readers, Boori Pryor. Pryor writes with a white co-writer and photographer, Meme McDonald. With excellent design support and commitment of funds from a major publisher, *My Girragundji* and its sequel, *The Binna Binna Man*, give readers an unprecedented access to contemporary Aboriginal life, with no self-censorship or special pleading, but with life-affirming laughter countering the fears and the sadness.

**Recommendation:** These texts are deservedly familiar to primary school students, but they still should be in high school libraries and book boxes so that no one misses out. They will help fill that large cultural gap in the representation of Aboriginal people in our literature. These are very satisfying easy reads for inexperienced readers.


*My Place* is an Australian classic. It begins with the experiences of Sally’s own life, growing up in Perth in the fifties and sixties. Sally is told that her ancestors were from India. However, when she is fifteen, Sally learns that she and her sister are in fact of Aboriginal descent, from the Palku people of the Pilbara. Sally sets about writing her mother’s, her grandmother’s and her grand-uncle’s stories. She returns to her grandmother’s birthplace in remote northwestern Australia, and her physical journeys are paralleled by a journey for truth into which the whole family is drawn. Finally, all three women - mother, grandmother, and granddaughter - tell their stories.

**Recommendation:** Use this book as part of a wide reading unit for Year 10 in biography and autobiography. Students could use small group discussion to look at the conventions of life writing and consider the experiences of Indigenous people and the ideas of identity and belonging. An abridged, simplified version - *Sally’s Story* - is available for younger readers.


Just as I was complaining about the dearth of new texts with Indigenous content that I could guarantee would work in the classroom, Jackie French comes to my rescue – again! She does have a real talent for producing books that will provoke good class discussion. This one is based very firmly in the history of the early years of the colony and of the first contacts between blacks and whites. As usual French’s research is thorough and meticulous and she has included an appendix in which she explains where she has departed from verifiable fact. I have to admit that I had never heard of Nanberry, although I of course know about Bennelong. It is believed that Nanberry is buried with Bennelong in James Squire’s orchard on the banks of the Parramatta River. Nanberry, aged perhaps 9 or 10, was orphaned by the plague – usually thought to be smallpox – that virtually wiped out the Indigenous people in the immediate area of the first settlement in 1789. He was adopted by Surgeon White and lived between the two cultures. He was frequently used by Governor Phillip as a translator. From the sketchy historical facts about an unusual and interesting life, French has created an engaging character. French uses limited third-person narration,
moving the perspective among several characters: Nanberry himself, Maria – the surgeon’s housekeeper, Surgeon White, Rachel – who succeeds Maria as housekeeper and becomes mother to White’s son Andrew – and Andrew himself. A close bond forms between Nanberry and Andrew and they are both ‘black brother white’, each learning and adopting the other’s culture.

The shifting of focus from one character to another rather than remaining with the protagonist is rather unusual in a book for this readership, but it works. In some ways it is the colony itself that is the protagonist.

**Recommendation:** I think this will probably work best for Years 8 or 9, and it should definitely be considered for whole-class study. It’s a little longer than some of French’s other popular class set books, but it is an accessible read. It is a fascinating picture of the Indigenous people of the area and the impact on their lives of the early settlement. It is also relevant to questions of sustainability: the Indigenous people were healthy, strong and well-fed and knew how to survive in their environment, while the settlers came close to starvation waiting for supply ships from home.


This extraordinary book, which is more an illustrated book than a traditional picture book, is compiled of multiple text types – both verbal and visual - contributed by the members of the school community. It tells of the traditions and lifestyle of the people of the area, the changes that occurred when their lands were invaded by Europeans and of the development of a belief in ‘two way learning’ – learning that draws on both the Indigenous and western traditions. This is a very rich text worthy of close study. While the bibliographic details list the staff and students of the Papunya School as the communal authors of this project, the contribution of writer Nadia Wheatley and artist Ken Searle as mentors was enormous.

**Recommendation:** This can be studied at any level. The teacher’s notes on the Allen & Unwin website suggest a unit of work for upper primary, one involving integration of English and HSIE, but there is also a unit of work for Year 11 in *The TEXT Book 5 Standard* (edited by Helen Sykes, Cambridge University Press), which involves looking at the nature of the text types used, including visual texts presented from a post-colonial perspective. This should be included in any unit of work on Indigenous Australia, but is well worth close study in its own right.

**Playground: Listening to stories from country and from inside the heart**

*Playground* is subtitled ‘listening to stories from country and inside the heart’. Photographs, illustrations and images that complement the narrative accompany this beautiful collection of stories from Aboriginal childhoods. Wheatley is the compiler of this range of stories from oral history, written records and interviews, including young Indigenous people in the twenty-first century. She has (with the help and support of Dr Jackie Huggins, her Indigenous adviser) placed these memories and stories under headings such as *homes, first lessons, journeying, getting water, cubbies and toys, playing sport, growing up and learning through song and ceremony.*
Recommendation: Playground would make a terrific text for a multicultural unit in Year 7 that explored the similarities and differences in Asian, Australian (Indigenous and non Indigenous) and other nationalities’ childhoods. Jeanie Baker’s Mirror, Maralinga, the Anangu Story and Li Cunxin’s The Peasant Prince are other picture books that could be included.

Poison Under Their Lips by Mark Svendsen. This is currently out of print. Svendsen challenges the legends of the pastoral conquest of outback Australia in this book that describes part of the Aboriginal resistance. His story purports to be based on an apparently fictional journal, letters, newspaper accounts and court depositions which ring with the psychological truth of a confession by a guilt-ridden young trooper who took part in a ‘dispersal’ or extermination drive against Aboriginal people in Queensland in 1876. Without historical notes I can only surmise that this is ‘faction’. It certainly is convincing. Svendsen’s achievement is that he writes a gripping story of ordinary people entrapped in a crime but still retaining their consciences. The elegiac tone of the nineteenth-century voice of the older narrator filters the horror through an intelligent and sensitive memory. The early naïve narrator is replaced with other voices, but the collective feeling moves the reader towards the idea that reconciliation is the only outcome we can work towards with any honesty. For who can forgive such crimes that not only went unpunished but were rewarded?

Recommendation: For Years 9 – 10. Wide reading links: historical fiction; the big questions; generations; Australian identity; prejudice; rural life.

Rabbit Proof Fence directed by Phil Noyce. 2002. PG. Rabbit-Proof Fence is based on Doris Pilkington Garimara’s memoir, Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence. In 1931 Molly, Daisy, and Grace (two sisters and a cousin who are fourteen, ten, and eight) have been taken from their Aboriginal families and sent a thousand miles away to the Moore River Native Settlement, north of Perth. Moore River has been set up as a camp, to train so called ‘half-caste’ Aborigines as domestic workers and integrate them into white society. This was part of an abhorrent government policy to deliberately separate children from their family. Molly doesn’t stay at Moore Rive long; she leads the girls’ escape and with courage and determination sets out on an epic journey. They travel over 1 500 miles of Australia’s outback, finding and following the rabbit-proof fence that will lead them home to their community at Jigalong.

Recommendation: This powerful and disturbing film has become a popular text in secondary schools and works at any year level. Students can debate the effectiveness of the first-person point of view used in the film and director Noyce’s cutting between the children’s journey and the pursuers’ increasingly desperate attempts to capture them.

The Rabbits by John Marsden and Shaun Tan. Lothian Books 2000 (1998). 9780734410832. This was controversial when first published, regarded by some as an example of what John Howard called the ‘black armband view of history’. It is an allegory about white settlement, telling the story of the invasion of the continent by the rabbits and the consequent devastation of the native animals. There is minimal
written text – often just one simple sentence per page - and striking, surreal visual text. If anyone ever doubts the existence of picture books for older readers, there is no better example than this.

_Recommendation:_ This fits beautifully into any unit of work on Indigenous Australia. It can be studied in its own right as a class text or as part of a wider unit, at any stage from Years 5 to 12. Lothian’s notes suggest that it could also be studied as part of a unit on allegory, with titles like _Pilgrim’s Progress, Gulliver’s Travels, Watership Down, Animal Farm_ and the graphic novel _Maus_ by Art Spiegelman.


