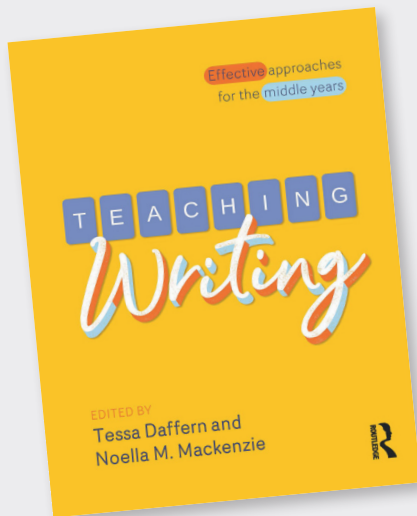




# VATE member book reviews

March 2021



# Teaching Writing: Effective approaches for the middle years

Reviewed by Catherine Booth, Bairnsdale Secondary College

**EDITORS:** Tessa Daffern and Noella M. Mackenzie | **PUBLISHER:** Routledge, 2020, 392 pages | **RRP:** \$51.99

Anyone involved in the teaching of writing in schools is aware of the general concern over the perceived decline in students' writing ability despite it being 'essential for success at, and beyond, school' (Daffern & Mackenzie, 2020, p.2).

*Teaching Writing. Effective approaches for the middle years* takes the approach that effective teacher instruction is needed for students to gain proficiency in writing. It focuses on the middle years of schooling – upper primary and lower secondary – when effective instruction in all aspects of writing is crucial to help students progress towards the highly complex writing tasks demanded of senior schooling and the workplace. Set out in sixteen chapters written by a variety of contributors, *Teaching Writing* outlines evidence-based principles of writing instruction. It begins with a discussion of the concerns over writing (including declining NAPLAN scores) and includes a helpful chapter on the main theoretical perspectives on writing instruction.

Chapters 3 and 4 look at teachers as writers and what is involved in the teaching of writing (including a discussion on multiliteracies), but the main chapters of interest to many

English teachers will be Chapters 5 to 9 which focus on supporting meaning-making through, in turn:

- Text organisation
- Sentence structure and punctuation
- Vocabulary
- Handwriting and keyboarding
- Spelling

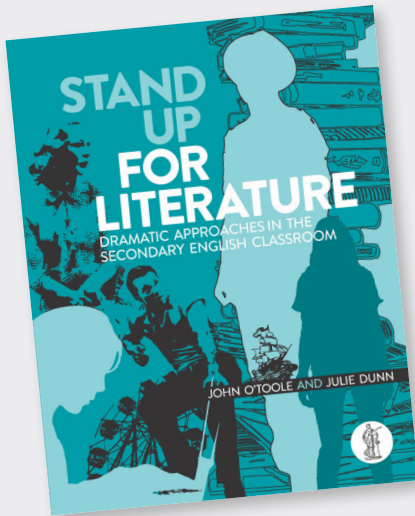
These chapters present both the principles behind good instruction and also strategies and examples of how to implement them in a classroom. In the chapter on sentence structure, Beryl Exley and Lisbeth Ann Kitson set out a form of modelled writing, familiar in many primary schools, but less so in secondary, whereby students and teachers deconstruct a modelled exemplar text to see how 'expert' writers construct in a certain genre, before co-constructing and eventually independently constructing their own. The chapter on vocabulary is particularly enlightening, including its recommendation that 90% of new words that students learn in school (which is, for most students, the major source of acquisition) should be from exposure in discussions relevant to students and not from intentional word study.

Further chapters focus on teaching

writing across disciplines (with examples from all the main subjects); teaching writing to EAL/D students and those who are experiencing difficulty in writing; and finally, two chapters on teacher-led and peer-led assessment of writing – both an invaluable resource on how to better assess writing in a way that helps both teachers and students monitor progress and understand what needs to be undertaken next. There is much discussion throughout about the emerging concepts of multimodality and multiliteracies.

There are strategies and exemplars throughout the text, with 'Pause, Reflect and Take Action' sections that would work particularly well for teachers using this for PD discussions. A helpful appendix provides a number of graphic organisers and templates to aid student writing as well as help teachers with writing conferences and assessments.

For educators looking for evidence-based principles and strategies to help progress student writing, this text represents much of the latest research, by an impressive range of highly qualified contributors. It is a hugely comprehensive and informative contribution on writing and would be useful to all teachers of writing (and not just those in the English Department).



# Stand Up For Literature

Reviewed by Rebekah Keenan Mount, Northcote High School

**WRITERS:** John O'Toole and Julie Dunn | **PUBLISHER:** Currency Press, 2020, 192 pages | **RRP:** \$54.99

**I like to think my English classroom is a dramatic space! As both an English and Drama trained practitioner, I have often used strategies, such as freeze frames, hot seat, and role-play, to bring texts to life so that my students might embody the 'world of the text'.**

I've done this from Year 7 through to Year 12. It's fun – as learning should be, right? Furthermore, students develop self-confidence, team work and empathetic skills. For experienced educators John O'Toole and Julie Dunn, drama to animate a text is put simply, it's a 'value-add'.

