



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
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# A REPORT ON TRENDS IN SENIOR ENGLISH TEXT-LISTS



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## Preface

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The purpose of this report is to present findings from a research project investigating text-list trends in the Senior Victorian English curriculum between 2010 and 2019. This report introduces the context of the study, and summarises the literature which establishes the factors impacting on text selection. We outline the methodology we took to help us answer the question: *What are the trends in VCE English text lists between 2010 and 2019?*

The substantive part of the report focuses on the analysis of trends from the 360 texts which appear on these lists. We have summarised our findings into ten themes, and include focus questions designed for English and Literature teachers grappling with their own text selection challenges. We conclude by discussing the implications of these trends, and advocating for greater diversity when it comes to discussions about which texts should be included in the senior English curriculum.

## About the Authors

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## Acknowledgements

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## Foreword

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I arrived at a new high school for a visit in December 1973, at the end of my first year of teaching, to meet my new English coordinator. After the initial shock of being asked to take two HSC (Year 12) English classes the following year, I asked about the books. George Jackson's *Soledad Brother*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, John Le Carre's *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold*, Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (film) and Bertrand Russell's *Authority and the Individual*. Faced with a conceptually dense six-part essay by one of the then world's most renowned analytical philosophers, a Swedish 'art' film and a varied collection of books, all of which reflected on questions surrounding different kinds of authority and the rights of the individual, the coming holidays weren't looking too promising.

At this time, senior school English texts were almost exclusively 'books'. 'Film-as-text' was starting to appear on lists but not many teachers knew what to do with this new textual development. It fit into a theme called 'Communication'. Another key framing factor about how I presented texts to my students was that they were all largely chosen to address a theme. In 1974, these included 'Authority', 'Environment', and 'Communication'.

Throughout the 1970s, 80s and into the 90s, Year 12 English teachers had access to a number of support publications, one of which was known as the *HSC Resource Book*. A brief review of this publication's offerings presents a revealing insight into what reading experiences were on offer to senior students and what the thinking was that supported this. For example, the 1974 edition quoted the VUSEB (1970's version of VCAA) Handbook about English:

*'The subject aims to develop the student's ability to read more rewardingly, to think and talk more cogently, to write more clearly, relevantly and creatively—and in the process, to broaden and enrich his (sic) awareness of the world... It is regarded as important, however, that the study of the chosen book should lead outwards, suggesting a number of directions for exploratory discussion and further reading.'*

The same edition, on its second last page, left students with an extensive 'wide reading' list of what they could look at next—all titles were presented under thematic headings. The idea of personal growth and moving out from the book's confines to consider broader implications were obvious emphases in all of this.

In 1975, my third year of teaching, all the Year 12 HSC books changed at my school – all seven of them! This time, we chose four titles broadly around the theme of 'Personal Growth', along with three other unrelated titles. After a year of political philosophical exploration, I now needed to read widely on psychological revelations about becoming a person. The framing device of selecting and exploring a linking 'big idea' became a powerful influence on how books at this level should be presented to students.

My 1976 edition of the HSC Resource book spoke about 'People meeting Books...which, ultimately is people meeting people... (and) you, in the whole experience, meeting the rest of the world.' The messages about reading and what it was supposed to offer my senior students were accumulating and, at the same time, these perspectives were obviously quite revealing to a young English teacher learning about his craft and profession. Five out of the 28 texts offered to HSC English students that year were written by women. Only one 'book' had anything to do with film – *The Citizen Kane* Book by Pauline Kael.

The 1978 Resource Book spoke to my students and me about 'books for study' being there to 'tell stories and entertain.' They must do this, it was claimed, 'very well' before they had a chance of doing anything else, which included enabling us 'to share the experience of people we have never met.' That year, text offerings included a group tied together under the theme of 'Men and Women'. Books included, *A Kind of Loving* by Stan Barstow, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. *The Young Wife* by David Martin (Aus) and a play, *In Celebration*, by David Storey. Again, no films but something like 'cultural diversity' was starting to sneak into the list with the inclusion of titles like *The African Child* by Camara Laye, *A Man of the People* by Chinua Achebe and *Diary of a Welsh Swagman* by William Evans.

The mid-80s saw us all witness some important reviews that were going to affect English at the end of the decade, and into the 90s. *Ministerial Paper No 6*, 'Curriculum Development and Planning in Victoria' offered fresh policies and guidelines on the purpose of schooling and shared responsibilities regarding decisions concerning the nature of curriculum. In 1985, Jean Blackburn's 'Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Schooling' recommended a single two-year certificate, a recommendation that was eventually reflected in the VCE. During this period, books were largely (though not exclusively) presented to Year 12 students around themes and big ideas.

As always, end-of-year examination assessment criteria tended to shape important aspects of students' experiences of the texts. My students at the time faced questions related to their Part A books which were not substantially different to the single-text questions currently presented to students in their English exams. Writing about their 'theme' texts, students were asked to demonstrate an 'ability to establish and support a point of view on the aspect of the theme raised by the examination question. In arguing their point of view candidates must draw for their illustrative material on at least two of the core books set for that particular theme' (VISE Course Description).

While never the sole determiner in text selection, assessment imperatives across the years have played an interesting role in how students may experience their texts. The period just prior to the introduction of the first VCE English Study Design saw a variety of English courses offered to senior students. The course, then known as Group 2 English B (teacher assessment based entirely on the student's satisfactory achievement of the goals specified for each unit), spoke powerfully and explicitly about assessment being continuous, diagnostic and participatory. At this time, a document written by Graeme Withers and Margaret Gill, 'Assessing Text Response: A Review of

the 1990 pilot CAT for teachers', reported on teachers and students work responding to 'Prompts' and gave the analogy of 'a prompter in a theatre who at the very last moment remind an actor or actress what he or she must remember.' Students were offered a choice from nine prompts, presented in three groups. The first were 'Close Reading' prompts, the second were 'Creative' and the third were 'Issues-Based Analytical or Expository'.

The process of selecting texts today, of course, is based around a different set of questions. How might a text 'reflect community standards'? How might a particular text speak to whole-of-school priorities, for example, opportunities for critical appreciation of craft and the aesthetics of language? Will the text promote the enjoyment of reading? Does our choice of texts reflect a wide range of cultural, gender-based and racial experiences? Is Australian Literature represented? Is there film-as-text? Multimodal texts? Digital texts? ... the list goes on. It has always been an exercise that has offered me a chance to pause and think about what my colleagues and I are doing as English teachers, and particularly what sorts of reading, writing and conversations about matters of common interest we could offer our students. Despite pressures in schools, I don't think this has changed.

**Paul Martin (English teacher and VATE Life Member).**

## Introduction

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The first mention of the subject we call 'English' can be traced back to 1587, when Francis Clement included in his preface to *The Petie Schole* a mention of 'a word or two with the English teacher' **(as cited in Michael, 1987, p. 5)**. Since then, social, cultural and historical factors have created a context whereby we must now speak about English in the plural sense, to recognise the diversity of ways that students and teachers experience the subject. One aspect of English which has remained constant over the past 400 years is the central role of texts in the classroom.

Whether for the purpose of skill development, supporting the growth of spiritual and compassionate dispositions, encouraging empathy and multicultural understandings, or to instil knowledge about the cultural heritage of peoples and places, texts have always been the means by which English teachers work with students. For some, texts have been the method used to civilise and humanise individuals **(Arnold, 1869)**. For others, texts in the English classroom are used as a way to provoke, or to produce disequilibrium **(Boomer, 1993)**. They are tools for grappling with new ideas, encouraging new ways of seeing, and calling into question old and new paradigms.

Subjects like English are socially and historically produced, having the effect of bestowing legitimacy on particular forms of knowledge **(Young, 1998)**. Curriculum is always organised to preserve vested interests and maintain the status quo. Any attempt to change this curriculum, and therefore disrupt the status quo, is met with fierce resistance by those who perceive that such change will undermine the values, relative power and privileges of the dominant groups involved. However, it is also worth remembering that disciplines are not static **(Yates, Woelert, Millar, and O'Connor, 2017)**. Over time, their boundaries change.

The tendency of politicians and media commentators to use English to comment on society is more pronounced than their attention towards any other subject in the curriculum. We could take this as a compliment and a sign of the centrality of English in the school curriculum, if only a little less of their discourse did not focus on denigrating and disparaging the complex nature of the work teachers do with texts.

For those teaching in the English classroom today, this work has become even more complex due to the rise of new media texts, and the globalisation of education. The multicultural nature of most classrooms, the diversity of cultural and historical perspectives which students bring with them to schools, and the rapid proliferation of digital texts in the lives of young Australians, has caused many teachers to question whether the texts we currently use are best suited to preparing our students for future work and life.

## Literature Review - The Factors Impacting Text Selection

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Text selection in Victoria is informed by a number of factors, as this brief literature review will show. The current Victorian system, mandated by VCAA guidelines for text selection, reflects the broader history of considerations for teaching English, including the inclusion of canonical literature, Australia's national literary identity, the way that students relate to the texts they study, broadening understandings of what constitutes texts worthy of study and adherence to community standards.

One overarching principle of the VCE text selection guidelines is that the texts 'reflect excellence'. Known as the Cultural Heritage model, this historical imperative for English study to cover 'the best which has been thought and said' (**Arnold, 1869**) has traditionally seen an emphasis on canonical Western literature as being fundamental to a liberal education.

While canonical literature continues to be prevalent and valued in Victoria, as elsewhere, concerns that literacy standards are declining, as well as political misgivings over the mixing of high and low culture, have left conservative commentators concerned that the canon is under attack and that the importance of Western literature must be re-established (**Donnelly, 2018**). Termed the 'literacy wars' (**Snyder, 2008**), ideological differences as to the value of text study have only grown in the last ten years, with debates about how to balance the legacy of the past with future literacy demands that students must face.

Certainly, post-WWII education and the literary movement of postmodernism prompted educators to advocate expanding the study of 'literature' to the study of 'text' (**Beavis, 1996**). This philosophical stance argues for the interrelationship between high and low culture, and has resulted in a broadening of text types studied at VCE to include forms such as graphic novels and film.





A Critical Literacy lens in education considers all texts to be equally worthy of study in so far as they are all elements of culture that warrant students' critical attention. Academics Misson and Morgan (2006) argue, however, that the study of popular culture as a phenomenon should not confuse the object of study with the process of analysis. Extending this theory, research such as that by Bacalja (2018) argues that video games may also warrant study in the English curriculum, not least for their ability to make students cognisant of the way popular culture positions them.