This is an extraordinarily ambitious and impressive work. The publishers call it a graphic novel, but there is nothing quite like it. It is multimodal. It is an illustrated story, with a wide variety of illustration styles, from dramatic double-page paintings to comic-strip style frames. It is several stories at once, and this is reflected in a range of font styles and layouts. And it has in the back a music CD, consisting of the author’s own original compositions interspersed with traditional Aboriginal music.

The core story involves a city boy working with cattle in the outback in a journey of self-discovery. The climax of his personal story is his battle with the huge wild bull, which links to his memories of the myth of the minotaur. His story is linked to a story that haunts him from his father’s past – a story of cowardice that led to the disappearance and death of an Aboriginal boy. The theme of the book seems to be that we can only move on to the future when we have reconciled with the past, and so the boy becomes involved in an old woman’s story of the stolen generations.

_Recommendation:_ This is a very sophisticated and complex work that fascinates many reluctant readers. Use it from Year 9 upwards, especially with boys.


I first heard about this book when listening to the ABC’s _Conversations with Richard Fidler_. John Danalis tells the true story of the skull that used to sit on the mantelpiece at his parents’ home. It was his revelation about this in a tutorial and the reaction of his fellow students that started this white Australian on a journey to find out where this Indigenous skull came from and how to return it to a proper burial in Wamba Wamba country. Along the way many people, including his parents, are changed by what happened. This moving story about reconciliation is simply told and should have a powerful impact in your classroom. The lead up to the ceremonial handover and the gratitude (not anger) of the Aboriginal people involved is particularly affecting.

_Recommendation:_ This is suitable for Year 9-11.


This is a simplified and abridged version of _My Place_, suitable for use in Years 5-8.
This is superb – a wonderfully readable account of William Thornhill, transported to the colony in 1806, with his wife Sal and his children. William has grown up on the meanest of London streets and has known hunger and fear, but never anything as alien as the foreign world of Sydney Cove: ‘How could air, water, dirt and rocks fashion themselves to be so outlandish?’ But the colony can provide undreamt of opportunities. William is assigned as a convict to his wife and is able to use the skills he learnt as a Thames waterman to start up a business. Within eight years he and his family claim a hundred acres of land on the Hawkesbury – land that to the newcomers seems to be there for the taking, as the Aboriginal people do not seem to have any sense of ownership of it.
This is in many ways the quintessential emancipist story – one that echoes the experience of one of Grenville’s own ancestors and that can be found in the history of many of Sydney’s most established families. In lesser hands this novel would have been a satisfying family saga. Grenville makes it so much more, exploring the heartbreaking realities behind the success of men like Thornhill, good men who sometimes made bad choices, for the land that they claimed was, of course, anything but empty. The settlers respond in different ways to the Aboriginal presence. Grenville vividly recreates the brutality and violence, but there is genuine moral complexity in this account: not all evil deeds are performed by evil men. Particularly memorable is the final portrait of William, wealthy and successful, sitting surveying his property, but with an ongoing sense of loss: ‘He could not understand why it did not feel like triumph.’ Grenville has also published Searching for the Secret River, about the writing of this novel.
Recommendation: This adult novel would be best with Advanced Year 11 classes, but it may be worth considering if you have a very talented Year 10 group.

This picture book is a joyous celebration of contemporary Australian Indigenous life. The main character is the cook in a pizza shop in Northern Queensland. He has learnt how to cook pizzas during a two-year stay in Italy and he greets the three hungry boys in Italian. When he reveals that he is a Murri, they are puzzled, wondering – in his words – why he is ‘not standing on one leg, leaning on a spear, looking for emu’. He explains: ‘a man’s got to make a living and you boys are hungry.’ But he reveals too that, when he has the time, he and his family remember his connections to the old stories, especially as they are told in dance. This is a great story about keeping a culture alive. It’s a highly rewarding book for Indigenous Australian children to read, explaining their place in the world, and it’s an important contribution to cultural understanding for non-Indigenous readers. Boori Monty Pryor’s stories about Indigenous culture have been a significant influence on inter-cultural understanding. The decision to team him up with world-renowned children’s book illustrator Jan Ormerod is inspired.
Recommendation: This is a worthwhile text for sharing with students of all ages.

Snigger James on Grey by Mark Svendsen. This is currently out of print.
This multiple narrator story, complete with ghost commentators, is the best book yet about Aboriginal Australians and race relations. Set in a small country
town, it is mostly told by ‘The Boy’, Steven. What happened that night when two fifteen-year-olds, The Boy and Selwyn an Aboriginal, meet as usual among the crowd outside the picture theatre and Kevin Sully comes hooning along in his lime green Monaro with the musical horns blaring ‘Here Comes the Bride’ and shouts insults at Selwyn. In their next encounter, Sully throws a bong at Selwyn and he and The Boy are alarmed to see their friend Kelly looking scared out of the rear windscreen as the car screams away. The police soon arrive and The Boy runs, not realising that Selwyn is still there almost frozen with the bong in his hands.

What happened to Kelly in the back seat of the car? Gradually, after several foolish attempts at lying to protect Kelly and themselves, and after frequent advice from the ghost commentators of the boys’ uncles and grandfather who are experts about mateship, friendships are restored. They all front up to the magistrates court where the identity of Snigger James is revealed and his favourite expression proves true: ‘With people there’s no black and white, there’s only shades of grey.’ There are a few expletives, in context, and the events are not as bad as this outline suggests. It’s the strain on friendship that Svendsen has in focus.

Recommendation: This is a happier companion text to the grim realism of *Bye Beautiful* by Julia Lawrinson. For Years 9-12. Wide reading links: friendship; friendship across cultures; prejudice; coming of age; families; generations.

**Songman** by Allan Baillie. This is currently out of print.
This absorbing adventure story is set in the north of Australia, long before European settlement. Macassan fishermen from the islands to the north regularly visited the coast and traded with the Indigenous population. An Aboriginal boy, Yukuwa, and his father travel to the islands with the Macassans in order to show them how to make bark canoes. Yukuwa is exposed to a whole range of new experiences - not only the superior technology of other peoples, but also the brutality of ‘civilised’ justice systems and racism. The reader sees this new world through the eyes of the boy.

Recommendation: This is an exciting read for Years 7 and 8. It is also a cleverly imagined recreation of Indigenous life prior to European settlement and a critical look at the effects of colonisation.

The Australian Museum has recorded three Indigenous Australians telling Dreaming stories from different regions of New South Wales.

**Extension texts**
The texts listed here are not about the Australian Indigenous experience, but their exploration of issues such as racism means that they can be used to extend readers’ understanding.

This excellent American novel, set in Florida in 1966, could be read alongside *Bone by Bone* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The sand mountain is a hill of mine tailings that the miners’ kids slide down on cardboard boxes in the moonscape
outsskirts of the small mining town where everyone knew everyone 'unless they were colored'. The naïve narrator is Dewey, accident-prone and fearful of starting high school and being mistaken for 'colored' because he wasn’t able to fully remove the boot-polish makeup he used for the Black and White Minstrel Show. Wagging school down by the creek, he is rescued by Walter, the long-haired Vietnam veteran who is one of the other outcasts of the small town. Dewey admires Darla, a knowing young girl whose theatrical family are also living on the edge. When Dewey's father stands for election as mayor, he is seen as being too close to the coloreds and his family too, joins the outcasts. His dad retreats to his shed, where there are memorable scenes of father-son attempts at communication.

Watkins captures the innocent wonder and gullibility of Dewey's voice so that the various adventures with his older brother Wayne and his friends David and Darla are often humorous. However, the slow increase in the references to the 'coloreds' who live in 'Boogerbottom' leads the story towards more serious events and suggests that readers might re-interpret such things as Dewey being treated as a 'colored' boy by the school bullies who hang a sign 'Whites Only' at the entrance and prevent him from using the toilet. They also regularly steal his food in the canteen. Dewey is an emotional boy, so when he finally rages in response, Watkins accelerates the race towards a tragic climax, where the sensitive representation of Dewey's grief recalls the quality of the writing in *Bridge to Terabithia*.

*Recommendation:* This can be used from Year 7 to 10. Wide reading links: living on the edge; brothers; friendship; prejudice; bullying; outsiders; other countries; images of adolescence; families; school life.


I have tried unsuccessfully to convince schools to consider this as a class set text. It is a beautifully written book that allows readers to explore Indigenous issues in a context other than Australia. It has been compared to *To Kill a Mockingbird* – a comparison that I am prepared to say is not unreasonable.