*Stand Up For Literature: Dramatic Approaches in the Secondary English Classroom* is a contemporary guide for teachers that explains the principles and practice of using dramatic approaches to bring literary and spoken texts to life. O'Toole and Dunn acknowledge that the texts we use in our classrooms offer an embarrassment of riches for drama planning.

Where to start? O'Toole and Dunn encourage a measured approach and note the first decision is whether

drama will be used: to introduce the text to ignite our students' curiosity; alongside reading the text, to focus on key moments and passages; after reading, to explore a central theme, or get a complete sense of the context, narrative and structure. If that still seems mindboggling, ten exemplars follow – step-by-step guides to teaching a range of literary texts including fiction, contemporary prose, modern and classic plays, myths and legends, film, poetry, song and Shakespeare. These exemplars can be used as direct lessons (if you happen to be teaching that specific text) or as models to adapt.

English and Literature teachers will find some of the strategies familiar: mind mapping characters and their relationships; using the Five Ws to explore a focus question; and Writing-In-Role to create empathy for a range of characters. So start here, but then let O'Toole and Dunn take you a bit further out of your comfort zone.

One strategy I adapted to my Year 12 Literature study of *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* was called 'Conscience Alley'. To review the play for our exam preparation, I asked my students to

think about one or two questions they would like to ask the playwright himself if they got the chance. Next, the students formed two lines facing each other. I elected one student to 'be Tennessee Williams'. Williams walked slowly through the alley as the students asked their questions. He didn't answer, though occasionally he looked directly at the questioner in acknowledgement. The dramatic energy was electrifying! It was a simple lesson to prepare but the complexity of ideas that it generated was impressive.

I also adapted the sequenced Freeze Frames to revisit the play and to create a list of scenes identified by the students as significant for further discussion. Next up, I am going to give a WHOOSH a whirl! However, the Teacher-In-Role? Even my comfort zone has limits

This is certainly a comprehensive resource book that breathes life into the teaching of English and Literature. It encourages teachers to take a playful approach to text study to support our students to make meaning in literature through their bodies, hearts and minds.



# This One is Ours

Reviewed by Linda Hogan, Mentone Girls' Grammar School

WRITER: Kate O'Donnell | PUBLISHER: UQP, 2020, 272 pages | RRP: \$19.99

Kate O'Donnell's second novel starts with 16-year-old Melburnian Sofie looking forward to her exchange to France. She is an artist and naïve to the challenges that await, more focused on the croissants and sketching on the Left Bank she sees awaiting her in Paris.

Thankfully, though, this novel breaks out of the clichéd 'overwhelmed to homesick to disappointed to coming-of-age formula' by being much more observant about the modern world. While Sofie does have a floppy-haired French boy love interest, she also engages with the crises dominating debate: climate change, individual responsibility, and how best to approach the future.

From the protest of the Yellow Vests to the Notre Dame fire, *This One is Ours* feels absolutely contemporary. As Sofie becomes increasingly swept up in protest, she learns Paris is not the cultural utopia she had envisioned in

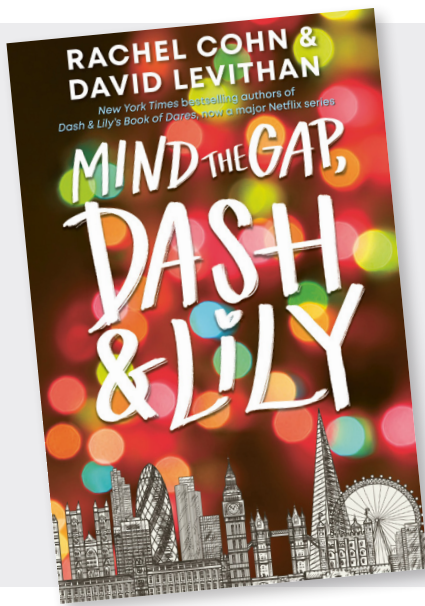
her mind, but a complex city with both gritty and beautiful parts. Protesting has consequences and can jade even the most idealistic, something O'Donnell acknowledges. Yet, there is a tangible hope for the future as well as belief. Sofie, and by extension all young people, have both a responsibility to stand up for what they believe in and the power to collectively capture the attention of those in positions of power.

One particularly interesting moment occurs when Sofie realises she is both protesting against the rich exploiting the vulnerable in places like Tahiti, and at the same time a member of the wealthy herself, travelling by aeroplane across the world to spend five months learning French and attending an arts school. The moment, in the middle of a street protest, is captured in a photograph, which she later questions whether to post to Instagram: would such a thing make her protest performative and therefore devalue it? These ideas keep cropping up in the media, with the

recent Black Lives Matter movement coming to mind. Complex and important ideas such as these would definitely find a place in any of our classrooms.