Policy guidelines for text selection in Victoria also mandate that English students study at least one text that is by or about Australians, including Indigenous Australians. There are many rationales for the study of Australian literature, including the need for students to be able to claim their 'own national literary inheritance' (Doecke, Davies, and Mead, 2011, p. 1) through engaging with the narratives of their own country.

The study of Australian literature is rationalised for the way in which it speaks to transnational literatures, thereby allowing a critique of Australia's place in the world—both how its culture is shaped by 'what is written in other times and places' and what may be appreciated in terms of its literary uniqueness (Reid, 2011, p. 18). By specifying the inclusion of Australian literature in the curriculum, the VCAA guidelines avoid issues of 'cultural cringe' that in 2011 saw the University of Melbourne fail to offer any formal undergraduate studies in Australian literature, amid a student and media backlash (see Brady, 2011).

Text selection in VCE English has found contention among media commentators, parents and the education community on matters of contemporary concerns such as diversity and inclusion, and mental health. In 2012, VCAA ordered a review of Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* after it was labelled 'pornographic' by a Melbourne teacher/journalist (Bantick, 2012). In a similar vein, a series of news articles in 2017 broke stories that students found the VCE texts lists 'too depressing', prompting calls for 'trigger warnings' on texts that cover confronting issues (Cook, 2017).

There is also the important issue of the role that teachers play in text selection. Selected texts do not constitute the curriculum in and of themselves—they must be negotiated between teacher and students, and in that negotiation the views and values of individuals impact upon the way the texts are received. In this way text selection is not only mediated by teacher preference, but also a consideration of international trends towards high-stakes testing pressures (Sahlberg, 2011) and preoccupations with maximising ATAR scores.

One notable way that these values are received relates to the work of Teese (2013), who views text selection as a matter of politics in which teacher perceptions of their students (especially in terms of class) perpetuate disparities in achievement. It is this phenomenon that can incline teachers in higher socio-economic schools to teach 'harder' literary texts, while teachers in lower socio-economic schools to select texts from the list that might be more relatable (or shorter reads) for their students.

Regardless of how consciously they follow such academic and media debates, in the lived experiences of teachers and schools, a combination of these factors will impact on the selection of texts for study.



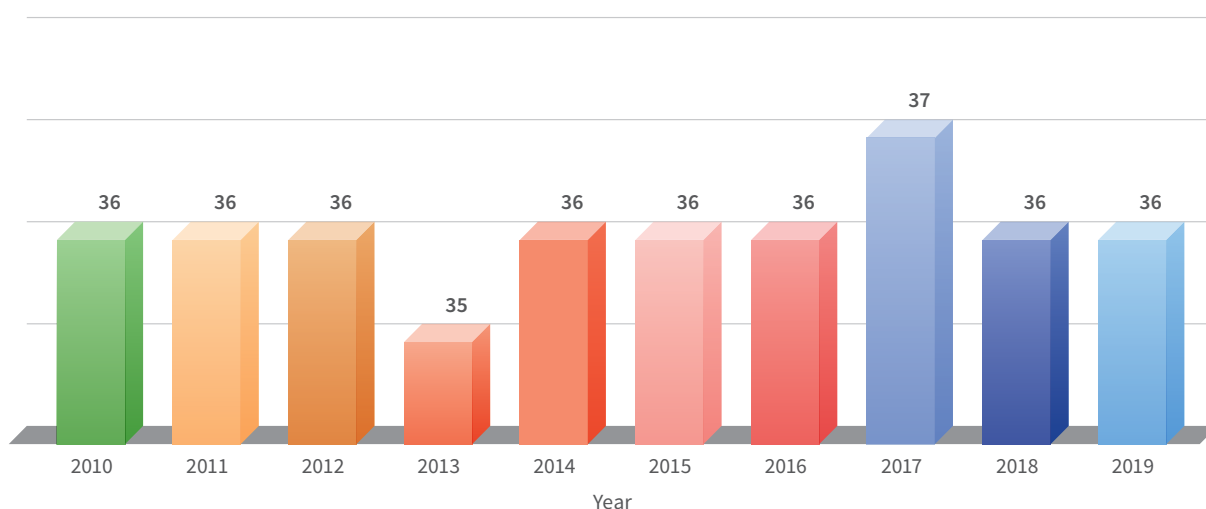
## Methodology

We examined the 360 texts which appeared on the Victorian senior English curriculum text lists between 2010 and 2019<sup>1</sup> and collated all texts into a single data file. We produced a coding frame, outlined below, to inform our investigation of the primary research question: *What are the trends in VCE English text selection between 2010 and 2019?*

Our study coded trends in themes, authorship (sex and Indigenous identity), narrative structure and characterisation. To locate trends, we developed our coding frame through a renovation and simplification of literary theory and film theory. While our primary aim was to understand trends in the relationship

between characters, narrative, plot, and story, there is no ‘established’ academic approach to narrative analysis across English, Theatre Studies and Film studies. Project team members would code each text according to the coding frame and every text was double-coded through a blind process to ensure reliability. A small number of discrepancies that emerged as a result of the double-coding process were resolved by the lead researchers. The coding frame allowed for the identification of trends between key aspects of each text. These aspects included: the author/director’s sex, the year of publication, the geographic setting of each text, the text type of each text, and the major themes explored.

Number of texts per year



Our coding frame guided coders to understand the social and historical significance generated by the texts and the primary motivation was to link text selection to policy-driven aims of education and the curriculum. Our explicit goal was thus to understand socio-cultural norms and patterns in text selection.

<sup>1</sup> Each year’s list is released 12 months in advance which allowed the 2019 list to be included in the sample.

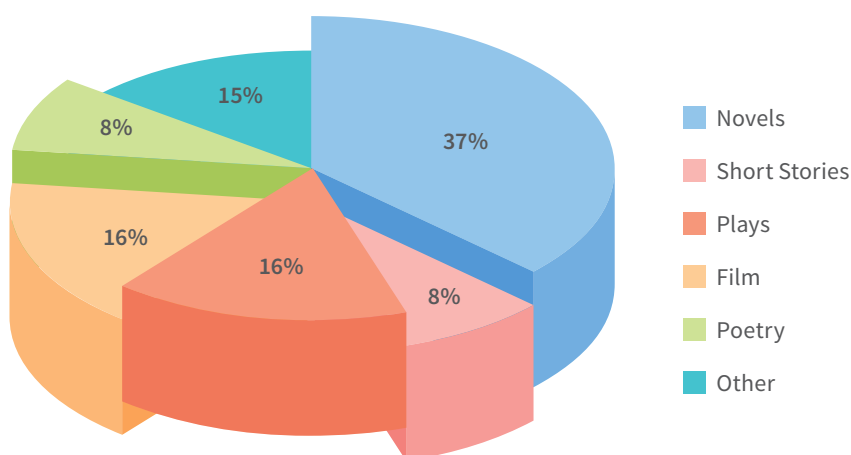
## Finding 1: Text type

*While English in the very early days of its existence as a subject was dominated by the study of poetry, the popularisation of the novel in 18th century England contributed to its current status as the most dominant text in the English curriculum. This dominance has implications for the extent to which students are supported to understand a range of text types, including those which privilege visual and aural modes. The dominance of the printed word also risks crowding out new media and digital texts which are becoming increasingly prolific in the everyday lives of today's students.*

*Our coding team were asked to identify the genre of each text. Six categories were provided (novels, short stories, plays, films, poetry and other). The 'other' category was intended to capture any texts which did not fit in previous categories, but in practice mostly consisted of non-fiction memoirs.*

The data revealed that texts which privilege the printed word dominate the text lists. Novels were the most frequent text, representing over one third of all texts. This was followed by plays (16%), films (16%) and other (15%). The least represented text types were poetry (8%) and short stories (8%). There were no digital texts in the sample, and no interactive texts.

Text type (%), 2010 - 2019



The 'other' category proved to be a proxy for memoirs, with all but one text in this category representing historical or biographical accounts capturing the lives of individuals. The one exception was the text *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, a graphic novel incorporating comic-style animations with extensive linguistic elements. Had memoirs been coded as novels, then this category would represent over half of all texts on these lists.

*'Students identify and evaluate values and traditions as central elements of the context in which texts are created, read and viewed. English teachers believe that English encompasses the study of literature and a range of other textual forms...The development of self-understanding and a better understanding of others are key aims of the English curriculum. Students achieve this through their study and use of language in written, spoken and visual modes and through different types of texts, including: classic and popular texts, multimodal texts, fiction and non-fiction texts'*

(AATE, 2007)

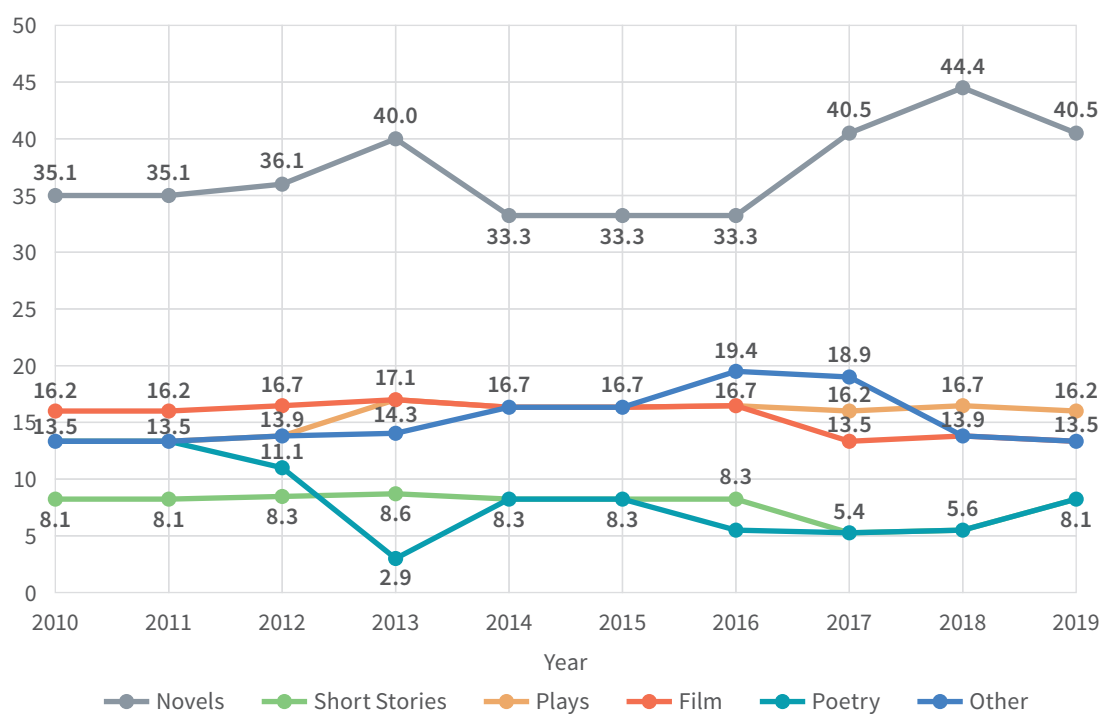


There was also consistency in terms of the proportion of different text types which appeared on the text lists over the ten year sample period. Novels were always the most prevalent text on the lists, with their percentage of each year's list increasing in more recent years, and representing almost half of all texts in 2018 (44.4%). The number of short stories, plays and films on the lists is relatively stable, usually between 11 - 19%, suggesting a concerted effort by those constructing the text lists to include numerous examples of these texts each year. Poetry had a more erratic presence on the lists, drifting as low as 2.9% (2013) and peaking at 13.5% (2010 - 2011).