Like *Mockingbird*, this begins with a very distinctive voice – that of a young teenage girl living in the desolate frontier town of Bethel, Alaska. Lorraine is feisty, opinionated, incurably curious about the world and wonderfully upbeat. Her single mother, whom we see only through Lorraine’s eyes, is a glorious character, wise and tolerant, full of advice about the way of the world: 'Not everybody spends time in the penitentiary is necessarily trash. And it ain't always clear who's savage and who's not ... Just because a man's wearing a uniform don't mean he walks the straight and narrow his own self.' Mama, who refused to give in when life turned sour and who has struggled to provide a life for her daughter, is not much concerned about appearances; Lorraine, on the other hand, is obsessed with self-improvement magazines and their advice about beauty and fashion. Mama cooks for the local prison and for the orphanage and Lorraine delivers the meals.

Lorraine’s voice is probably the most distinctive in the novel but it is not the only one. The story is told by four voices. The second Caucasian (or Gussak) voice is that of Annette Weinland, daughter of the local minister. At seventeen, Annette is a little older than Lorraine and a little more comfortable economically, but she
has lived a lonely life as housekeeper and babysitter since her mother ran away with a lover. She works part-time at the prison, looking after the paperwork. The other two voices are those of two indigenous teenagers from the orphanage, Thelma Cooke and Edgar Kwagley, both separated from their people and their culture.

The title is an astronomical term referring to an object such as an extrasolar planet that cannot be seen but whose existence can be inferred by the way other bodies react to it. The ‘unseen companion’ of the novel is the sixteen-year-old ‘mixed-breed’ Dove Alexie, who has been imprisoned after striking a white teacher. His existence is revealed only by the way the four voices in the story react to him as they tell their own stories.

Each of the four voices is each distinct. Their personal stories are very different. Together they are woven into an intricate and very satisfying plot that explores major questions about humanity.

This is a story of indigenous issues: death in custody; stolen generations; the deliberate extinction of an old culture, its language and beliefs; the marginalisation of an indigenous underclass; white man’s justice; institutional abuse; and so on. It is deeply sad and disturbing, although there is also hope, resilience and some humour.

The astronomical imagery is central to the novel. The story takes place at the time of the first landing on the moon, and this significant milestone in human history is part of the framework of the novel.

Recommendation: Consider using this for class set study with the sort of group to whom you give To Kill a Mockingbird – middle to top streams in Years 9 and 10. It will not be an instantly popular choice, like Looking for Alibrandi or Tomorrow When the War Began, but nor is Mockingbird. Like Mockingbird it has a huge amount to offer for close study. In particular, it will allow teachers the opportunity to explore indigenous issues without having to battle against entrenched stereotypes that can make the study of Australian indigenous texts difficult in some communities.

**Sustainability**

**Avatar** directed by James Cameron. 2009. M.

A wonderful new landscape is revealed in this film and, if Cameron had used a better scripter writer than himself, it could have been a masterpiece. Still, there are plenty of opportunities for students to come up with a better script and to consider the different positions towards land and environment and sustainability taken by both sides in the film.

Recommendation: Most students in Years 7-10 will have seen this film, but viewed through the lens of sustainability they may see the film in a different light.


Abel Jackson is a young Australian living in an isolated spot between a national park and the sea. Abel is a keen swimmer, and both he and his mother are passionate about the environment in which they live. When swimming, Abel encounters a huge blue groper he names Blueback. The fish is a legend in the district and attracts the attention of a vicious fisherman who puts Blueback and the fishing in the bay at risk. Abel’s mother prevents the fisherman from killing
Blueback, and Abel learns that human beings can be both cruel and predatory. As time passes, Abel’s mother wages a campaign to protect the bay from pollution and encroaching developers. She is joined by Abel, who leaves a promising international career as a marine biologist to help protect the bay.

**Recommendation:** This has long been a proven success as a class novel in Year 7 to explore environmental themes and the idea that each of us can make a difference. It was great to have a new edition in 2008 of what is almost now a classic. Winton’s language is superb.

Think *Hunger Games* but even tougher and bleaker and you get some idea of the impact and power of this debut novel by Jane Higgins. In *The Bridge* a city is at war and the truth is definitely the biggest casualty. Nik is very clever and he desperately wants to join the ISIS, the military force who is in charge in Cityside, but they reject him and he finds himself crossing the bridge that divides the city and heading into Southside to rescue a young friend. Just who Nik is and which side he will support is a riveting tale with harsh lessons and difficult decisions. *The Bridge* won the 2010 Text Prize.

**Recommendation:** Year 9 will eat this up.

This warm and charming story about vulnerable and endangered turtles who lay their eggs on islands off the Queensland coast has a strong environmental message. Chellie lives with her parents on one such island and her father monitors the turtles. She is devastated when she finds a turtle dead on the beach, choked by a discarded fishing line, and she begins a campaign to clean up the beaches and the oceans. She succeeds in attracting media attention and the support of both professional fishermen and recreational boat-owners. There is a positive message that individual action can make a difference, and an appendix covers organisations who are working to improve the natural environment.

**Recommendation:** This is aimed at readers in the Year 4-7 age group and, despite its charm, is probably too young for use as a Year 7 class text. Chellie’s age is never revealed but she is certainly not a teenager - and is also perhaps just a bit too good to be true. Sneak it into a wide reading selection if you can.

This is a very readable and well-researched look at the fast food industry. Based on Schlosser’s 2001 exposé, *Fast Food Nation*, which then became the basis of a fiction film, this version has been adapted for teenage readers. It is gruesome and grisly, very funny, and ultimately quite disturbing. The authors are British and there is particular emphasis on the British experience, as well as much attention to the origins of the fast food industry in the US and the growth of the huge multinationals. The impact of the industry worldwide is also considered. While it will have you examining food labels more carefully than you have ever done before, it will also cause you to ponder the human consequences of so much
power in the hands of corporations whose only concern is profit. The sheer size of the operations of the multinationals is also mind-boggling. If you are worried about obesity in the young, read to your kids the chapter on 'The Secret of the Fries', with its very detailed description of the massive processing operation at the Lamb Weston factory in American Falls, Idaho. In each of seven gigantic storage buildings potatoes are piled 6 metres deep, 30 metres wide and almost as long as two football pitches, before being sent through an incredible processing system.

There is a good choice of black and white photographs, a very detailed section of notes explaining the origins of assertions made in the text, and an excellent glossary.

Recommendation: This is an excellent non-fiction text for use with classes in Years 9 and 10. It will work well with mixed-ability classes and will interest all students. You could use it alongside the documentary Supersize Me. Devise a unit of work on modern values and the impact of commercialism, with books like Deepfried by Bernard Beckett and Clare Knighton, So Yesterday by Scott Westerfield, Ads R Us by Claire Carmichael, Uglies by Scott Westerfield, and The Gospel According to Larry and Vote for Larry by Janet Tashjian. The Canadian 2004 documentary The Corporation would be a useful extension text.


This is a visually stunning picture book about the extinction of the Tasmanian tiger. Brooks has incorporated images from the film footage of the last, caged and miserable tiger, contrasting with glorious paintings of the animal in its natural environment. Wild's text is haunting and evocative, especially when set against the ageing wooden bars of the cage and the faint images of the thylacine behind the dominant image of the wire.

Recommendation: This elegy to the loss of a species is suitable for class study at any level. Ask students to consider how the story might have been told differently as a stepping stone to their exploration of the choices the composers have made. This is a masterpiece.


Imagine a future world where computers feed advertisements, censored news, chatter, and ‘malfunctions’ directly into your brain and have done so since birth. In this consumption-driven society, even School™ comes with a trademark, as the corporations have taken it over and privacy is a thing of the past. We see this brave new world through teen narrator, Titus. He and his empty-headed, inarticulate friends go to the moon (the fifty-first state) for a weekend holiday and get hacked at a nightclub. For a few days they are without their feed and hardly know what to do with themselves. But soon they are back on track and changing their fashions hourly and cultivating the hideous lesions that are appearing on everyone into a fashion statement. They go ‘mal’ in banned sites that intoxicate them by jumbling their feed. On the moon, Titus met home-schooled Violet, a clever teenage girl who was the recipient of a late feed. He is exposed to some ideas and attitudes he has never contemplated before. Later, Violet tells him she is dying; her feed has been distorted and Feed Tech Corp are not interested in helping her, as she doesn’t have a good consumer profile. Titus
is a flawed hero, rejecting Violet at her moment of greatest need, but finally and uncomfortably awakening to the reality of the world around him. 