The use of snippets of French is not a turn off for readers who don't speak French – their meaning is obvious from the context, and they also can help readers relate to Sofie's feeling of alienation. O'Donnell's writing also captures teenage dialogue in a way that feels plausible, with the adults portrayed noticeably differently to their children.

*This One is Ours* would sit comfortably in a school library or as a text taught at Years 8 and 9. O'Donnell tackles the big issues of our time while still maintaining a focus on the possibility of change and hope for the future. Even when characters despair for the environment or their future, there is a sense that beauty remains in the world and that change is possible.



# Mind the Gap, Dash and Lily

Reviewed by Melanie Van Langenberg, Sacré Coeur

**WRITERS:** Rachel Cohn and David Levithan | **PUBLISHER:** Allen & Unwin (and Penguin Random House), 2020, 256 pages | **RRP:** \$19.99

**'Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?' – Mary Oliver.**

*Mind the Gap, Dash & Lily* is the third instalment of Rachel Cohn and David Levithan's young adult series; it follows the charming *Dash & Lily's Book of Dares* (2010) and the slightly uneven *The Twelve Days of Dash & Lily* (2016). With its release coinciding with the new Netflix adaptation of the first novel, one can't help but feel that this publication was motivated by opportunistic timing rather than necessity, as it is comparable more to the second of the series than the first.

The eponymous 'gap' that Dash and Lily are 'minding' takes myriad forms. While, directly, the title is a play on the fact that the series has moved setting from their home of New York City to London, it is also the physical gap that exists between the young couple as Dash commences his studies at Oxford University and Lily remains in New York as a 'dogpreneur' (that is, running an online business selling dogwares as

well as walking dogs). As can happen with such distance, the gap that emerges between their expectations and understanding of each other is also a factor. Lastly, as Dash puts it, 'there's the fantasy and there's the reality' when it comes to long-harboured aspirations and then coming to terms with the gap that can exist between these. Mary Oliver's aforementioned quote provides inspiration to both Dash and Lily as they navigate making significant decisions and growing up. The exploration of many of these trials will be appealing to young readers.

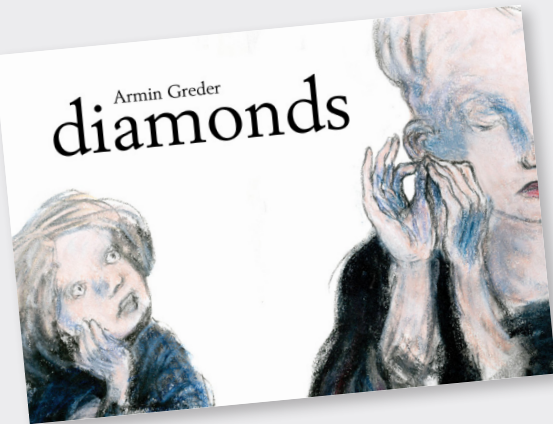
Cohn and Levithan alternate their chapters, each taking on the narrative voice of Lily and Dash respectively. As is wont to happen when there are two writers, the novel is a bit uneven.

Critics may find that Lily's voice and attitude can be gratingly immature and the attempts to draw humorous contrasts between America and London are inauthentic and ill-advised. In addition, one can't ignore the immense privilege that underscores much of

Dash and Lily's concerns and the way their families operate. However, as always, Levithan's writing and his ability to give voice to the difficulties of a young person's self-discovery approach profound. Of note, his insights on 'building character' versus 'building a character', as well as the analogy built around Christmas tree farms, as opposed to forests, will likely provoke much thought. Levithan can be masterful with his language and expression.

*Mind the Gap, Dash & Lily* will best serve as a recommendation for wide reading, most suitable to girls aged between twelve to eighteen years. There are some passages, particularly within Levithan's chapters for Dash, that could be used well in isolation within a Year 7 to 10 creative writing unit.

An excerpt and audio sample from the text is available on the Penguin Random House [website](#).



# diamonds

Reviewed by Jennifer Shelton, Bendigo South East College

WRITER: Armin Greder | PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin, 2020, 36 pages | RRP: \$29.99

## Another thought-provoking read from Armin Greder, *diamonds* exposes issues in the world's diamond industry.

The story starts and ends with minimal text as Carolina watches her mother dress for an evening out. She is interested in her mother's diamond earrings and asks questions. Many questions. Like most harassed mothers getting ready to go out, the mother gives brief responses including a mention of where diamonds could be mined, such as in Africa. Like most curious children, the child connects ideas and points out that their nanny, Amina, is from Africa and she has no diamonds.

Mama leaves for her evening with Uncle Winston, the giver of the diamonds. Carolina goes to bed. Text disappears then for the bulk of the story as the illustrations take over. What we see are trademark Greder drawings with very little colour depicting the diamond's journey from the ground in Africa onwards to satisfy the demands of a world that only cares for the show of

the wealth. This journey, which the nanny has been a part of, is fraught with tension, conflict, corruption and oppression. The images are dark but not overwhelming as they are set on white background and presented in different formats like a graphic novel, some small, some large but all informing us of the process.