*'One of the problems, of course, is that the reasons why English is constructed in the way it is these days is enormously complex, because it is reflecting the complexity of texts in our world and the complexity of the uses to which language can be put. The theory behind it is often complex too, with multiple versions possible, and therefore very easy to simplify and misrepresent'*

(Misson, 2006, p. 8)

Text type (%), 2010 - 2019



## Focus Questions

What text types should we be using in the English classroom?

Should the dominance of the novel continue or is a diversity of texts more desirable?

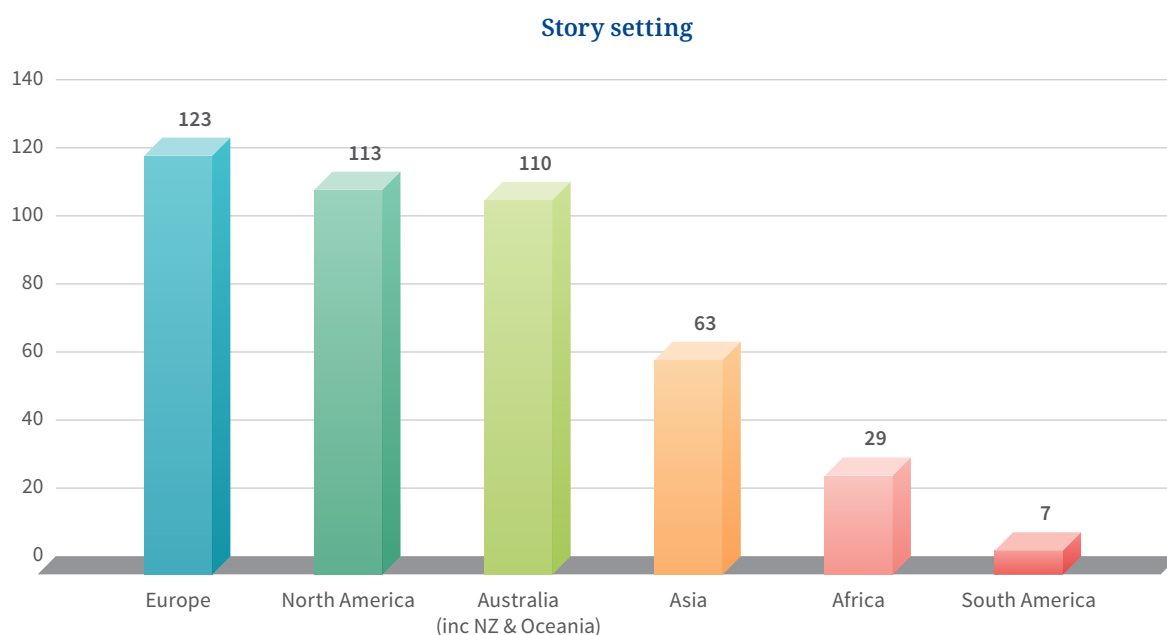
Is there a place for the study of new media digital texts in the English curriculum?

## Finding 2: Story Setting – Place and Time

*Setting refers to the world in which the story takes place. It includes the location of the story's events, as well as the period of time. Whether through sights, sounds, colours or textures, setting helps the reader position the plot within a geographic location, time, mood and atmosphere.*

*Coders were required to indicate the geographic setting of every text on the list. Given the fact that many stories*

*are located across multiple settings, coders could select more than one setting for a text if they felt that a substantial portion of the story took place in that location. This explains why the sum of all story settings exceeds the 360 texts analysed. Coders were also required to locate the plot within particular time periods. Again, coders could select more than one time period if the plot occurred across categories.*



The data shows that the most popular geographic setting for texts was Europe, with 123 of the 360 texts including a substantial portion of the story within the continent. A closer look at these 123 texts reveals that the vast majority were set in British Isles, likely reflecting the origins of the early colonial history of Australia as well as the origins of many British canonical works. This was followed by texts set in North America (113), with Australia (including New Zealand and Oceania) the third most popular location to locate stories (110). As a percentage of all texts, this reveals that almost one-third of texts had a substantial portion of their story located in Australia. Despite Australian Bureau of Statistics census data (2016) revealing that a majority

of Australians born abroad are from Asia, and not Europe, less than one in five texts were located in Asia. This figure decreases even further when considering stories set in the African continent (29). Less than 2% of texts were set in the South American continent.

*‘The literatures of the world’s leading peoples are seen to stand to us in closer or more remote degrees of relationship. Some literatures are entirely extraneous to the evolution of which we are the product ; if they have an interest for us at all, this must rest entirely upon intrinsic literary attractiveness’*

*(Moulton, 1911, p. 12)*

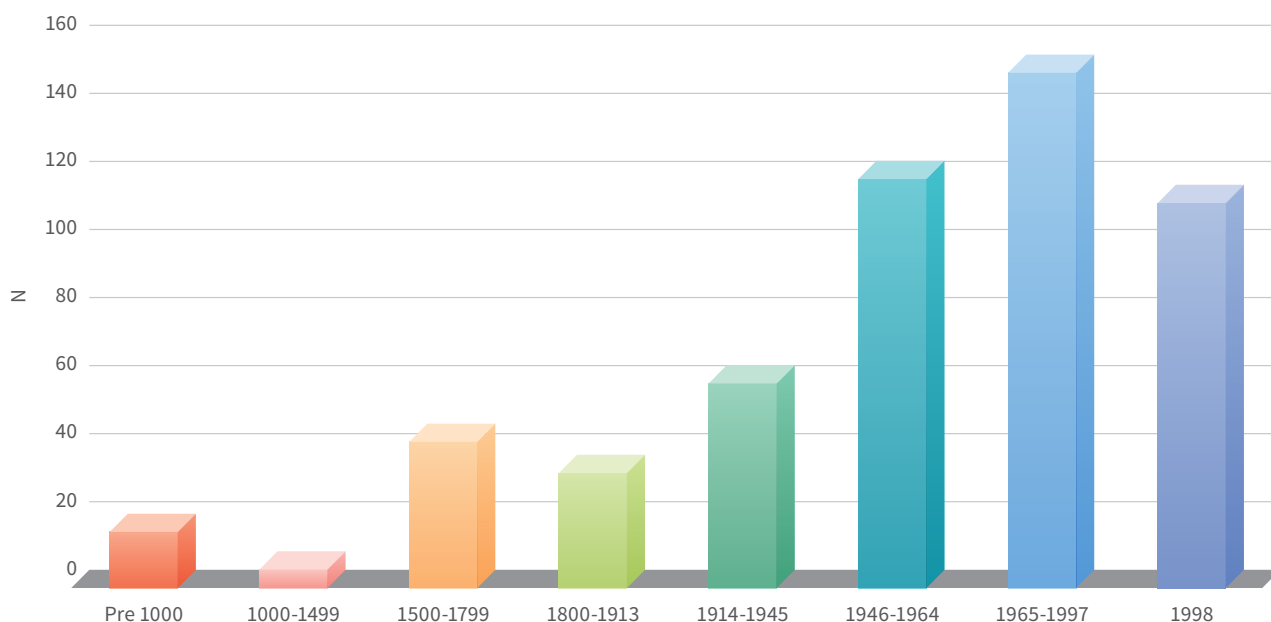


The vast majority of texts were set in the post WWII period (1946 to the present). Within this broad period, over one-third of all texts were set between 1965 - 1997, closely followed by texts from 1946 - 1964 (the post-war years). 31% of texts were set in the time period 1998 to the present, the time period which represents the lived era of most of the students studying texts from these text lists. Texts set in this period were likely to represent a world somewhat familiar to students. In contrast, very few texts were set in the pre-1800 world, less than 20%. Of the texts located in the 1800 - 1913 period, a time

characterised by colonial and imperial expansion, 33 texts were set, with almost two-thirds of these located in Europe. When it comes to texts set in the 19th century and early 20th century, it was highly unlikely texts would be set in the areas of the world that were subject to colonisation (Africa, Asia, and South America as well as Australia (see below)).

*‘Until the lions have their own historians,  
the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.’*  
— Chinua Achebe

Texts set in each time period



### Focus Questions

How much time should we dedicate to texts which place the reader in unfamiliar and foreign contexts?

Should the cultural backgrounds of our students inform our text selection practices?

Is it important to select texts with stories located in the lived worlds of our students?