*Recommendation:* This chilling satire will create great discussion in the Year 9 classroom. Be aware that there is considerable use of obscene language, but some blunt Anglo-Saxon almost comes as a relief from the mind-numbing advertising spiel - excerpts can be found at the end of each chapter, but the ads flow right through every thought and scene. Anderson has created new concepts and lingo for these future kids with chats flowing privately from mind to mind amid the parties and shopping malls and popular sitcom imaginatively called ‘Oh? Wow! Thing!’ Students could examine the techniques Anderson uses to launch his thought-provoking attack on a corporate- and media-dominated culture.

*First Light* by Rebecca Stead. Text Publishing, 2011. 9781921758256. 336 pp. This is Stead’s first novel where she shows the command of fantasy narrative that won her the Newbery medal with *When You Reach Me* and places her with the great fantasy writers such as Lois Lowry. Her signature mixture of science, fantasy and the admirable trait of young people’s curiosity continues, this time with a central reference to mitochondrial DNA and its possible ability to change cell reproduction for the better as well as for the worse. Also the major premise of the narrative relates to how and why the Icelanders have an incomparable database of every family’s antecedents.

Peter’s mother, Aurora, is a microbiologist in this field and his father is a glaciologist who regularly travels to the Greenland ice cap to measure global warming. However, they keep their other agenda secret from Peter, who is intrigued and excited when they take him with them on a field trip, despite their misgivings about the risks involved. At the beginning of the novel Stead establishes a sense of realism by introducing us to Peter’s life in a New York apartment, his friend Miles, Peter’s parents and Jonas, an Inuit who will be their field assistant. This familiar world is established before Stead lands her characters on the glacier, pitching a tent, unloading all the equipment and going through safety drills and misadventures.

However, Stead also sets up the framework for mystery by beginning with a prologue from Mattias, who puzzles over a secret drawing of two women and the sun. This is clearly a very different world from Peter’s world in New York, but it will be some time before the reader learns more. Stead moves immediately from the prologue to a time that is seven years later, when she introduces Peter with a migraine-like headache; he is keeping the headache secret from his mother who is sometimes prostrated by similar headaches. His mother also keeps a mysterious red notebook and the drawing she makes of the mtDNA proves to be similar to a red ring that Peter thinks he has seen embedded in an ice wall. Few could predict how Stead draws these strings together to combine dangerous adventures in the snow and ice with the history of refugees who fled persecution as witches from England and successfully hid their settlement under the glacier.

Because Stead does not overburden the reader with details, the willing suspension of disbelief in this underworld town and its circumscribed life of rations and family controls is easily accomplished. The story of these people of Gracehope connects because of the two curious teenagers whose naïve courage is always supported by their parents who are central to the action. With all this
action and intrigue, Stead adds the sled dogs who continue to be crucial to survival in the extreme cold of the Arctic and whose extra-sensory perception complements that of the protagonists.

**Recommendation:** This is a good companion survival story to those by New Zealanders Anna Mackenzie and Fleur Beale. Use it with Years 7 – 8: the font is generous and bulks the book and the third-person narration is signalled clearly to be from several points of view. Wide reading links: fantasy; science fiction; thrillers and mysteries; generations; identity; other countries; overcoming adversity – physical, mental, environmental; refugees; technology; cultural diversity; a question of gender.


This is a post-apocalyptic adventure that makes frequent reference to climate change warnings that were ignored. Eventually huge barriers had to be erected to prevent flooding of cities, but three years before the opening of this story a massive wave has broken through. A group of children are surviving on their wits, living in the upper storeys of high-rise buildings.

**Recommendation:** This is a good adventure story for Years 5-8, although the flooding seems rather extreme.


Class sets of *Hatchet* can be found in many school bookrooms all over Australia. The novel is a classic survival story. Brian Robeson is a thirteen-year-old city boy flying to see his father in a small plane. When his pilot has a heart attack and the plane crashes, he is left stranded and alone in the Canadian wilderness. He has to find food, create a shelter and improvise clothing with little more than his parent’s parting gift – a hatchet - to help him. The insect life is overwhelming – anyone who reads this novel never forgets the mosquitoes! – but Brian uses his intelligence and courage to overcome the many obstacles he encounters. Readers learn a great deal about survival skills in the wilderness and the importance of tenacity and endurance.

**Recommendation:** Use this novel with any Year 7 or 8 class. It’s short, accessible and deeply engaging, and there are many possible learning activities; for example, transforming the descriptions in the book into pictures, flow-charting the process that Brian goes through to make fire, and analysing the difference between reality and romance. In the novel Brian begins to see the difference between the way nature is portrayed on film, in newspapers and books and the way it is in reality. Ask students to find examples in the book that show this difference. The author had extensive experience of survival in the wilderness and the book has great authenticity. There were several sequels, but unfortunately most are now out of print.

**Into the Wild** directed by Sean Penn. 2007. M.

*Into the Wild* is based on the true story of a young man, Chris McCandless, who, in 1992, walked into the Alaskan wilderness as an expression of his idealism and independence. Here was a young man who wanted to escape society and its excesses for a life of intense experience. Leaving behind a career and donating his savings to charity, McCandless hitchhiked around America, encountering a series of people who would influence his life, just as he influenced theirs. In the
film, his story is told by his sister, who shows the effect of his disappearance on the family he left behind. Finally, Chris fulfils a long-held goal to go to Alaska and live in the wildness. He doesn’t take much with him – a rifle, a camera, some camping gear and some books. Tragically, he dies there from starvation after consuming a toxic plant, only weeks from help or rescue. Written into one of his books is a last conclusion: ‘Happiness is only real when shared.’

Recommendation: The film is based on the bestselling book by Jon Krakauer. *Into The Wild* (Pan, 9780330453677) is a disturbing true-life story that will appeal to a wide range of students in Years 10 to 12. Teaching strategies could include allowing students to question their own values and ways of living and challenge their ideas about what is important in life. Group discussions could include an individual’s choice of lifestyle and desire to survive without the trappings of civilisation, and the consequences of such desires.

This is a tour de force from one of our most interesting Australian authors. It appears to be a non-fiction story about a doomed Antarctic expedition. There is a list of members of the expedition at the beginning, labelled diagrams of their ship, family trees for the Expedition Leader and for the Second Officer. There is an introduction by the author, signed Canberra May 2008, about the Second Officer’s journal that has come into his possession. It is the story contained in that journal that the author feels compelled to tell, a story of a terrible tragedy when twenty-eight men were trapped in the Antarctic icepack in the dark polar night.

It is, of course, all a wonderful fictional construction. There was no such expedition or such men. Their ship, *Raven*, never existed. And although Anthony Eaton was able to spend some time at the Australian base in Antarctica, thanks to an Arts Fellowship, he did not find a long-lost journal – nor did he remove it, without authorisation, from the base. It is a magnificent work of the imagination, and the use of the author’s persona to channel the story to us is a clever and effective narrative decision. Much of the story is told in what purports to be that real journal, supported by other supposed historical documents. It has the ring of authenticity. The story is even more disturbing, the character of the Expedition Leader even more terrifying, because of the reflections of the authorial voice.

Recommendation: This is a substantial read but it may well intrigue some boys who are normally resistant to reading fiction. There is an epic quality about it – the story of human beings pitted against the harshest of conditions. There is the haunting, unforgettable landscape. And there is the sheer brilliance of the writer’s craft. Try it with fairly good readers in Years 9 to 11. Try it with that group of mainly boys who are bright enough but say that they don’t like English.

**Maralinga, the Anangu Story** by Oak Valley and Yalata Communities with Christobel Mattingly. Allen & Unwin, 2009. 9781741756210. 72 pp.
This wonderful text created by the Aboriginal community and author Christobel Mattingly explains the history of the Anangu people and the horror of the atomic testing that took place on their land.
The text begins with the Dreaming story of the land and the importance of water and bush tucker and then leads into the invasion and the coming of the railway.
Individual stories are told in the context of the establishment of the mission, the destructive environmental effects of the railway and the expulsion of the Anangu people from their own land. Then the bombs came. It was not until 1984 that Anangu land was transferred back to the original owners and only in 1995 that the British government paid some compensation for their contamination of their country. The authors and illustrators conclude, 'Maralinga, the Anangu Story is our story. We have told it for our children, our grandchildren and their children. We have told it for you.'