The story presents as both Amina's memories and Carolina's nightmare. For younger readers, some explanation and support to explain some of the ugliness of the blood diamond industry could be helpful. For older readers, some discussion before and after reading could clarify understanding and link to topics of further interest.

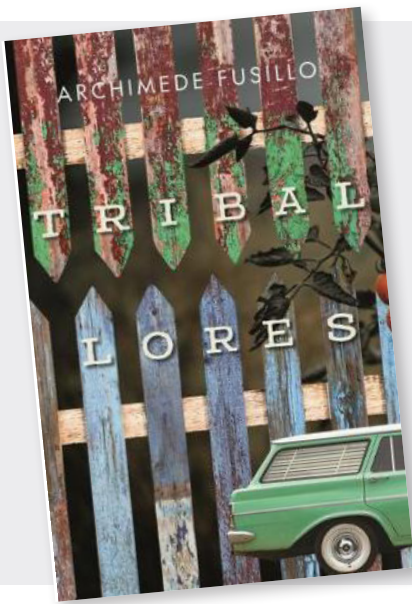
Anyone who has ever lusted after diamonds, dreamed of owning some, inherited some, would be pushed to think about the original source of their diamonds and the journey to ownership. It might not be comfortable, it is likely to challenge thinking and it should make us more careful. Those who worry about the humanity involved in a diamond's

journey would see the range of levels – from mine owner to the worker children, in slave-like conditions, to the buyers and sellers and eventually the resellers and the consumers – and begin some conversations that could prove both interesting and confronting.

This book also has some additional information in the form of an afterword by Francesco Boille that discusses Armin Greder's work, the visuals, influences and issues. This book would make an excellent focus or supplement to any study of a film like *Blood Diamond*. *diamonds* should have a place, like Greder's previous works, in every school or classroom library so that students come to it incidentally. It is relevant to younger audiences who are ready for the issues it raises, but may be better left for older students from Year 9 upwards and it could easily be a great personal resource for a teacher of English or Humanities.

This book is one of the really good things to come out of 2020.





# Tribal Lores

Reviewed by Jackie Corless, Christian College Geelong

WRITER: Archimede Fusillo | PUBLISHER: Walker Books, 2020, 432 pages | RRP: \$19.99

**Archimede Fusillo's novel *Tribal Lores* begins with a culture clash, and variations on the theme of culture, tradition and divided loyalty are played throughout.**

The Rescio family are 'old-school' Italian, in the words of eldest son Frankie. Family is first, food is plentiful, weddings are big events. Readers of *Looking for Alibrandi* will be familiar with the tropes that Fusillo includes. There are bottles of homemade wine, trays of lasagna, parents who work long hours (here, father Todo in his butcher shop), and many routines which young Frankie finds stifling – including his younger brother's button accordion playing.

The next-door neighbours are almost a parody of the uncouth Ocker. Mr Marsh is crass and insulting, drinking from long-necks, owning the barbecue, loud and boorish. The vernacular is over-the-top: 'It's Oss-bloody-tralia Day!' 'That drop would strip tar from the road', and the entire Marsh clan finish every sentence with 'ay'. I was a little uncomfortable with the thick accent written on the page: Mrs Rescio cooks for the Marshes because 'Is nice thing. They looks be nice people.' And Todo proudly claims that 'I got it my own

business...everyone she knows this.' At times these linguistic markers seem to be making fun of characters, which I doubt was the author's intention.

Against the backdrop of these two families, both with their secrets and shames that become known to the reader and the boys in the course of the text, the friendship between Lochie Marsh and Frankie grows. They belong to a bigger group of teenagers, who are all trying to navigate the tensions in their own families while playing at being bigger and tougher than they really are. China's parents have separated in shocking and sudden circumstances and he is raging against the world, and taking it out on his mates.

This theme of adults behaving badly – which Frankie and Lochie witness in their homes as well – serves to highlight the dreadful repercussions that parent's choices have on their children. Go and Spicks make up the rest of this gang of boys/young men, who are experimenting with risk-taking as a way of proving themselves to each other, and striking out against a world where they are trying to find their place. Fusillo portrays the struggle of teenagers to express their emotions, alongside their desire to be understood, and the frustration that

that brings. When risk-taking becomes law-breaking, Frankie refuses to join in, and is teased and mocked for what is perceived as his lack of courage. In these moments, where Frankie and Lochie try to understand the unpredictable and saddening behavior of adults, siblings and friends, they rely on their trust in each other, and despite their differences, their loyalty to each other grows.

Frankie's parents are admirable and loving, but many of the adults are deeply flawed and irresponsible. This is not a story of neat, happy families. The death of Frankie's sister Amelia Rescio, hangs over the family. Lochie's older step-sister Em has moved back home for her pregnancy. She is partnered with the very unflatteringly portrayed 'Hippy Ray'. More stereotyping here – he has long hair, smokes dope, is unemployed, and is lazy, and seems to care little about Em. Other adults are neglectful, selfish, crude.