### Finding 3: Author's Sex

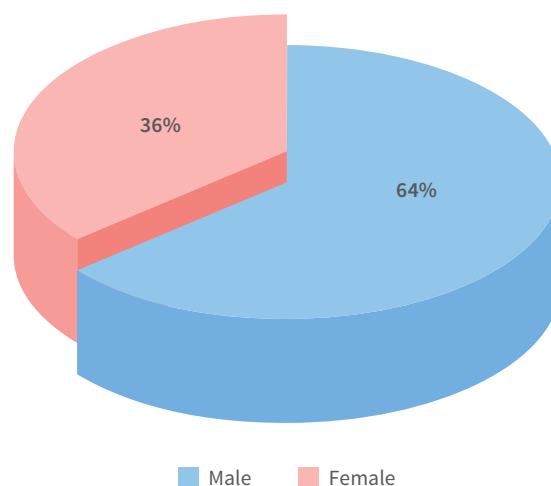
*Stereotypes and social and cultural norms associated with sex and gender inform how we read and analyse texts. Stereotypes ensure an immutable and unchanging view of sex and gender and mean that the reader cannot think or imagine a world outside or beyond the stereotype in the first place. In this sense, a deep engagement with literature and the arts in a classroom environment can have positive effects on gender bias and carries with it the potential to alter sexist views of authors and creators.*

*Sex refers to the biological categories of male and female and was coded accordingly. Coders were instructed to consider any transgender author (whose gender identity does not correspond with their birth sex), however, there was no representation of transgender authors or directors in the text selection lists.*

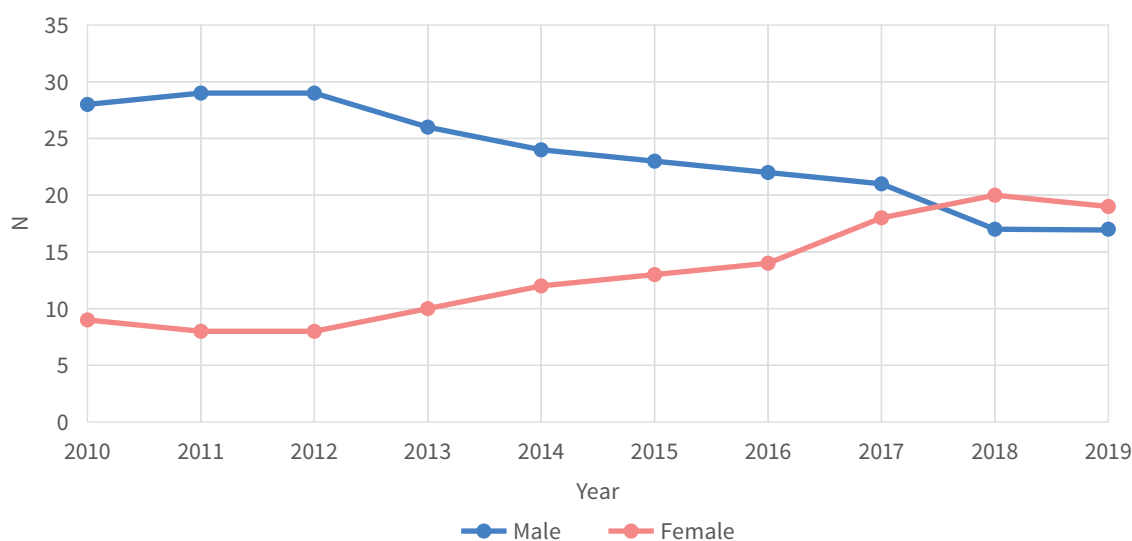
Our findings revealed inequality in text selection, which can be connected to gender stereotypes. While creators of texts were overwhelmingly male (64% to 36% overall) trends from 2010 until 2019 showed increasing representation of female creators across all texts. One way to explain the disparity is through the prevailing stereotype, the essentialist perspective, which posits that male – rather than female – authors and creators are more equipped to write about and imagine major social, political and cultural issues and that it is thus male authors and creators who form the ‘canon’ of Western literature and the arts.

The data also revealed differences in terms of text type. Over the sample, novels were almost exactly equal in representation (48.1% were authored by women); however this was not the case for all text types (discussed below). We would also note that, although equally important to a study of this nature, coders did not account for nationality, or (for example) ethnic or religious identity of the authors, due to limitations of scope and the fact that our frame remained primarily focussed on the content of texts. The only exception to this was made for Indigenous authors, directors and playwrights – findings for this are discussed below.

Author's sex (%), 2010 - 2019



Author's sex, 2010 - 2019

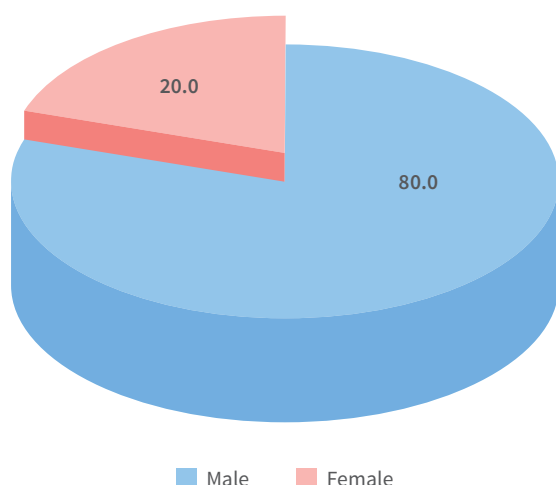




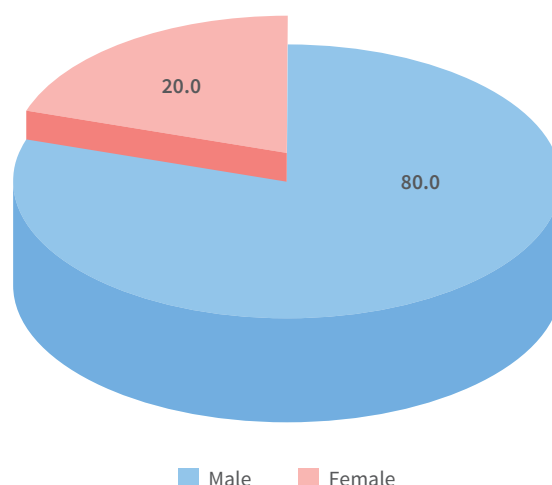
*‘There have been, in my lifetime, so many arguments about whether women are any good, as writers, whether they could ever be considered great, as writers, most of them started by angry old men. Women found these arguments – so casually made – confusing, undermining and worth disproving. A vast amount of work was undertaken ... in order to do so. It always seemed to me a double burden that women should suffer the discrimination and do all the work to fix it. (Besides, who are you trying to convince?) ... To be constantly reminded that you are female is to be pushed back into your body, over and over, when, as a writer, you function not as a body, but as a voice’*  
(Enright, 2017)

The figure for poems and films created by women was a mere 20%. This inequality in representation can be thought in relation to issues of ‘text type’, which includes a study of the history, reception and cultural significance of poetry and film, as well as issues of form and content specific to cinema and poetry. It is worth reflecting here on perceptions of the purpose and significance of poetry and cinema, as opposed to the novel. Female film directors, poets and playwrights are perhaps traditionally less received by critics, less likely to have work funded and recognised, and often have subordinate or unequal representation in canonical lists. Thus the ‘cultural heritage model’ of texts, which the curriculum is largely built on, can also serve to reinforce these inequalities (Pollock, 1999).

Films by female or male author (%), 2010 - 2019



Poetry by female or male author (%), 2010 - 2019



### Focus Questions

How do we, as teachers and students, perceive differences between male and female creators?

How do specific texts allow us to question historical and cultural stereotypes?

How does a focus on the author’s identity impact how we understand the meaning of texts?

Should we select texts for our students created by female and male authors?

## Finding 4: Australian Literature

*The Teaching Australian Literature Survey (Mead, Kilner, and Healy, 2010) noted that public dialogue and debates about the role of Australian texts in the classroom tended to exclude the actual voices of teachers, and that discourse was dominated by politicians, academics and journalists. Students, it should also be noted, often have negative perceptions of national literature and the study of Australian works is burdened by stereotypes of being ‘dry, boring, obsessed with national identity and Australian history, and set in the bush’ and confined (in the words of one student) to ‘dusty’ texts about ‘mateship, world wars and white men’ (p. 63). The inclusion of Australian literature on any text selection list demands a teacher’s passion for the text (Magner, 2015), a range of complex, diverse texts, and a rejection of the ‘medicine approach’: (e.g. read this, it’s good for you) (Mead et al., 2010, p. 30).*

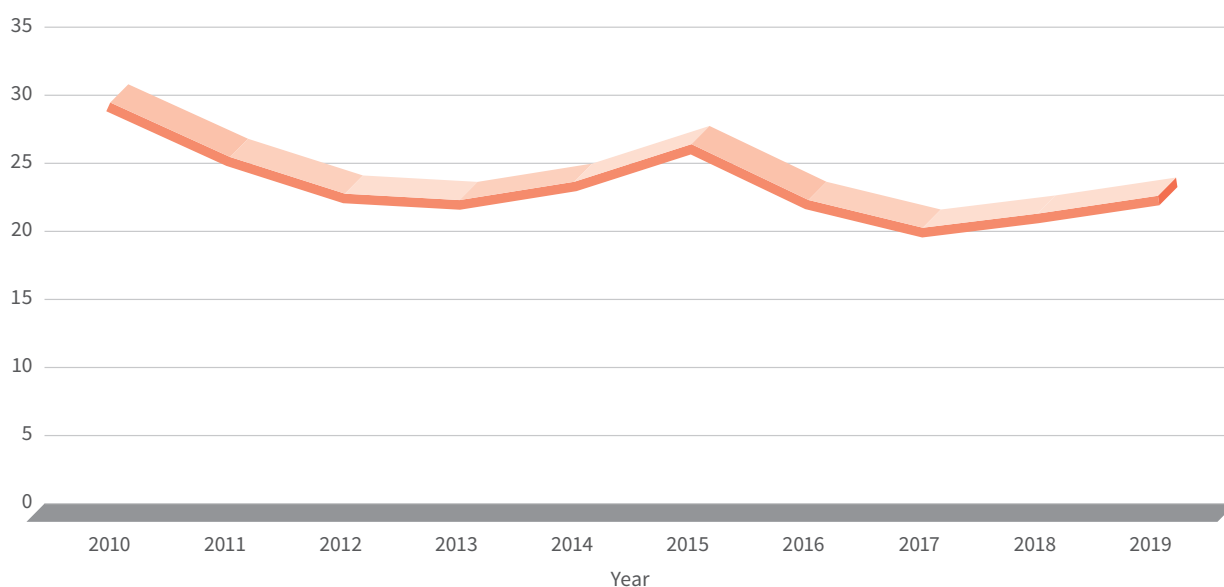
*Coders did not explicitly map the nationality of authors or directors here, as we considered ‘setting’ (any text set in Australia), and ‘themes’ that were connected to Australia in any form, to be equally influential in the imagination and representation of Australia. In this respect, we took a literary approach and accepted the definition of Australian literature and fiction as mutable. A separate section in this report discusses themes and representation of Indigeneity and colonisation.*

Texts set in Australia followed a downward trend, beginning with just over 30% of texts in 2010 and gradually falling to a low of 21% in 2017. Texts set in Australia tended to be created by men (54%) and were more likely to be placed in urban or suburban settings (56%). These findings are meaningful only when connected to broader debates about the purpose of Australian literature. As Patterson notes in her study of the low uptake of Australian texts by VCE students for examination, ‘to make literature teaching mean something in political, ideological, historical and cultural terms’ demands ‘a mechanism by which to teach students to value diversity, promote tolerance, expand language and reflect on identity formation and its consequences’ (2012, p. 11). Within this context, it is pleasure, and a pedagogical focus on affect and the emotional engagement with texts, that will preserve the study and reception of national literature.