Recommendation: I hope all Australians hear and see this story.

This fantasy was a pioneer in environmental fiction. While it is a story about a girl who realises that her natural environment is the sea, the focus is on the deteriorating health of the oceans, destroyed by nuclear testing, oil spills, ocean mining and global warming. Sisters Rika and Sif are half-human; their mother and brother belong to the sea people, the people of mermaids and mermen. Sif chooses life in the sea, a decision that has terrible consequences because of environmental damage. Mermaids and sirens have had a recent resurgence, due to the (worrying?) preoccupation of YA fiction with the paranormal. Sadly, the recent offerings have nothing to do with the environment. Park was years ahead of her time in recognising the importance of the health of the environment to our survival.

Recommendation: This was recently re-published by UQP in their Australian children’s classics series. It still reads well, with a good balance of realism and fantasy. Use it with Years 7 and 8, especially girls.

This picture book tells the story of Macquarie Island, now a World Heritage site. A wildlife haven suffered terrible degradation when it became a base for sealers, who slaughtered penguins for oil when they had killed all the seals and who brought with them feral cats and rabbits that devastated the ecology. The book tells about the struggle to save the island and restore the natural balance.

Recommendation: This is a beautifully presented information text that can be used at any level. It is an interesting contrast to The Dream of the Thylacine. The two picture books have similar purposes but have used quite different means to tell their stories.

Our Choice is an ebook application for iPad. It provides an impressive opportunity to explore digital books in a new way. Al Gore surveys the causes of global warming and weaves narrative with photography, interactive graphics, animations, and documentary footage to create an engrossing interactive experience. There are eighteen chapters including Where Our Energy Comes From and Where It Goes, Electricity From The Sun, Harvesting The Wind, Less Is More, and finally Our Choice. I have shown this ebook to so many people, not just
for its content but to demonstrate how interactivity can draw the reader into the text and make them a participant.

Recommendation: I recommend you have a look and show it in your classroom to Year 9 and 10 students via the iPad and a data projector.

The Road by Cormac McCarthy. Picador, 2007 (2006). 9780330447546. 256 pp. The Road won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for Literature. It is one of the most harrowing novels I have ever read. At times I had to put it down, just to cope with the images that it evoked. But this post-apocalyptic tale of a man and his son’s journey across a devastated America is not without hope. McCarthy expresses the horror of this nightmare trek in almost biblical prose, which is sparse and beautiful. The ash-coated landscape, where bands of humans have degenerated into cannibalism and prey on the vulnerable, and the memory of the boy's mother, who has already committed suicide, are effortlessly conveyed. The man carries a pistol with two bullets, meant for suicide should this become necessary. In the face of these overwhelming barriers, the man and the boy only have each other. In the end, despite his heroic efforts, the father dies, leaving the boy alone on the road. The boy encounters a man, who, with his wife and two children, adopts the boy. The manner of the encounter suggests that these people are truthful and compassionate and will keep the boy safe. Yes, it’s a bleak book in many ways, but do read it and be swept away by its power and grace. Recommendation: Most schools will use this with Years 11 or 12, but it might work with a mature Year 10 class. Be warned that there are disturbing scenes of cannibalism and some sexual references, but McCarthy’s luminous and highly accessible prose, his portrayal of the father/son bond and his establishment of the desolated landscape are remarkable. It will be hard to bring discussion on this book to a close.

The Rosie Black Chronicles: Genesis by Lara Morgan. Walker Books, 2010. 9781921529399. 454 pp. When Rosie Black finds an unusual box in the Old City she has no idea what suffering will follow her discovery. This novel is set in a future where people are divided into the Centrals (well off), the Bankers (the poor) and the Ferals (the fringe dwellers). Rosie’s Banker world comes tumbling down as she goes on the run to Mars to escape the people who are desperate to obtain her mysterious box. She is not sure if the attractive Pip, a Feral she met when she found the box, is out to help her or hurt her. Big issues of manipulation, exploitation and evil experimentation with humans jostle next to the growing relationship between Pip and Rosie. This is an engrossing sci-fi novel with great pace and captivating characters set in a terrifying future - a future that is a result of environmental degradation. Recommendation: This would be good to use in Year 8 or 9 with The Bridge to explore possible futures. I’m looking forward to Book Two!

Saving Abbie by Allan Baillie. Out of print. This sequel to Wreck tells the story of the main character’s quest to take Abbie, the kidnapped orangutan, back to Borneo to a sanctuary which is trying to save the engangered animals from the ravages of poachers and the destruction of their homelands. Baillie spent several weeks at the sanctuary and he gives a memorable picture of the conditions there and the threat to these wonderful
creatures. This is a great survival story and an alarming account of the destruction of the forests and the consequent threat to creatures like the orangutans.

Recommendation: Try to find copies for Years 7 and 8 to read and discuss.

**The Unidentified** by Rae Mariz, Text Publishing, 2011. 9781921656934. 304 pp. This reminded me of M. T. Anderson’s *Feed*. Like *Feed*, it is about young people living in a future world where their main role in life is to be consumers of products and where everything is shaped by the advertisers. The story is set in a school that is controlled by the advertisers. Lessons are all computer games and activities provided by commercial sponsors. As in *Feed*, fashion is everything - fashion determined by ‘the top players’, those who succeed in playing the Game and who become commercially-sponsored celebrities. In this apparent Utopia, Katey is shocked by a mock suicide and discovers that there is an underground counterculture group - the Unidentified.

Recommendation: This is an excellent thriller that asks questions about contemporary values. Use it as part of a wide reading study of post-apocalyptic novels for Years 9 and 10.

**Walking the Boundaries** by Jackie French. Angus & Robertson, 2006 (1993). 9780207200434. This is the story of a materialistic white city boy to whom land is significant only in financial terms. His great-grandfather is prepared to give the boy a large block of untouched bush, but only if he first walks the boundaries of the property. The boy, thinking of what the money will buy him, agrees. As he walks the boundaries, the boy walks back into time and finds himself walking beside others who have lived on that land – both before and after settlement, including an early European settler, an Aboriginal boy who lived on the land long before European occupation and a very charming little diprotodontid, who lived in Australia about a million years ago – something like a wombat, but the size of a mini-bus.

Recommendation: This is a proven success as a class set text in Year 7 and raises significant issues about the relationship with and treatment of the land.

**We are the Weather Makers: The Story of Global Warming** by Tim Flannery. Text Publishing, 2006. 9781921145346. 275 pp. This edition has been produced especially for young readers. Arguably, the major world concern for the twenty-first century is global warming caused by human activity. Tim Flannery is a well-respected writer, scientist and explorer. His books include *The future eaters* and *Throwim Way Leg*. *We are the Weather Makers: The Story of Global Warming* (a revised and updated young adult edition of *The Weather Makers*) is his passionate account of the impact of climate change and a call to arms directed specifically at Australian school students. Tim Flannery dedicated the first edition of *The Weather Makers* to children: ‘to all of their generation who will have to live with the consequences of our decisions.’ This book gives adolescent readers easier access to Tim Flannery’s advice about the dangers of profligate use of fossil fuels and ways to find the solutions to save our planet.
**Recommendation:** Use this powerful and informative text with students in Years 8 or 9 so they can investigate the basis for global warming. Students could script an interview between Tim Flannery and an interview host, such as Andrew Denton, setting out the arguments for global warming and the actions people can take. Related texts could include the DVD of *An Inconvenient Truth*, in which Al Gore sets out the arguments for global warming, the Stern Report – available online - released by the British government and Al Gore’s most recent work, *Our Choice*, available as an iPad app.

This is a coming-of-age story. At 16, Tilda Braint is unsure of her future. There have been important family changes in the last year or so and she herself is facing decisions: does she want to leave home to continue with senior school? what does she want to do with her life? One afternoon she happens upon an elephant seal on the beach - many, many kilometres from its natural environment. As she works with officers from Parks and Wildlife to protect the seal - and the baby that is born - she finds a sense of purpose.
While the focus of the book is on Tilda's story, there is a strong awareness of the extent to which environmental issues impinge on everyday life. There are those who resent the expenditure of public money on caring for the seals. Tilda's grandfather has been a logger in the Tasmanian forests, but is now convinced of the importance of preserving the old-growth forests, while Tilda's dad is under pressure as he needs timber contracts to keep the truck that he has bought working.
**Recommendation:** This will be much enjoyed by Year 8 girls.