There are many scenes of tobacco smoking and alcohol drinking (by the teenagers and the adults), and the f-bomb is dropped in dialogue several times. There is discussion of pregnancy before marriage. This novel would suit a wider reading list, for Year 9 and above.



# The Edge of Thirteen

Reviewed by Meg Dunley, Mount Alexander College

WRITER: Nova Weetman | PUBLISHER: UQP, 2021, 256 pages | RRP: \$16.99

**The Edge of Thirteen is a contemporary story that focuses on the transition from child to teenager, the values of friendship and truth, while also challenging perceptions and stereotypes.**

It's the summer holidays between Year 7 and Year 8 and Clem, twelve-year-old lover of trees, books and gelato with her dad, isn't wearing a bra yet and hasn't got her first period like her besties Ellie and Bridge. When she sees them before returning to school, they've changed and she hasn't. Ellie is talking about a boy called Sammy and her incredible holiday. Bridge is talking about boys, Instagram, makeup and her previously disliked but now admired older sister Nat. Bridge thinks Clem needs more friends and puts Instagram on Clem's phone despite Clem's mum banning it; Clem's wracked with guilt and worries her mum will find out. Then, when she's holding hands with her dad on their way to get gelato, a too-cool girl from school sees them and makes fun of her.

When school starts back, the girls have separate classes due to subject choices.

Clem makes friends with a guy called Tom in her first class of the day after she lends him a pencil and he calls her Clem-with-a-pencil. Bridge makes a big deal about the potential relationship between Tom and Clem, leaving Clem feeling embarrassed. As the girls prepare for their Outdoor Ed camp, tensions rise. Bridge focusses on who'll get together on the camp (Tom and Clem or Ellie and Sammy), what food they are taking, and what mischief Nat got up to when she went on camp. It makes Clem not want to hang out with Bridge anymore. When they get on the bus, Bridge decides who sits next to her on the way up (Ellie) and on the way back (Clem). Clem slides into her seat hoping she's not stuck with someone she doesn't want to talk to. Then Jacq, the too-cool girl who saw her with her dad, sits next to Clem and promptly falls asleep on Clem's shoulder.

At the four day camp, the girls' alliances are tested to the limits and the girls' friendship takes a bruising. Clem's friendship with Jacq grows, which results in Bridge acting strangely. Bridge doesn't stop talking about Ellie and Sammy, who are getting closer, and Tom and Clem, who have bonded over

a love of trees and the outdoors. Bridge pushes the friendship boundary too far when she tells Tom that Clem likes him and Clem that Tom likes her. When Clem finds herself with him in the lake cooling off after a hike she kisses him on impulse and his reaction sends her into a spin, making her resent Bridge. Angry, Clem turns to Jacq who is much nicer than Clem had thought. The girls develop a friendship over their common experience of feeling like outsiders and Jacq pierces Clem's ears, something that Bridge and Clem had previously made a pact to do together. Bridge and Clem's friendship is in shatters.

It takes time after they return from camp for the girls' friendship to recover and Clem learns that it's okay to love trees and hang out with Mum and Dad and share gelato on Sunday afternoons, as well as have friends like Jacq, Bridge and Ellie.

Teacher's notes are available on the [publisher's website](#). This novel is most appropriate for upper primary to lower secondary students and well suited for a secondary school library for junior students.





# From Stella Street to Amsterdam and everything that happened

Reviewed by Belinda Engelman, Geelong Lutheran College

WRITER: Elizabeth Honey | PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin, 2020, 422 pages | RRP: \$16.99

**Elizabeth Honey's unique book, *From Stella Street to Amsterdam and everything that happened*, follows inquisitive young Australian protagonist Henni Octon, as she accompanies her elderly neighbour, Willa, to Amsterdam – Willa is returning for the first time to her home country.**

The captivating element of this novel is the uncovering of the long held and concealed memories of Willa, or as she is affectionately known, 'Roos', as Henni persuades her to tell her story.

The reader uncovers snippets of the consequences and reality of the German occupation of the Netherlands during World War II. At the heart of this novel are the challenges faced when reuniting with family, particularly after enduring trauma and a prolonged absence.

There is tension within the family, especially between Willa and her sister, Hyacint. The brutal effects of war are revealed to Henni, as memories from the

past confront Willa and she is deeply challenged by recalling all that occurred during the occupation. A visit to the Resistance Museum triggers painful memories buried deep and leads to her abruptly leaving the museum, much to Henni's distress.