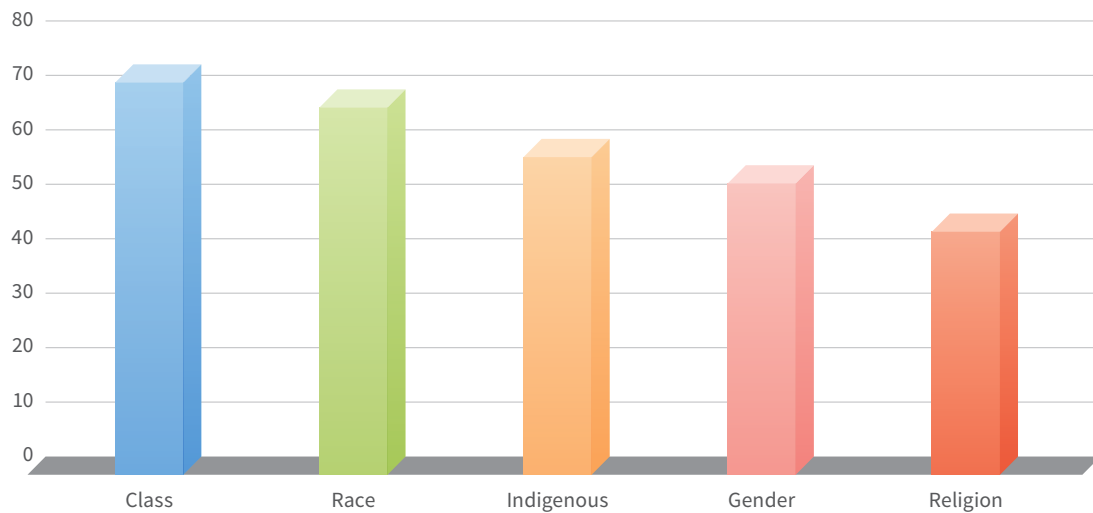
*‘It is surely vital to think in terms of a national literature, historically or contemporary, with flexibility and an openness to change and reassessment’*

*(John Kinsella, 2012)*

Texts set in Australia (%), 2010 - 2019



Themes addressed by texts set in Australia (%), 2010 - 2019

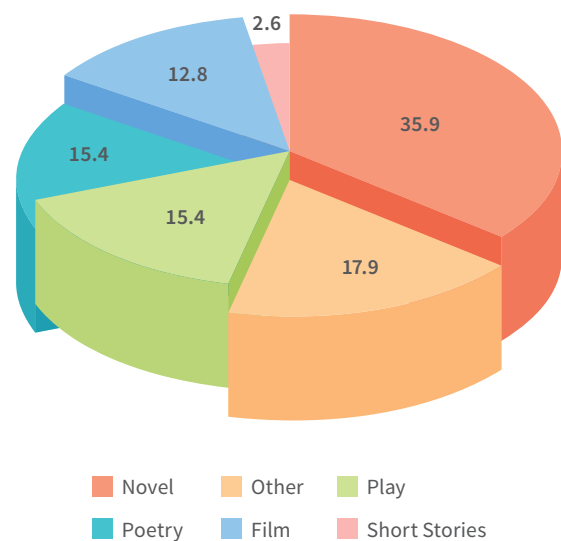


The place of nation and its representations is linked to trends in themes here. The popular theme explored by Australian texts was 'class'. The fact that themes about 'class' preside over all others is perhaps telling about how Australian identity and the sense of Australian literature is actively constructed by texts lists. Overcoming class inequality and the 'working class hero' are traditional tropes of Australian nationalism. Identifying with the 'battler' cuts across political, social and cultural lines (think of how politicians often utilise rhetoric and 'working class lingo' to garner support and seem more relatable) and it is therefore a unifying theme. The high number of texts exploring 'race' can also be linked to Australia's history, with issues of colonisation, immigration and migration relevant to all Australians. It is worth considering that we may do a disservice to students where more complex, divisive and emotive topics like those listed above are not actively explored.

Novel and 'Other' (which here means memoir) make up over 50% of text types set in Australia. While the written word remains a stable means through which notions of the national are imagined and communicated, it is of relevance that the two text types more closely aligned with 'truthful representation'

make up over 50% of text types set in Australia. Why should poetry, which is closer to the imaginary, the abstract and the fictional, and film, whose narrative devices are sometimes derided for 'manipulating truth', be under-represented here? Memoirs are too often regarded as proxies for reality as they are categorised as 'non-fiction' and they make up almost one-fifth of texts.

Texts set in Australia by text type (%), 2010 - 2019



### Focus Questions

How do texts set in Australia shape notions and narratives of Australian history and identity?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of reading and analysing 'Australian' texts through the prism of their 'Australianness'?



## Finding 5: Character's Sex and Sexuality

The education of sexual knowledge has always been a controversial topic and can be linked to broader social concerns and debates about the relationship between childhood, adolescence and sexuality (Robinson and Davies, 2008).

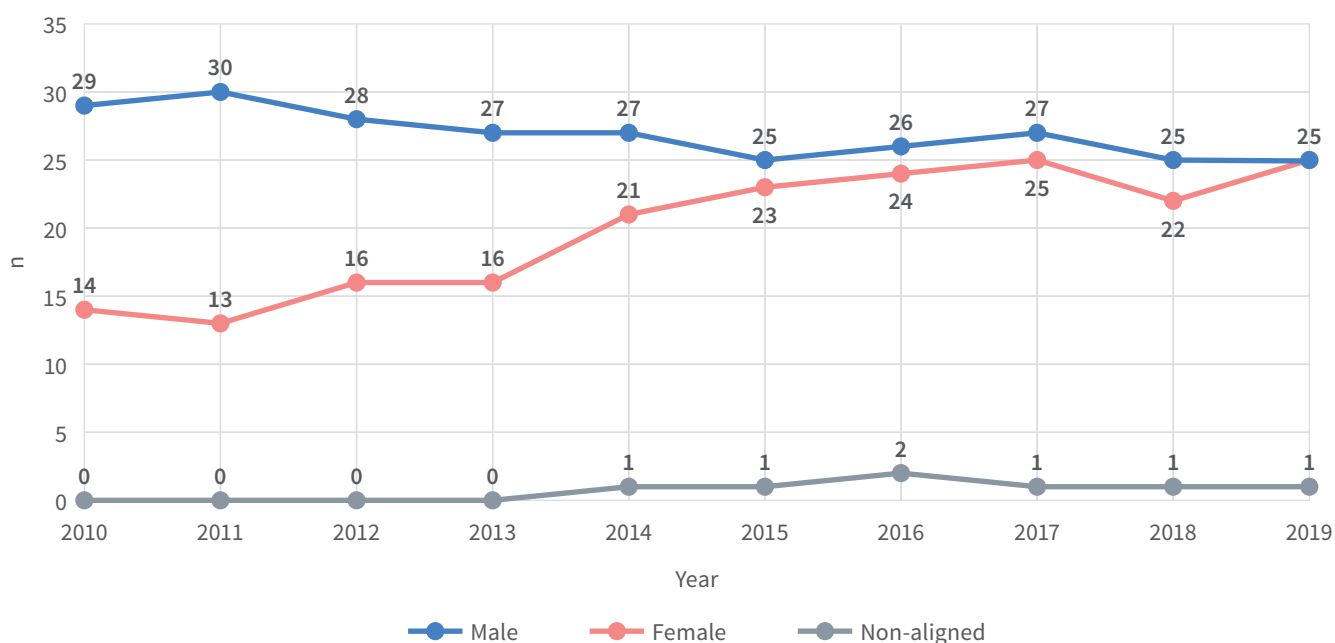
Our study coded only the protagonist's sex (female, male or non-aligned); and sexual identity (heterosexual, non-heterosexual, not disclosed) however, we recognise potential and scope for studying and analysing a broader range of relationships represented in texts that adolescents encounter (including, but not limited to, divorced, single, etc.).

Positive trends in female characterisation (protagonists who play an active role in the narrative) are reflected in this graph. In the early years of the data sample, protagonists were twice as likely to male than female. Over time, there is a trend towards equality, with equal numbers of female and male protagonists in 2019. There is a slight rise in representation of characters whose sex was identified as non-aligned. However, these positive changes are undermined somewhat by the over-representation of heterosexual characters, as demonstrated below.<sup>2</sup>

*'We act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or something that is simply true about us, a fact about us, but actually it's a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time'*

(Judith Butler)

Protagonist's sex, 2010 - 2019



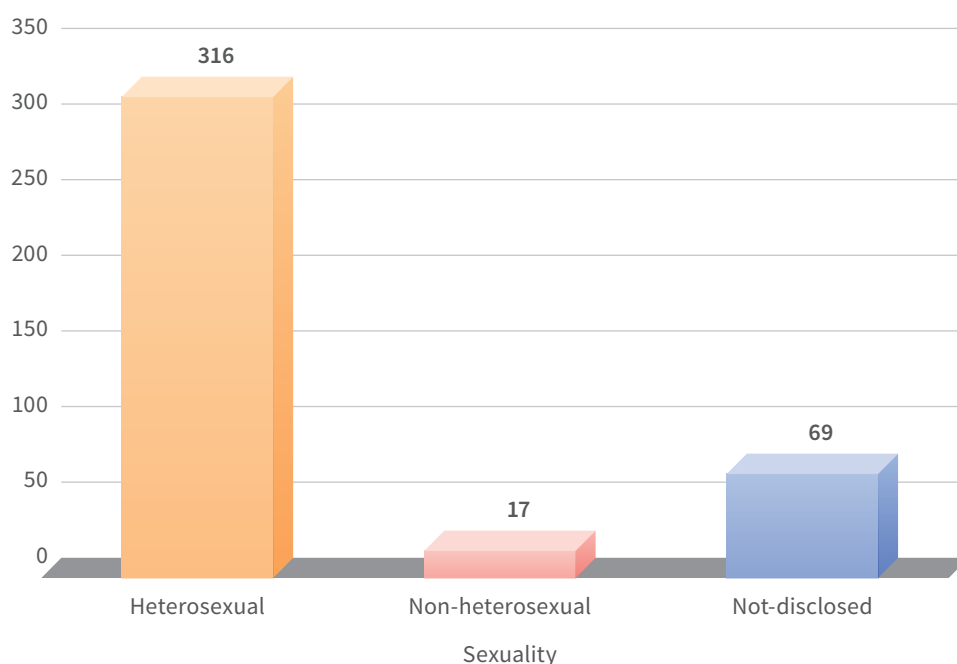
<sup>2</sup> While the total number of texts on each year's list was usually 36, figures here exceed this as some texts included multiple protagonists. This was especially true for collections of short stories and poetry.