This is a compelling and disturbing read. It is set in Kazakhstan, in a vast toxic desert that was once the Aral Sea and the home of a thriving fishing community. Dams built for irrigation in Russia have destroyed the sea and consequently the community. Most people are unemployed, living desolate lives in crumbling Soviet-era blocks of flats. Sixteen-year-old Alexi survives by recovering the metal from the booster rockets that fall back into the desert after being launched from a distant cosmodrome. It is dangerous work, the rival gangs even more lethal than the radioactivity to which boys like Alexi are exposed. Many of the inhabitants are ill, like Alexi’s young brother Misha. A nurse at the inadequate local clinic tells Alexi that he must get Misha away from the deadly environment. They journey to Moscow, in search of medical help, and find the urban desert even more desolate and deadly than the environment they have fled.
The story is told in the first-person by Alexi and we come to care deeply for the brothers and the tragedy of their lives. Alexi’s courage and resilience are impressive. Many of the scenes, especially early in the novel, are very exciting and will hold readers’ attention. Few Australian young people will have any idea that children elsewhere are living lives as desperate as this. Few will have encountered examples as stark as this of the consequences for human lives of environmental degradation.
**Recommendation:** This could be used as a class set in Years 9 and 10, especially as the core of a unit of work on the environment, but I think it is too sad for that: opening students’ eyes to the reality of others’ lives is one thing, but focussing on it day after day for several weeks might be too much. Instead, include the novel in wide reading selections on themes like the environment, other cultures, survival. Make sure that students have opportunities to talk about the book.

**Wide reading suggestion**
One way of covering the issue of sustainability would be to develop a wide reading study for Years 9 and 10 of post-apocalyptic novels. Ones reviewed above include *The Bridge* by Jane Higgins, *Feed* by M. T. Anderson, *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy and *Genesis* (in *The Rosie Black Chronicles*) by Lara Morgan. Victor Kelleher’s *Taronga* - almost now an Australian classic - is perfect. There are some excellent New Zealand young adult novels in this genre, including *The Travellers Quartet* by Jack Lasenby, *Juno of Tari* by Fleur Beale and *Genesis* by Bernard Beckett. In case readers are tempted to speculate as to the predominance of end-of-the-world stories from New Zealand writers, throw in Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* to remind us of Ava Gardner’s view of Melbourne.

**New titles worth knowing about**

After an earthquake kills his father and destroys their fishing village on a Greek island, Makis and his mother migrate to a Greek-speaking suburb of London, probably in the late 1950s. The largely Cypriot community is unwelcoming and the mother becomes agoraphobic and depressed in the basement flat. Twelve-year-old Makis is put with the six-year-olds to learn English from their readers. Soccer football becomes his salvation when, despite the racist taunts of the bully he replaces in the team, Makis plays for the first time with a full-sized ball and borrowed boots. His other release comes from his father’s mandolin, with which he comes to play with a kindly musician neighbour, culminating in a concert at the local Greek restaurant where he sings the famous song of his island. There are sufficient turns in this simple story to interest readers, as Makis and his mother overcome their exclusion and find peace and acceptance.

**Recommendation:** Use this with Year 7. It is an easy read. Wide reading links: kids as carers; the migrant experience; sport; school life; other countries.

Kiki is an ageless Year 5 girl, an angry ‘firecracker’ like her Oma and a young version of the mother who knew a thousand ways to die. She has good reason, as her father is a doctor who has gone to work in a humanitarian field hospital in an African war zone. She is not comforted by her mother’s reasoning that the odds against having a dead father are indeed longer than finding a coin in the street, so Kiki works to improve the odds. Humour and warmth are brought to the story as Kiki and her mother look for things to distract themselves from the irrationality of worry, while Oma openly expresses her anger at her son who was always a risk-taking child. When the father is listed as missing, the mother worries about his underpants and socks...
but Kiki goes to a pet shop and outrages the young man assistant by deliberately buying a sick mouse so that its death would improve her father’s odds. Similarly, Mona, their ancient, fart-prone dog is told to drop dead until, as tension rises, Kiki almost puts into action one of her five ways to kill a dog. The conclusion is not a sentimental one in this simply told story of family tensions of living under the strain of everybody being nice but making things even worse. The first-person narration holds a skilful balance between naivety and irony while the characters are memorable.

Recommendation: This is a good easy-to-read and beautifully written book to use along with The Book of Everything. Year 7. Wide reading links: families; living on the edge; overcoming fear; other countries; animal stories.

It’s the summer school holidays and sixteen-year-old Mim’s mum is on the couch and her brothers are in gaol. Mim knows she doesn’t want to turn out like any of them. As the hot summer continues, Mim finds herself involved in trouble with the local crims, trouble with a boy and trouble with her best friend, as well as her deteriorating relationship with her mother.

Recommendation: This tough and honest novel should light up the Year 9 classroom with its dark humour and real insight into the fracturing and healing of relationships. Wakefield’s evocation of the steamy, dusty suburbs is beautifully done and her dialogue is equally as impressive. She lights up this lost place with humanity and challenges the reader’s prejudices as well. It’s the best first novel for me in a long time.

Byron Bay, NSW, in schoolies week - not Lord Byron but still full of ‘mad, bad and dangerous to know’ for gullible eighteen-year-old school leavers. It reads like a contemporary update on Nick Earls’ classic, After January, with added sex, drugs and music. When Adelaide boy Andrew falls out with his flatmates, he moves in with Heidi, who has scars on her arms, and Tim and Jude, who are fellow musicians and have a flourishing marihuana plantation in the basement. Andrew quickly falls for Heidi and, after he gets the bill for the trashing of his mates’ apartment, he is well onto the slippery slope as a partner in the distribution and sale of the marihuana.

There’s lots of enjoyable action and dialogue as a wild ride is provided.

Recommendation: This new writer will be enjoyed by students who like other action novels like Ted Dawe’s K Road and Thunder Road and Malcolm Burgess’s Junk and Nicholas Dane, because they seem to ‘Tell it like it is’. For Years 9 – 12. Wide reading links: action adventure; crime fiction; thrillers and mysteries; living on the edge; outsiders; identity; images of adolescence; a question of gender.

This American YA novel is clever – and lots of fun. The two authors write alternate chapters, Levithan in the voice of teenage boy Dash and Cohn in the
voice of teenage girl Lily. It is Christmas time, the least favourite time of the year for cynical, world-weary Dash, who has succeeded in convincing each of his parents that he is spending the holiday season with the other. He is happily alone, moving between the two empty apartments while his parents and their respective new partners are on vacation. Lily, in contrast, loves Christmas and is unhappy this year only because her parents have gone away on a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary holiday and left Lily and brother Langston alone. Langston, preoccupied with his new boyfriend, invents a project for Lily – to find herself a boyfriend – and does so by leaving a red notebook full of cryptic clues among the books of a large secondhand bookshelf. Dash, who loves bookshops, finds the notebook, follows the clues and is intrigued by the identity of the mysterious Lily. This begins the relationship, which develops through a series of further clues and dares.

This is a delightfully quirky story of young love with very unusual protagonists – so unusual that their idea of bliss is to spend New Year’s Eve in a storage closet in a bookshop with the complete Oxford English Dictionary – all 20 volumes. And it is delightful too to read a teenage love story that ends with a first sweet and awkward kiss.

Recommendation: This is a great read for Years 9 and 10.

The Australian writer Scot Gardner has written a number of highly regarded books with teenage male protagonists – boys from disadvantaged backgrounds who are doing it tough. While I have admired his writing, I can’t say that I’ve enjoyed it much: I am clearly not the target audience. But this one kept me absorbed from the moment I turned to the first page and stepped into the funeral parlour where Aaron is about to start work.
The funeral director has taken Aaron on only as a favour to the school counsellor, who is a friend. Aaron’s school reports are dismal: even the counsellor expects very little of him. He appears to be completely antisocial and he has failed all his subjects. But Aaron is very different from the persona he presents to the world. I think he is among the best-drawn male teenage characters in Australian fiction.
The story is told by Aaron in the first-person and the reader sees the world through his eyes. And what a cruel world it is!
The funeral parlour setting is fascinating (and often blackly funny) and Aaron’s gradual socialisation, as he is treated with respect and kindness by his employer, is beautifully developed. Aaron knows that there is something in his background that has traumatised him, giving him terrible nightmares and causing him to sleepwalk, and that background is finally, sensitively, revealed – to both Aaron and the reader.