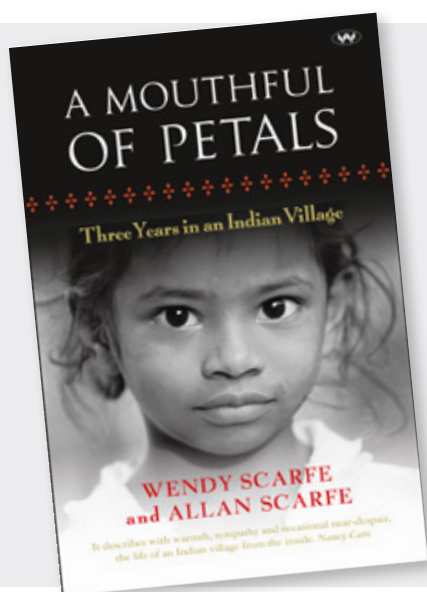
When secrets from the past are not being pursued by the protagonist, modern-day Amsterdam reveals itself to the reader, with its surprising architecture, preferred method of pedal power for transport, and the bohemian lifestyle of those who live in the 'Anitkraaks' – these are run-down buildings that groups of 'hipster types' live in at a reduced rate. The cobbled streets, new friendships, and the dual mystery of the 'blue dog' and the whereabouts of nephew Bram all offer plenty to spark the interest of readers and maintain intrigue for the curious mind.

Interspersed throughout this book are text messages, emails, bulletins, drawings, poetry, maps, and diary

entries – all of which would keep young readers absorbed. In addition, the text is peppered with Dutch phrases that not only lend authenticity to the text but also provide an opportunity to experience and learn some of the language. The freezing cold attic where Henni stays is charged with secrets that ultimately reveal the most confronting secret within the van Veens family.

The text explores the complexity of history as observed through the re-telling of memory by Willa to her neighbour Henni. While those who have read Elizabeth Honey's previous books in the Stella Street series will be well acquainted with the characters, this book can be enjoyed by a new readership without necessarily having read the previous novels.

Overall, I would recommend this text to middle school readers as a part of a wide reading selection and for those students who may have a keen interest in World War II and life in Amsterdam.



# A Mouthful of Petals

Reviewed by Jennifer Shelton, Bendigo South East College

**WRITERS:** Wendy and Allan Scarfe | **PUBLISHER:** Wakefield Press, 2020 (new edition), 294 pages | **RRP:** \$29.95

Written in the early 1960s with an update from 1967, *A Mouthful of Petals* takes us on a journey into remote, regional India. This is not the India of the glamour travel images, the fashion shots and it is not a sanitised version either.

Wendy and Allan Scarfe are Australian teachers who accept an invitation from an Indian political leader/activist to lead the education activities in his ashram in Sokhodeora, in Bihar State. The Scarfes do not hesitate to do more than just teach or oversee teaching in their work and they tell their story honestly.

While both Wendy and Allan have written the story, it is presented in the first person, using Allan's voice. This does not affect the story but it is interesting to think about as you undertake the journey with them. A map of the village, the ashram and surrounding hamlets helps to orient readers to the place. The story opens with a description of the approach to their new home and immediately we get a sense of the remoteness and the 'smallness' of the place in the expansive plains below the Monghr-Hazaribagh hills. 'Sokhodeora is a dot that is part of the plain; beautiful, serene, full of a sense of continuity with the very

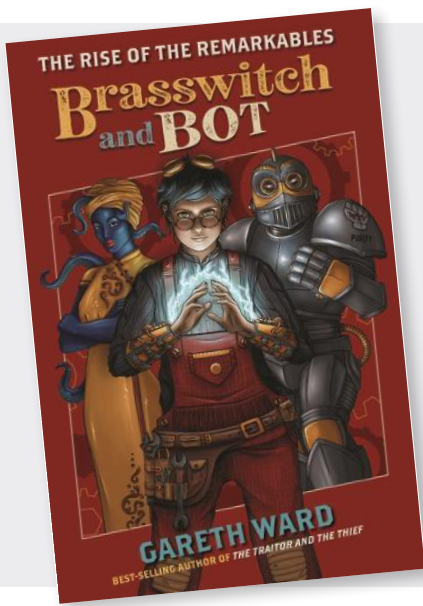
beginnings of human civilization.'

That statement reveals much about the Scarfe's attitude to their new life. They are positive – about the place, the people, their work and life. This is most definitely not to say that they do not see the hard, ugly, and difficult aspects but they do not give up and they do not ever take on a complaining tone. The descriptions of the streets and the village surrounds are clear and so detailed that you could easily imagine yourself right there – without actually having the full sound and smells experience. Neither of the Scarfes shy away from work and so they often find themselves doing more and different tasks than those a teacher might normally experience. They distribute milk rations, show films about health issues like cholera, highlight the need for cleanliness, negotiate ideas and train people to take on new and sometimes challenging roles. Learning the language, blowing up a kerosene stove, navigating cultural differences, managing lice outbreaks, working through issues, adopting a baby, all without the technology and resources we take for granted – their experience was far from dull!

This is a fascinating book. Initially, it seemed odd to be reading an account of

life in India sixty years ago but there are parts of the world today where things are not dissimilar. It did not feel like a 'time travel' read and readers can still learn from the Scarfe's approach to their experiences. It is a longish read, with quite densely packed writing and many of the references to the political issues pertinent to that time and place are challenging. It would still be useful for anyone interested in making a difference at home or abroad.