*'Not to include sex in books for contemporary young adults [...] is to agree to a de facto conspiracy of silence, to imply to young readers that sex is so awful, so traumatic, so dirty that we can't even write about it'*  
(Michael Cart, 2017)

The data reflects the absolute dominance of heterosexual characters, and near absence of homosexuality in characterisation and narrative. While same-sex attraction may no longer be a taboo

topic in Australian society, the inclusion of narratives about sexuality in general remains at the margins within the classroom, and text selection do not come close to representing 'the vast tapestry of human sexuality' (Hillier et al., 2010, p. 3). The exclusion of diverse sexualities, and censored discussion of sexuality in general, has been proven to harm psychological health of young people (Batchelor, Ramos, and Neiswander, 2018).

Protagonist's sexuality, 2010 - 2019



### Focus Questions

What purpose does the representation of sex and sexuality play within the specific text?

Why does the representation of sex and sexuality often create 'moral panic' in wider society?

Should we select for our students texts led by protagonists with a diversity of sexual orientations?

What notion of sex and sexuality is the author or creator of a specific text trying to address or represent?

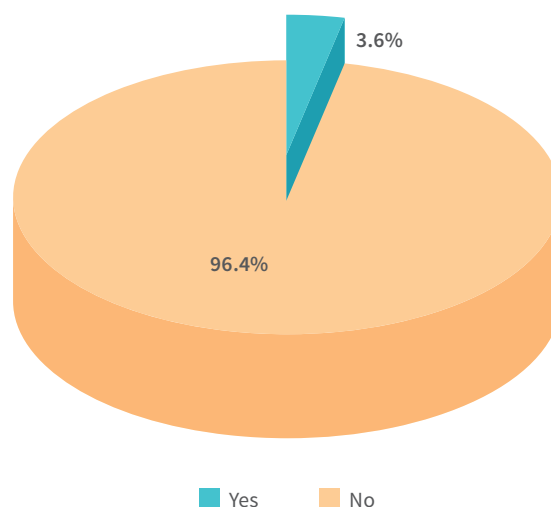
## Finding 6: Representation and Authorship by Indigenous Australians

The policy document which underpins the requirements of the text-lists states that they must ‘include texts by or about Australians, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’ (**Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2018**). It is mandated that teachers select one ‘Australian’ text from the list, however this does not need to be a text by an Indigenous author, nor must the selected text engage with Indigenous themes.

The coding team addressed trends related to authorship, themes and characterisation. They determined which texts had been written or directed by Indigenous peoples.<sup>3</sup> To understand trends in characterisation, we divided characters into ‘protagonist’, defined as a figure who drove or enacted causal change within the narrative, and ‘antagonist’, defined as a figure who played an oppositional, role within the narrative that was in direct opposition of the protagonist. We also studied texts in terms of their exploration of themes of Indigeneity and settler colonisation.

The inclusion of Indigenous authors or directors was rare. Of the 360 texts which appeared on the text lists, there were only five individual texts which were created by Australian Indigenous people. When factoring in those occasions when these texts appeared multiple times across several years, we can conclude that just 4% of all texts were the work of Indigenous creators. If we exclude films created by Indigenous directors, we are left with only three written works, comprising less than 2% of the total text list, and only a single novel by an undisputed Australian Indigenous author.

Does the text have a sustained Indigenous protagonist?



Of the 360 texts in our sample, only 3.6%, or 13 texts, contained a sustained<sup>4</sup> Indigenous protagonist. This low figure is linked to the wider historical context of how narrative can represent, and misrepresent, Australian history. As Marcia Langton (1993) has stated, this figure is a reflection of stereotype and a reinforcement of the dichotomy of powerful vs powerless, which extends back to the beginning of colonisation. In reflection of Langton’s argument, the majority of works on the list which represent themes of colonisation and contain Indigenous characters have been produced by non-Indigenous creators.

*‘The introduction of culturally sensitive texts does not necessarily deter negative stereotyping; the appreciation of ‘difference’ does not guarantee ‘inclusion’; and, the acceptance of one’s ‘blackness’ constitutes more than unity’*

(Nakata, 1995, p. 47)

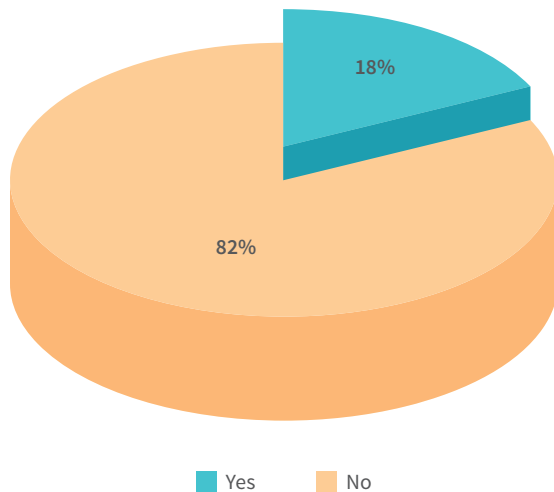
<sup>3</sup> We limited our definition of Indigenous peoples to those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.

<sup>4</sup> We removed short stories and poetry collections which contained Indigenous protagonists that were not sustained across the collection and appeared only momentarily.



We found that 18% of all texts included themes associated with Indigeneity and settler colonisation. However, focussing more closely on those texts set in Australia, over 57% of these explored these same issues. This suggests that when texts are located within Australia, they are far more likely to address these themes.

#### Did the text explore themes of Indigeneity and settler colonisation?

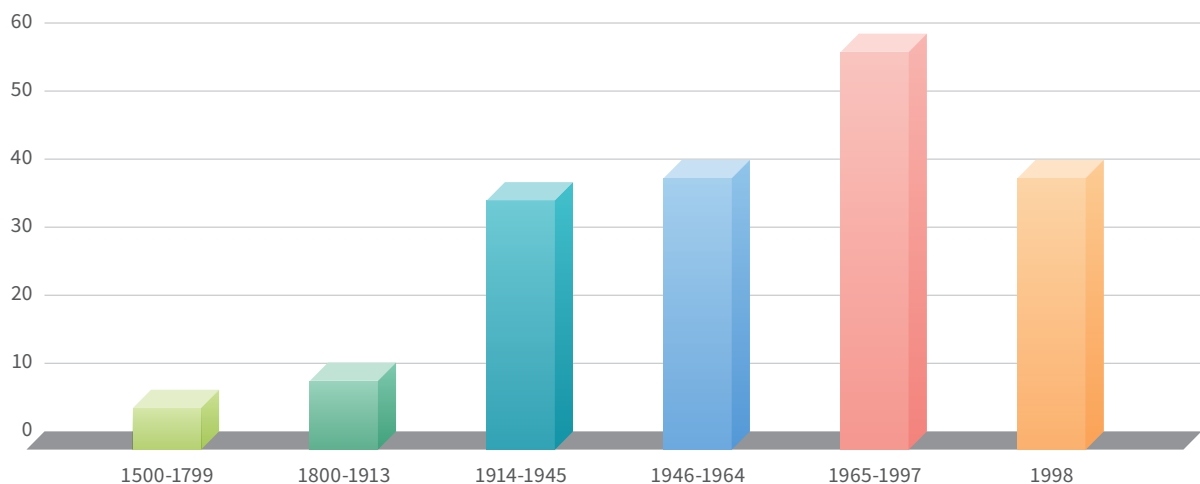


*‘Since the late eighteenth century – very shortly after the invasion of 1788 – Aboriginal Australians have been a major preoccupation of settler literature. And it is these texts that are used to teach the ‘story’ of Australia...It allows for the cultural transmission of settler narratives and values, and in doing so overwrites Aboriginal history and experience. I am not suggesting that this work and others like it be scrapped – they are important texts that reveal synchronic slices of settler consciousness of and about Aboriginal people at any given time. But I am challenging the notion that these are Aboriginal stories. They are not’*

(Leane, 2016, p. 42)

When we look at just those texts which are set in Australia and explore Indigenous themes we find that very few of these are set in time-periods that relate to the early invasion, colonisation and settler period. Less than 15% of texts which explored Indigenous themes were set between 1500 - 1913. In contrast, texts that explores these themes were far more likely to be located in 20th and 21st century contexts.

#### Texts with Indigenous themes which are set in each time period (%), 2010 - 2019



#### Focus Questions

How do we confront and understand the complexity of Australia’s history?  
How can authors and creators (especially those who are non-Indigenous) reproduce cultural and historical stereotypes and power relations?

## Finding 7: Themes

*The study of plot, character and theme remain central to the study of texts in secondary classrooms. Theme is concerned with the wider social, moral or ethical purpose of the text and will usually be central to the narrative and character development across any text type. The notion of ‘theme’ (which could be connected to – for example – ideology, as well as typology, figuration and scenario) considers the link between narrative, character, story-world and ‘real world’ as it plays out within the text. In high school classrooms, a thematic analysis ensures that the text is linked to history and real-world issues and allows for relevance and identification (Johannessen, 2000).*

*Coders mapped each text against five major themes to determine trends and locate diversity within each text.*

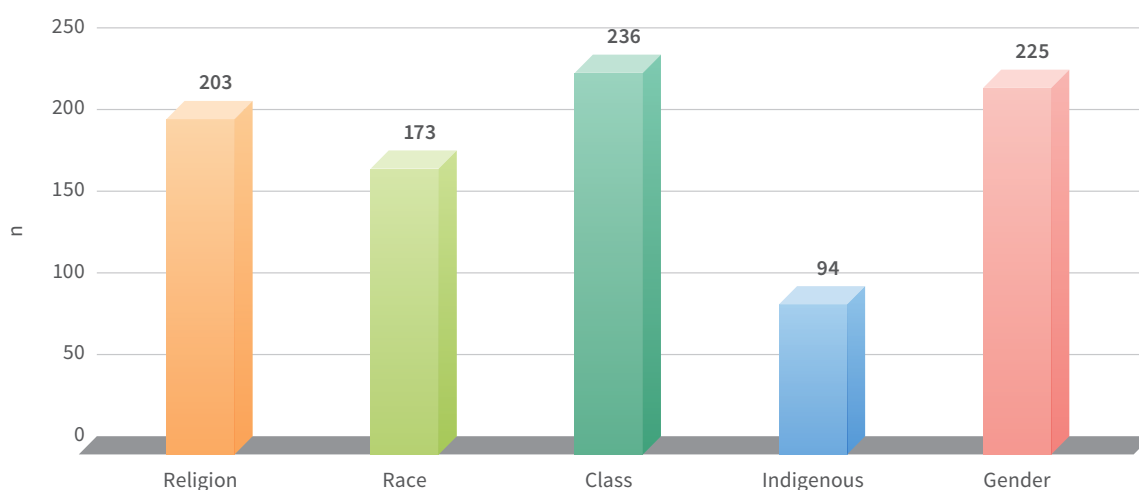
Our study shows clear emphasis on exploration of themes connected to class, religion and gender. Within a sample of 360 texts, over half explored these themes, with issues of class the most likely to be evident. It is interesting to note that issues connected to Indigeneity (which in this instance is not restricted to Australia, but includes a range of historical and national contexts) were the least likely to be found in the texts from the sample. This can also be connected to our earlier finding that there was a distinct lack of Indigenous-authored novels and directors on text lists.