Recommendation: Try this with reluctant male readers in Years 9 and 10.

1976, the summer of the Bicentennial of the USA when Eli was ten and ‘did something that was unforgivable’. House establishes on the first page that Eli, his narrator, is now an adult and telling his story in a gentle reverie, filtered by his own experience as a father and with the realisation that he was ‘a child of war’
like his parents who were marked forever by the father’s war in Vietnam. War lives on, long after it’s over. Lest this sound too grim, there is the naivety of ten-year-old Eli, the watcher, the boy with big ears listening under the porch, the boy who dares to read his parents’ love letters, the boy who cared too deeply, the boy who thought it was always his fault, the boy who seeks solace in the ancient beech tree; this voice and this interpretation of the family secrets give the novel its gently amusing tone.

In contrast to Eli, Edie, his closest girl friend, is tough and scary, while Josie, his sixteen-year-old sister is at war with her parents, beginning the crisis by defiantly wearing pants despoiling the American flag. Aunt Nell, who was notoriously pictured in the national press as an anti-war protester, comes to visit and call a truce with her Vietnam veteran brother when things fall apart at the fourth of July small town parade in which no Vietnam veterans march. Like the film *The Tree of Life*, this novel has many dimensions. It alludes to Whitman and Thoreau with Eli’s love of trees and his sanctuary in the roots of the ancient beech, while House’s achievement is to succeed with the simplicity and lucidity of his prose that has the cadences of whispers from the past. Only a rock would fail to weep reading this: K. M. Paterson has yet another great American writer to emulate the power and subtlety of her story telling.

Recommendation: Like many great books this can be enjoyed by all age groups whose responses will be only limited by their emotional maturity. Wide reading links: families; friendship; generations; identity; music; other countries; a question of gender.


Steph Bowe is seventeen years of age in 2011 so it seems apt that her first novel, the first draft of which was written at the age of thirteen, should also be available in e-book form. She captures that jocularity that distinguishes Australian teenage attitudes at their best so it would be interesting to encourage student readers to compare this text with American and European representations of teenagers with problems.

The book opens when Jewel rescues Sacha, who almost drowns in the same lake where her younger brother died. It is gradually revealed that Sacha is dying with a recurrence of the leukaemia he thought he had beaten, but there’s no teenage angst here. Whatever; get on with it. The teenagers’ friendships and squabbles buoy them up and Bowe subtly represents the tentative growth of intimacy between her two narrators.

Although there are too many problems and deaths for me, the voices are convincing and Bowe gets the tone just right. The one sex scene obeys the conventions of old Hollywood and expletives are rare and in context. It’s good to see the parents prominent in the story in this easy-to-read novel that will attract teenaged readers.

Recommendation: For Years 9-10. Wide reading links: overcoming adversity; body image; coping with grief; images of adolescence; a question of gender.


Dubosarsky always delights with her originality and her talent in creating worlds that are superbly imagined. In this case, the world closely mirrors the real world
of 1967 at a private girls’ school in Darlinghurst, but readers have commented on the fact that there is a dream-like quality about this world. I think this is because it is a world seen through the veil of memory, as the eleven little girls of the smallest class in the school remember the day that changed their lives. It is a seductive world, but it also quite claustrophobic. It was a time of huge social change, and yet these little girls are living a cloistered, privileged existence, ignorant of anything outside their cocoon.

On the critical day on which the story opens, the last man to be hanged in Australia has died. ‘Is it right to take a man and hang him, coldly, at eight o’clock in the morning?’ asks Miss Renshaw, their eccentric and lion-like teacher, as she tells them that they are going to the Memorial Gardens across the road to think of death. Death hangs over their lives: this significant year for their personal lives, 1967, is to end with the drowning of a prime minister. This particular day is to end with the mysterious and worrying disappearance of their teacher. Comparisons with Picnic at Hanging Rock are obvious, but the whole novel resonates with allusions, even to the excited crowds gathering around the big black headlines on November 11, 1975 - headlines ignored by the girls who, about to leave school, try once more to explain to themselves what might have happened to Miss Renshaw.

Recommendation: This is a beautifully written mystery. Consider it for whole class use with a top-stream class of girls in Years 7 or 8.

Winner of the 2011 Ethel Turner Prize For Young People’s Literature, this terrific novel follows events in the lives of several teenagers over one night. Lucy is coming to the end of Year 12 and is searching for the graffiti artist the Shadow, whose artwork she finds inspiring. Ed accompanies her on the search and wrestles with the fact that he has lied to her about the identity of the artist (it’s him!). As Lucy previously broke his noise on their first date, their burgeoning relationship is fascinating to follow. There is a darker side to the novel, as Ed is out of work and considers participating in a break in to his old school, but humour and honesty win out.

Recommendation: Use this with Years 9 -11 to explore issues of relationships, responsibility, honesty, love and loss, ethics and drug use.

The Mogadonians are coming for John. They have killed three of the gifted Lorian who fled to earth to escape their invasion and John is next on the list.

Recommendation: I am Number Four is a gripping fantasy novel and with the recently released film would be an engaging text for classroom study in Years 8 and 9. Issues include relationships and loss, power, and responsibility.

In the Sea there are Crocodiles by Fabio Geda. David Fickling Books, 2011. 9781846554766. 224 pp.
Enaiatollah Akbari, a 21-year-old Hazara Afghan, tells the true story of his successful quest for political asylum after his mother left him to people smugglers in Pakistan at the age of ten. Geda and the translator capture the innocence of the narration and support this mood with questions and comments
from the writer as listener. The boy’s amazing story of survival from Pakistan to Iran, Turkey, Greece and Italy, during five eventful years, never loses that innocence and hope. The result is a triumph of the human spirit as the boy’s incredible optimism is nourished by the kindness of strangers and the resilience of the Afghans with their traditions of hospitality extended to the sharing of street knowledge, so that a boy knows that when - not if - he gets to Rome, he can find bus 175 and make contact with other Afghan refugees and find Payam, whom he hasn’t seen since the age of 9 but knows is somewhere in Italy. 

Recommendation: For Years 7-12. A book to give to politicians, especially immigration ministers and party leaders, this engrossing, easy-to-read story is an excellent companion book for Gleeson’s *Mahtab’s Story* and Deborah Ellis’s *No Safe Place* and earlier stories of refugees. Wide reading links: re-tellings; asylum seekers; the big questions; children in war; hazards; living on the edge; other countries; overcoming adversity; overcoming fear; refugees; choices; journeys; narrative forms.


This is very special – a book that will haunt you. Thirteen-year-old Conor is suffering a recurrent and terrifying nightmare, triggered by the fact – that he is attempting to deny – that his mother is dying. So when, just after midnight, Conor hears his name being called and finds that the yew tree from the graveyard on the hill has transformed into a huge and threatening monster at his bedroom window, Conor isn’t even frightened: this real-life monster is much easier to deal with than his nightmare. The monster is and does everything monsters are meant to do, roaring and threatening to eat Conor alive with its ‘raggedy teeth’, shattering glass and wood and brick, but Conor can cope with it. The dialogue between Conor and the monster is a joy. Over a series of nights, the monster tells Conor stories – stories that finally enable him to accept that his mother will die.

In this hardcover edition Ness’s beautifully written text is complemented by the evocative and scary black and white drawings. The story is totally absorbing and achingly sad, while at the same time providing that glow of satisfaction that a reader experiences when a story is perfectly told.

The origin of this book is equally sad. It was begun by Irish writer Siobhan Dowd, who died of cancer in her early forties. The publisher asked Patrick Ness, author of the brilliant *Chaos Walking* trilogy, if he could finish it. Ness makes it clear that he did not attempt to write the book that Dowd might have written; instead he used the ideas she had been developing to inspire his own story, which he dedicates to Siobhan.