For me, the most useful part of this book that is relevant to my teaching is in the descriptions. Throughout the story, I was right there in the street, walking around the village past the cow-dung patties drying on the wall for fuel, seeing the dirty children run to hide but peeking out anyway, the bareness or barrenness of the unproductive farming and the mud buildings. It could be useful too in Humanities where we look at the impact and delivery of aid. To that end, this book would be a useful teacher resource. I would not use this as a class set personally, but I do think it has a place in English classrooms of all levels as we teach descriptive writing. Additionally, having accessible copies for Humanities teachers of Years 9 and 10 would be highly recommended.



# Brasswitch and Bot (Book 1) The Rise of the Remarkables

Reviewed by Joanna Boer, Ruyton Girls' School

WRITER: Gareth Ward | PUBLISHER: Walker Books, 2020, 335 pages | RRP: \$16.99

**Brasswitch and Bot (The Rise of the Remarkables , Book 1) is an engaging and fast paced read that will be attractive to fantasy fans and lovers of magical and mechanical worlds alike.**

Set in an alternate reality that borrows from the traditions of Victorian steampunk, Gareth Ward's third novel demonstrates an ability to explore appealing and varied characters, and an entertaining and fairly straightforward world. The eponymous Brasswitch is a female protagonist with a passion for engineering and abilities that make her attractive to many dark forces. She is both powerful and vulnerable, and the novel shows some interest in examining her feelings of isolation and loneliness in the broader context of societal prejudice against young women and 'her kind'. Secondary characters are at times a little too familiar, and there is some sense that Ward is borrowing from a range of other narrative traditions that can feel a little like a pastiche rather than a particularly sophisticated or fully formed work. The mechanical 'Bot' is the other somewhat developed character, and his relationship with Wrench, or 'Brasswitch', is one that has a gruff avuncular charm that will probably

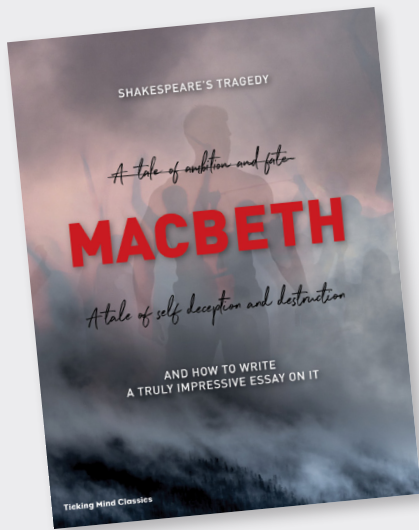
appeal to parents and middle school readers.

The strength of the novel, from a literary perspective, is in the incorporation of the world of mechanical engineering into the realm of fantasy and magic, an intriguing and novel merger that allows for vivid and engaging invocations and images. Teachers may also find scope to explore the intersection between marginalisation, societal disconnection and their interrelated consequences, though this is depicted in a fairly superficial manner.

The appeal to young readers will probably be the rollicking and tightly paced narrative itself. The plot is effectively woven and the narrative twists and turns will delight. For teachers seeking to engage their students in the act of reading itself, the novel offers clear scope for a sequel while also resolving the major plot strands of the original text, and the narrative is linear and has a singular viewpoint. There are some images of violence in the text that young readers might find confronting—a charred body and a branded boy figure briefly, but the violence is not explored in detail or valorised. The even representation of female and male characters might also

increase the text's appeal, and there is some recognition of sexism in Wrench's world, but it is not the subject of focus.

The reading difficulty of the text comes mostly from the use of familiar fantasy conventions that can be opaque and challenging to readers who are not inclined to persist past the use of neologisms and other elements of world building, especially in the early chapters. The vocabulary of the text is otherwise not especially challenging and many students in Years 5-8 would find it suitable if they were supported with an understanding of the genre of fantasy, and how to navigate this style of writing. Teachers might also recommend it as part of a wider reading course or to readers who are keen to develop their reading skills and enthusiasm. While it lacks the kind of thematic and structural sophistication that would enable close analysis as a set text, *Brasswitch and Bot* will extend some students who might be reluctant to move beyond those few very well-known fantasy texts that they might already be familiar with or quest-based narratives that are often rooted solely in the journeys of male protagonists. It is also a text that many students will simply enjoy reading for escapist pleasure.



# Shakespeare's tragedy Macbeth, and how to write a truly impressive essay on it

Reviewed by Charlie Hynes, Penleigh and Essendon Grammar

PUBLISHER: Ticking Mind, 2019, 248 pages | RRP: \$34.95

**This title promises to be 'not just another edition of the classic play, guiding students through the language of Shakespeare, offering an irreverent commentary on what is happening as well as strategies for interpreting the characters, symbols and actions.'**

It also offers pages 'filled with thinking and writing activities to help students analyse the play and, at the end of each scene, extensive vocabulary lists and sentences stems to help guide students towards writing a truly awesome essay on Macbeth.'