*‘A few years ago, when I was asked at a girls’ school to talk about the Killing Fields (from which only half of my extended family emerged alive), I received a gentle reminder not to go into too much gory detail lest I distress the year nines who were ‘not ready for that kind of thing’. What kind of thing? I wondered. The kids a couple of suburbs down in the commission flats? The scholarship girl from Sudan sitting two seats away from them?*

*The publishing industry, schools and libraries are filled with benign and progressive people who care about inculcating children with the ‘right’ values, and instilling love, hope and kindness. As these people are also the ultimate decision-makers regarding what kids read – or what they don’t – they often unwittingly convey to poorer students their class values of what constitutes ‘good literature’ and ‘bad morals’. There’s a difference between rubbing a child’s nose in Game of Thrones gore and violence and teaching them imaginative empathy about how different teenagers live, speak and experience the world – teenagers their own kids could easily know and befriend if they were allowed to catch the train two stops down’*

*(Alice Pung, 2017)*

Themes explored



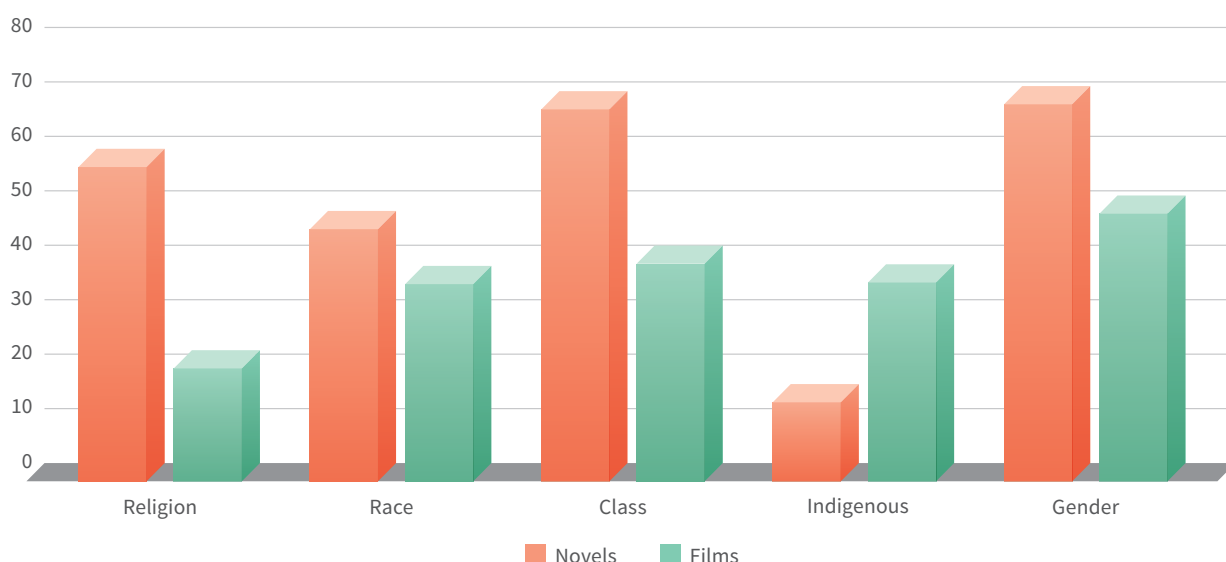
The findings reveal that different text types were privileged in order to support the exploration of particular themes. For example, links between the values we place on text type and the weight or importance of the theme explored are evident when comparing the ways that novels and films explored specific themes. Just 5% of novels explore themes of Indigeneity, where 20% of films do. This has both positive and negative aspects, film is often regarded as a stronger vehicle for mass communication and

widespread dissemination of ideas, but for that reason it is also traditionally seen as ‘inferior’ to the novel’s capacity to represent the world. It is equally relevant that themes of religion, which is a canonical theme and so perhaps seen as more ‘socially relevant’, are strongly represented in novels.

*‘As a black author, I’m sometimes afraid I say too much ... [But] why be silent? Why hold back? ... Why should we care about anyone else’s discomfort to make our pain known?’*

*(Angie Thomas, 2018)*

Use of Novels and Films to explore themes (%), 2010 - 2019



### Focus Questions

How can we use themes in texts to support students to imagine the world in new ways? How do themes allow us to empathise with others? How can complex, confronting themes spearhead discussion and understanding?

Should we select texts that explore a range of themes? If so, what themes are most worthy of exploration?



## Finding 8: Character's Age

*Character traits represent an important way to build narrative. Foremost amongst these traits is the age of the characters, which is used to establish chronology as well as to encourage connections between audience and story. Age is an important trope, which can preclude as well as enable certain themes and narratives.*

*Our study was interested in the age of the protagonists who occupy the text-lists. We asked our coding team to identify the protagonist of each text, and to indicate which age group/s they represented. Some protagonists were classified in several categories.*

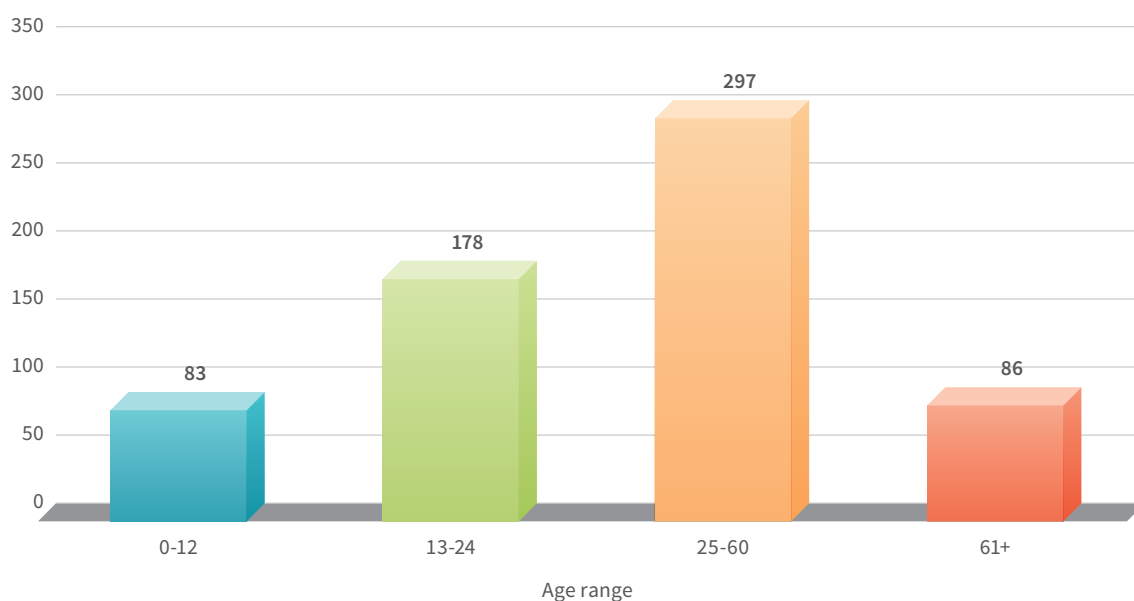
The data shows that five out of six texts included an adult protagonist in the 25 - 60 age group. This should not be surprising given the popularity of coming-of-age stories which begin with a character in their teens and who progresses into adulthood. Just under half of all texts (49%) involved a protagonist in their teenage and early twenties. Interestingly, less than

one in four texts depicted protagonists as babies, toddlers, or children. Likewise, texts which depicted a protagonist in their latter life years, 61 years of age and above, appeared infrequently. Issues of relevance impact on decisions about stories which represent characters from particular age groups. At a time when there is heightened concern over young Australians' disengagement with schooling (**Gallup, 2015**), it appears that texts are being selected which are more likely to be relevant to the lived experiences of students. Equally, however, we can ask whether there needs to be greater representation of stories about ageing and the later stage of life to ensure texts reflect the diversity of human experience.

*'In secondary and primary English/literacy and literature classes, teachers understand that textual engagement, and accessibility is vital if literacy is to move beyond a functional level, and reach the deeper dispositions of evaluation and critical thinking'*

*(McLean Davies, 2008, p. 4)*

Protagonist's age, 2010 - 2019



### Focus Questions

Should we choose stories which contain characters that our students can obviously relate to?

How might our classrooms benefit from texts which present the perspectives of characters from a range of age groups?

## Finding 9: Fictionality

*In literary, film, and theatre studies, distinguishing between fiction and non-fiction is not a straightforward process. While the distinction is retained in text selection practices (where, for example, a memoir is regarded as non-fiction and a novel is regarded as fiction), we can think that this straightforward differentiation obscures as much as it clarifies. In literature, as in any art form, the purpose is to influence the reader's imagination and so, for example, the difference between novels and memoirs is a question of form as much as of content.*

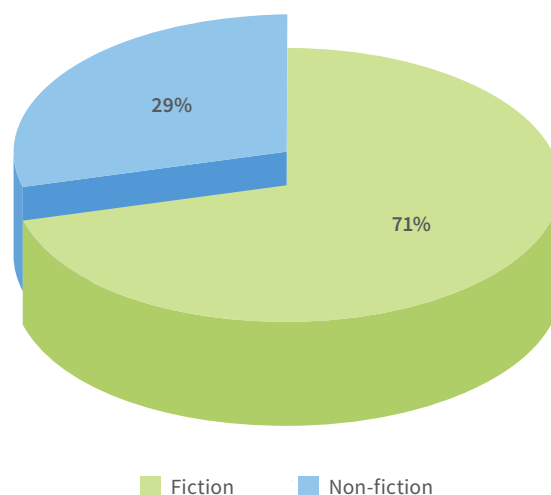
*In our study, coders considered a work to be non-fiction (especially memoir) where the narrative and characters were represented to closely resemble the realities they referred to using ordinary prose, for example, Malala Yousafzai's 'I Am Malala' was non-fiction, whereas self-referential poetry, such as by Bruce Dawe's 'Sometimes Gladness', was coded as fiction.*

Memoirs and other non-fiction works have a clear place in VCE text lists. Over the sample period, fiction represented over two-thirds of all texts listed. There is some variance in the number of non-fiction texts appearing each year, with an almost 100% increase between 2013 and 2017. While students should be