Recommendation: I would love to read this aloud, over several lessons, to a class. Years 7 and 8 are the intended audience, although I think most classes would be mesmerised. It’s a great horror story. Kids love horror stories but really good horror is hard to find. But it’s also a powerful exploration of the pain of dealing with the death of a loved one. Make sure to leave time for some attention to the detail of Ness’s writing and his genius for finding the right word. The morning after that first encounter with the monster, Conor is getting his own breakfast, relieved that he doesn’t have to eat his mother’s health-food-shop cereal and
bread: ‘It tasted as unhappy as it looked.’ Put your order in now for a class set as soon as this goes into paperback: it will become a classic.


Burgess, as he showed in his novel *Junk*, has the fictional benefit of having been active in the street life and drug culture of an English major city. Here again he creates a tone of authenticity as his 14-year-old character, Nicholas, is thrust onto the streets of Manchester, without any protecting relatives, following the sudden death by heroin of his young mother. Nick is, to a certain extent, streetwise, through his friend Davey’s largely criminal family who are used to living on the edge, but Nick is easily locked up in a shockingly cruel ‘home’ for boys who have no-one to get through the bureaucratic walls of the welfare state. Here Burgess patterns his plot on Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*, and, despite the fact that it is 1984, the violence and sexual molestation from the staff is all too believable. Burgess writes with power and pace as Nick escapes from the ‘home’ and lives on the street. As an adult reader, I was glad that this is a YA text so that Nick does survive when my heart told me that he could not.

**Recommendation:** For Years 9-10 students in schools that really care. Wide reading links: living on the edge; the big questions; challenge and endurance; a question of gender; power; friendship; crime fiction.


Burke transforms what looks like a bullied-in-school story to a tension stayed thriller that asks bigger questions about the nature of violence and revenge. Damon, aged 18, in his final term of school in a small Australian country town, is still followed by calls of ‘oink oink’, a reference to his size, his mother ‘the sow’ and his outsider status as a talented writer and computer games loner. Burke moves her story back and forth from his expulsion on his eighteenth birthday, respecting her young adult readers by leaving gaps in Damon’s narration. Clearly the expulsion that follows the attempted censorship of Damon’s Year 12 major work writing had a long gestation before Damon’s final, raging interview with the school principal. What happened at the Year 10 camp? How did this lead his mother to believe that Damon had caused her boyfriend to leave? How did the bullies’ torture of a neighbour’s kitten lead to Damon’s lust for revenge? Did he see a murder in the bush? What frightening thing is in the bag, in his locked wardrobe? Why does he secretly choose to get work with the other town ‘psycho’, the ‘Yugo’ Pigman, who shoots pigs for a living, when Damon is sickened by hunting and cannot shoot away from the computer online games where he is in role as The Prophet of Doom?

Both Damon and Miro the pig shooter suffer night terrors. Revelations begin to emerge after Damon’s terror increases as a body is found in the creek and he buys a hunting rifle with telescopic sights. Burke skilfully develops the characters of the two outsiders and their mutual need for each other. Some readers may find the characterisation of Damon’s mother and his attitude to her offensive, but any parent who has had a difficult adolescent boy at home will recognise the truth in her representation of his chaotic, angry home life. The violence, both in Bosnia and Australia, involving both humans and animals, is skilfully mediated and the few four-letter expletives should not worry those
who understand the context. Why worry about these when Damon hurls the cutlery drawer across the kitchen and spits out slowly, ‘Get. Out. Of. My. Life. Woman.’?

_recommendation:_ This is suitable for readers in Years 9 – 12. Wide reading links: the big questions; living on the edge; unlikely friendships; multicultural Australia; personal values in a global world; identity; thrillers and mysteries; bullying; power; a question of gender.


This off-beat and intimate collection of daily city life makes a refreshing change from the more usual fare for a graphic novel. The one-eyed narrator really draws you in to the mundane and minutiae of life from the scammer who takes over her email to the saga of the dead rat.

_recommendation:_ As a graphic novel study _Sensitive Creatures_ has much to offer to Years 10 - 12.


After the dramatic opening car crash, there is the tension of knowing that there were six teenagers in the car and only five seat belts. Who was flung from the car? Who died? Then there is the body found in the bush, and why are the friends reluctant to call the police? Australian writer Tayleur puts the opening story back into the past and, after the third-person narration, uses multiple and unequal narrators to piece together what happened and why, in that last summer before Year 12.

_recommendation:_ There is strong narrative drive and sustained mystery that makes this an easy read. For Years 9-10. Wide reading links: crime fiction; coming of age; friendship; identity; choices; thrillers and mysteries.


The editor, who is also a contributor, has chosen eight quality writers and asked them to provide stories that he calls ‘counterfactual’. The writers happily distort history and explore variations on the theme of ‘what if’? The stories are presented in chronological order, beginning with Jesus Christ and his desert temptations, Napoleon, Hitler, the lunar explorers, the year 2K bug and ending with the possible end of the world, as Frank Cottrell Boyce speculates about the consequences of an Aztec domination of the Americas and their belief that the world will end on 21.12.12. Other authors include Mal Peet, Linda Newbery and Matt Whyman. There is a helpful historical note for each story, revealing the orthodox historical events alluded to.

_recommendation:_ The engaging stories average only twelve pages and should be easy to read for boys who don’t read much. For Years 9-10. Wide reading links: science fiction; historical fiction; other countries; technology.


This is a gripping coming-of-age survival story. For his birthday, Christos is allowed to go out fishing on his own for the first time. He plans to fish and camp
out overnight. However, his plans are overturned when the boat runs aground on a reef and he attracts the attention of a four-metre tiger shark. The story is told in the third-person, interspersed with Christos’s thoughts in the first-person as he reflects on his experiences. This technique is very effective during the account of that long, precarious night as the shark tries to kill him and he considers his options. 

Recommendation: This is quite simply told, with comfortably large print. It’s very much a boy’s book: about doing things and solving problems and facing fear. The sequence involving the shark is quite terrifying, ensuring that the reader keeps turning the pages as fast as possible. Consider using this as a whole class text with boys in Year 7 or 8.


This is a powerful graphic novel about the story of a young woman’s battle against eating disorders. Anna’s enemy is personalised as a demon named Tyranny – the alterego who constantly tells her that she is not thin enough. Graphically, Tyranny is a spooky skeleton. The graphics are black and white and quite simple and spare, almost naïve, and this contributes to the power of the storytelling. The inspiration for the story comes from the author’s own experience.

Recommendation: This is strongly recommended for all adolescent girls to read. The graphic-novel format could also be used as a model for students’ own life-writing.


This is another twist on the vampire legend and this time it is beautifully conveyed in spare words and haunting illustrations. The vampire who lives in darkness longs for light and the ambiguity at the conclusion of this picture book will provide for much classroom discussion.

Recommendation: Use this with Years 7 and 8.


American writer Watkins shows his class with this very different YA novel about a foster mother from hell and the survival of sixteen year old Iris - although it’s not as good as his astounding debut novel _Down Sand Mountain_. The setting is the poor lands of North Carolina, and Watkins again captures the distinctive voice of his protagonist as she is plunged from a rural idyll in Maine with her veterinarian father to a goat farm in Craven County after her father’s death. Here, her only relative, Aunt Sue, and her football jock son Book fall upon her as their meal ticket and servant as Sue administers the father’s estate. In the dirt poor farm where the dog and the goats are habitually mistreated, Iris and Sue’s mutual hostility builds to a climax when Iris slashes the tyres of the new ute and, after being slapped, takes off with the young goats that she was ordered to slaughter.

Watkins goes a little over the top with the Southern Gothic suffering of Iris (for example, having the aunt torment her about her vegetarian meals) but he leaves
suitable gaps for his teenaged readers, especially when the aunt and her son take Iris to the lake to punish her. The strongly represented characters are all believable and the selected detail about raising goats, the boorishness and the misogyny of the football jocks in the drunken chaos of a 'field party', the 'Yes maam' culture of parenting and American gun culture emerge into a thrilling account of Iris's fight back. The best for me is Watkins' understanding of the power of adolescent, irrational passion, whether it be about cruelty to animals or asserting their own independence, whatever the odds.

*Recommendation:* For Years 9 – 12. Note that there are sexual references. Wide reading links: images of adolescence; power; a question of gender; overcoming adversity; rural life; cultural diversity; friendship; living on the edge.