Yes, it does all of these things, resulting in a dense collection of activities and resources for constructing that essay. In fact, it takes fifteen pages to explain how students should use the book, complete with graphic organisers and colour coded symbols to offer context and background. This is their method of tackling the common barriers to student access and engagement, touching on language, plot, key themes, ideas, symbols, themes and historical context.

This aforementioned density is a distinctive feature, with Act One alone

running to fifty pages. The original text is in there throughout, with room in the margins for students to add notes and ideas. There are also embedded coloured symbols to give hints and links to significant themes, which is a great idea.

Each page opens with a 'What the...?' summary, employing the vernacular of cool youth before they embark on reading and breaking down the play. In addition, each page contains varied activities aimed at building engagement and understanding at the word, line and conceptual level.

There is an attempt to break up the volume of text with colour, image and infographics. This is supported with writing prompts, scaffolding and modelled responses whose purpose is to assist students in the construction of the 'really awesome' and 'impressive' essay held up as the ultimate objective. Through the use of subheadings, clear labelling and layout, the creators have made it fairly easy to navigate and explore, once you know the system.

There are two clear weaknesses with this title. One is the inclusion of so much content, sound and fury if you will, as it burdens the intended pathway of study

and limits cohesion and momentum. It is simply too busy to envision as a student workbook in most English classrooms.

The second weakness relates to the register and tone employed throughout the handbook. Maybe I'm out of touch, but this attempt to meet students at their own level via 'irreverent commentary' and topical pop culture references comes across as forced and, on occasion, condescending and clichéd.

As a teacher resource or reference, there are useful activities to support certain elements of the study, particularly in relation to the more technical aspects of producing written analysis.

Ticking Mind have clearly devoted a great deal of time and effort to producing this handbook and constructing a journey through the play. Unfortunately, their desire to explore in such depth, concentrating on the explicit goal of writing a truly impressive essay, critically limits its usefulness as a standard resource.

A senior Literature class with plenty of time on their hands would perhaps make best use of it.





# Sky Dragon (Book 1) Take to the skies

Reviewed by Rachel Towns, St John's Regional College

WRITER: Anh Do | PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin, 2020, 232 pages | RRP: \$15.99

**Sky Dragon by Anh Do is focused on Amber Autumn, a young girl who loves learning about butterflies and other insects but whose life changes significantly when a meteorite lands on her house, engulfing it in flames.**

Her father Joe, a firefighter, manages to free Amber from the house, but both he and her mother, Liz, die. Amber is left with a scar but her older brother Reggie, who tried to save their parents, ends up in a coma. A neighbour Irene cares for Amber in the hope that her brother will soon recover. As Amber grows up, however, her brother remains in a coma, leaving her without a sense of family.

Her scarred face and unusual interest in insects makes Amber a target for bullies, making her unhappy. Her feelings of disconnection persist, even when she manages to make a friend, Justin, who shares some classes with her and has an interest in dragonflies. It is only when she wanders off from a school excursion in the forest, in order to be alone, and is almost attacked by a swarm of hornets, that she realises that she is able to communicate with insects.

Justin also notices that she has these powers and tries to warn her that

people with powers like hers have been disappearing lately. While she is a little worried about this, she is more concerned about her current struggles.

Once, when she leaves school, she finds an old hut in the middle of the forest and decides to set it up as a place where she can be herself. Amber finally tells Irene about her new friend Justin and he invites her to a school dance. Amber begins to feel more positive about herself. However, just before the dance, Amber receives a phone call to let her know that her brother has died. Upset and unable to properly control her powers, insects attack many people at the school dance and Amber runs away.

She lives in the hut in the forest, rebuilding it, and only leaving to steal small items of food. Though Amber does not know this, her brother has actually not died and, indeed, he also has special powers, in this case, with fire and water. A collection of scientists and doctors, headed by Doctor Harris and Agent Ferris, lead him to become a superhero known as the Firefighter. He is sent by them to prevent fires and capture criminals, including a person known as the Skydragon who has powers with insects. Firefighter and Skydragon fight each other. It is only at the end that Amber suspects that the person she has

been fighting is actually her brother.

This book is the first in a series and is aimed at middle years readers (8-14) – it has simple language, pictures, and a relatively short word length. It would be quite useful as a wide reading text, particularly for those students who are interested in books about superheroes and powers. The material, including the death of family members, might make it more suitable for older children. This could be used as a class text in upper primary, or for an older year level in a literacy class for EAL students or those with low literacy. The focus on issues like bullying, identity, friendship, death, loss, and power are all significant themes which make this suitable for a text study.

This book could also be used as a springboard into discussions of ethical issues, such as: what we do with power or science; insects and their role and why they are so important to the protagonist. This could also connect to a theme unit, including other 'superhero' films and texts and the exploration of ways in which these are similar or different. The focus on a girl as the main character with powers is less common in superhero texts and is quite useful for encouraging students' awareness and understanding of these gender roles.





VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

1/134-136 Cambridge St  
Collingwood VIC 3066

[www.vate.org.au](http://www.vate.org.au)