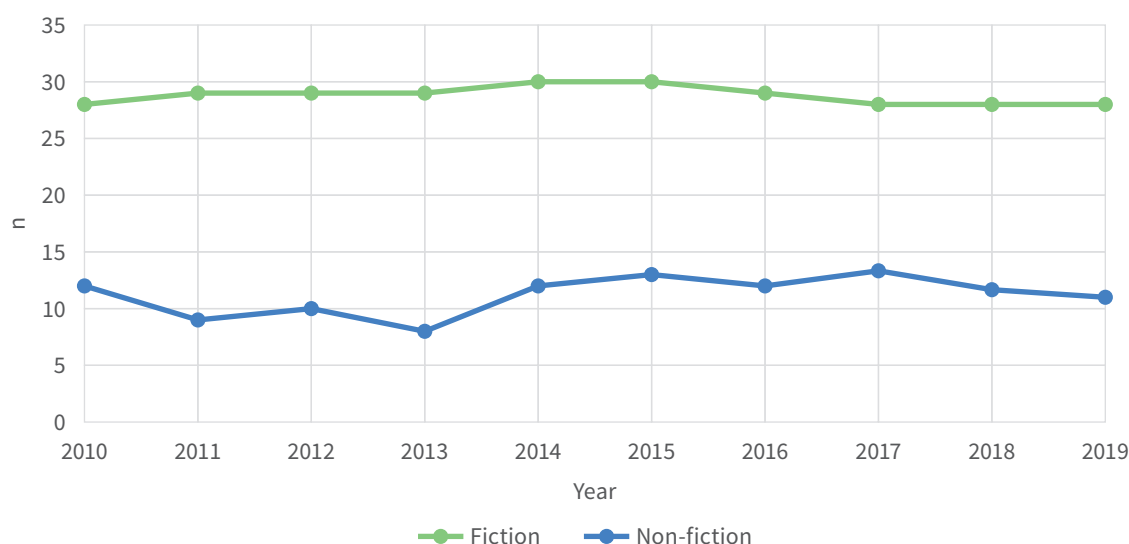
supported to understand both fiction and non-fiction texts, we should be cautious about the notion that the latter offers greater insight into 'Truth' than fictional works, or that the former offers a more literary and worthwhile object for study.

*'Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth',*  
(Albert Camus, 1942)

**Fictionality (%), 2010 - 2019**



**Fictionality, 2010 - 2019**



### Focus Questions

What are the roles of fiction and non-fiction texts in English classrooms?

How can non-fiction be represented through fictional devices, and vice versa?

## Finding 10: Urban and rural texts

*The notion of the rural ideal, an interest in the Australian countryside and Australia's agricultural history, frame debates about how we come to know the issues which face those who do not live and work in our major cities. While there was once a time when agricultural output represented 80% of exports, we are now in a time when agriculture employs only four per cent of the Australian workforce. Tales of the man from Snowy River, Burke and Willis' expedition across the continent, the trials and tribulations of farmers across the centuries, and the contemporary challenges of living in the country are juxtaposed against stories located in the cities populated by the vast majority of our students.*

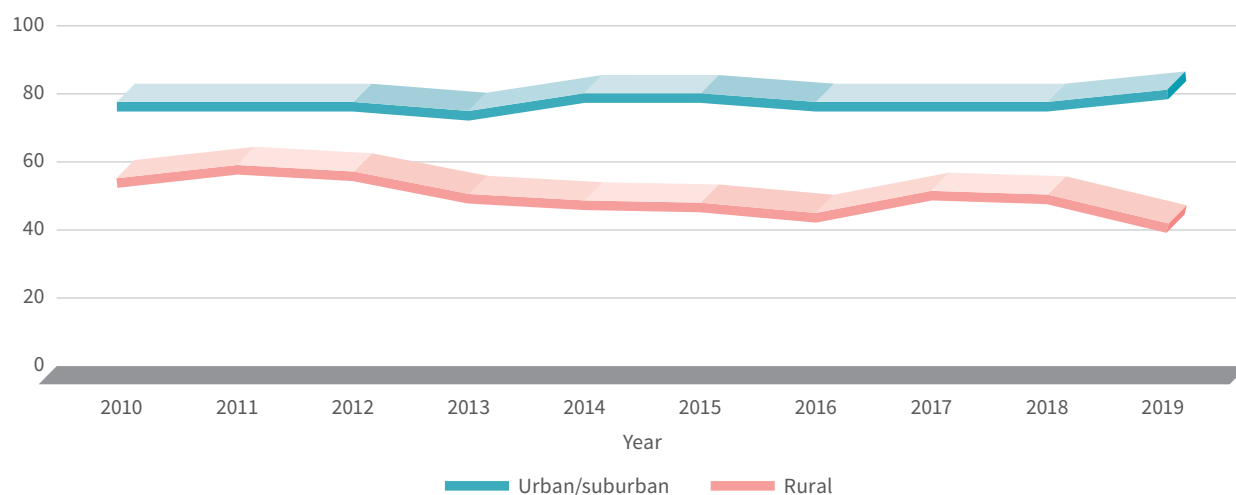
The data shows that stories from the text lists were more likely to be located in urban and suburban settings than rural. Overall, 84% of all texts had a substantial part of their story set in urban/suburban contexts, while 55% of all texts were set in rural contexts. This trend, consistent over time, indicates a privileging of narratives that spend a substantial portion of their time in city and suburb environments. In fact, the proportion of texts

located in rural places is quite high when considered alongside figures about how few students come from the bush. This suggests that the rural ideal, the mythologising of this country's story, past and present, is closely tied to tales of life outside of our cities, even if this is disconnected from the lived experiences of most of today's students. With Australian Bureau of Statistics data revealing that only 10.5% of Australian live in rural areas, we are left wondering what stories we should tell our students about the 'bush', and how often?

*'The rural context of English teaching is not reducible to disciplinary assumptions and practices. My analysis of the teachers' accounts of rural education suggests that, in many cases, the teacher views themselves in the position of an 'outsider' or 'stranger,' and found that this relationship complicates the process of text selection... Therefore, the perception of relevance for rural students is not only implicated within distinct models of English teaching, it is also complicated by the teacher's position in relation to the rural community.'*

(Heber, 2018, pp. 34-35)

Texts set in urban/suburban and rural settings (%), 2010 - 2019



### Focus Questions

Should students study texts set in locations that are familiar to them?

What place do stories around rural Australia have in the English curriculum?



## Discussion Questions

### Text type

1. What text types should we be using in the English classroom?
2. Should the dominance of the novel continue or is a diversity of texts more desirable?

### Story setting

3. How important are texts which place the reader in unfamiliar and foreign contexts?
4. Is it important to select texts which are located in the lived worlds of our students?

### Author's sex

5. Should we select texts, in equal numbers, created by female and male authors?
6. How does a focus on the author's identity impact how we understand the meaning of texts?

### Australian literature

7. How do texts set in Australia shape notions and narratives of Australian history and identity?
8. What are the advantages and disadvantages of reading and analysing 'Australian' texts through the prism of their 'Australianness'?

### Character's sex and sexuality

9. What purpose does the representation of sex and sexuality play within texts?
10. Should we select texts led by protagonists with a diversity of sexual orientations?

### Representation and authorship by Indigenous Australians

11. How do we confront and understand the complexity of Australia's history?
12. How can authors and creators (especially those who are non-Indigenous) reproduce cultural and historical stereotypes and power relations?

### Themes

13. How can we use themes in texts to support students to imagine the world in new ways?
14. Should we select texts that explore a range of themes? If so, what themes are most worthy of exploration?

### Character's age

15. Should we choose stories which contain characters that our students can obviously relate to?
16. How might our classrooms benefit from texts which present the perspectives of characters from a range of age groups?

### Fictionality

17. What are the roles of fiction and non-fiction texts in English classrooms?
18. How can non-fiction be represented through fictional devices, and vice versa?

### Urban and rural texts

19. Should students study texts set in locations that are familiar to them?
20. What place do stories around rural Australia have in the English curriculum?

## Conclusions

This study of text-lists in the Victorian Senior English curriculum aimed to investigate text trends in the VCE English curriculum between 2010 and 2019. It utilised a mixed-methods approach to double code all 360 texts using a content-analysis method. This approach allowed us to identify patterns within and across the lists, which revealed the composition of the curriculum.

We found some positive trends, and that some aspects of the text-lists represented diversity. This was evident in the range of text types present, the inclusion of stories from all continents, an abundance of Australian literature, and in more recent years, equality in terms of female/male authorship and use of protagonists. However, other features of the lists require serious attention. The lack of texts written by Indigenous authors, the marginalisation of protagonists from non-heteronormative backgrounds, and the privileging of texts from the British Isles, was alarming. Furthermore, if the lists are to respond to the real-world textual lives of the students then the addition of multimodal and digital texts must be prioritised.

We see these lists, and the trends captured above, as historical products, a consequence of ways of thinking about literature and subject-English that are simultaneously inclusive and exclusive. They are products of immense negotiation, primarily by those who are empowered to make decisions about what counts as texts worthy of study in our classrooms. As such, they reflect the dispositions of text selection panel members, curriculum officers, and those curriculum board members who hold ultimate authority over the composition of each year's list.

For those responsible for the enactment of these lists, English is understood as a multifaceted beast, tasked with meeting the demands of many members of our community. The texts on these lists are drawn upon to fulfil the requirements of the curriculum, foremost amongst them, meeting the goals of preparing students to negotiate the demands of high-stakes end of year examinations. However, the lists also serve other, less tangible, objectives. They represent opportunities to open windows to worlds unfamiliar to our students, to places, peoples and perspectives that they may never otherwise know. They are also the means for us to entertain and to encourage a pleasure for reading and viewing that is quickly vanishing from our schools. Finally, they represent tools to develop a critical orientation towards their worlds, constantly asking questions and challenging taken-for-granted assumptions.

There are those who would prefer that these lists represented a narrow body of work, highly literary and reflective of the Western Judeo-Christian canon. In response to commentators who argue for a version of English that puts forward a single truth, and for English teachers to teach it, we urge caution. As Misson states,

*'the world isn't a world of single truths, any more than it's a world in which there is one set of values that allows you to reject some texts and elevate others. English teachers are not on about teaching single truths, they are on about capacity building, giving students the capacity to create their own set of values and their own hierarchy of truths suitable for dealing with the diversity of the texts they come across and the diversity of the world they live in'*

(2006, p. 16)

These lists are representations of the world, but also tools to (re)present the world in new ways. It is for this reason that we believe values of diversity, multiculturalism, and inclusivity, are important considerations in text selection decision-making.

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