



VATE member book reviews

June 2021



The Boy from the Mish

Reviewed by Lisa Worthy, Haileybury College

WRITER: Gary Lonesborough | **PUBLISHER:** Allen & Unwin, 2021, 288 pages | **RRP:** \$19.99

Jackson Barley is seventeen and doesn't think he'll bother returning to school for Year 12. It's Christmas time, his house is about to be invaded by his Aunt and cousins and the weather is hot.

On the Mish, everyone knows everyone, aunts and uncles and cousins everywhere. The tourist campers have arrived by the lake, resuming their annual friendships with the locals. In town, Jackson and his mates do their best to avoid the racists and the cops. Between the beach and the lake, his mates and the men's group, there's enough to keep Jackson distracted.

Just as Jackson is trying to figure out why it's not working out with his girlfriend, Aunt Pam brings along Tomas to spend Christmas with the family. Tomas is recently out of juvie and Jackson's Aunt thinks Jackson can help Tomas with his art. But Jackson tells her 'I don't paint so much anymore.' And sharing his bedroom with Tomas, that stirs up a whole lot of what Jackson has been trying to hide, from himself more than anyone.

Gary Lonesborough's debut novel offers a new addition to the coming-

of-age collection, with honesty and a sweetness that also provides a nuanced view of the complexity of modern Australia – a First Nations voice telling a story that Lonesborough has said in interviews he wished he could've read when young. Sometimes if you don't see yourself on the page, he's said, you just have to write the story yourself. While hitting the tropes of the genre, the first-person protagonist conveys all the hope and despair and awkwardness that is familiar to teenagers the world over.

More than anything, Jackson wants to fit in. He's always felt different, hoped he hasn't seemed different, and is scared of what the response will be if he admits his secret; not just to himself but to his mates, his family and his community. The importance of culture and Country is conveyed so evocatively, non-Indigenous readers will have a greater sense of what has been lost and what is worth fighting for in our society. While experiences of racism don't dominate the story, the constant threat is there, always bubbling under the surface until it hits with potentially devastating consequences.

As Jackson and Tomas learn to trust each other by working on the graphic novel project that Tomas is completing

for his case worker, each boy comes to understand the advantages and disadvantages they have been dealt in life. As with any YA novel, agency is paramount to characters making their way in the world. This agency then crosses over to readers. With *The Boy from the Mish*, walking even just a few kilometres through County in Jackson and Tomas' shoes will provide a solid foundation for middle and upper secondary students to discuss ideas of identity and belonging, while developing their own confidence through self-belief.

Whilst the novel explores the messiness of teenage life with honesty – drinking, violence and sex – it is a reality that shouldn't be hidden. Jackson learns that being honest with himself, first and foremost, and then with those he trusts, is the way to move forward and take back control. These are all valuable lessons for readers if the novel is included in a Year 8 or Year 9 class study. For upper secondary readers, *The Boy from the Mish* is a highly accessible read that would complement crossover themes in other texts, adding to the breadth of own voices and Australian narratives that our students now have access to.



Footprints on the Moon

Reviewed by Melissa Wray, Newcomb Secondary College

WRITER: Lorraine Marwood | PUBLISHER: UQP, 2021, 256 pages | RRP: \$16.99

Lorraine Marwood's latest verse novel takes the reader to 1969 where man is about to take the first step on the moon. For Sharnie Burley, this momentous event runs parallel to several significant events within her own life.

Sharnie begins high school with her best friend Mia, and like many teenagers beginning secondary school, they both want to fit in and make friends. However, friendships become complicated and fitting in becomes a whole lot harder, especially when Sharnie is paired up with the social outcast Gail. The simmering tension within the friendship groups and change of dynamics between the teenagers are believable and relatable.

While Sharnie continues to navigate the socially complex world of high school, she also has to find a way to stay connected with her older sister Cas, a task not made easy by Cas who becomes involved with a returned Vietnam Soldier and anti-war protests – a sentiment that is strongly opposed by their father who forbids such actions. This forces Cas to become more secretive and distant from Sharnie who

just wants her sister to be there for her like she always has been. This storyline introduces the reader to the topic of conscription, Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, and how soldiers were treated upon their return. Marwood includes diverse opinions on these topics but is subtle enough in her writing that the reader can't help but draw their own conclusions around this time in Australian history.

The constant support in Sharnie's world is her grandmother who enjoys pottering around in her garden and collecting special shells and stones. The two have a close bond, however Sharnie has noticed that Gran has become forgetful and confused at times. She is not sure who to speak with about her fears. This relationship shows just how special the bond between grandparents and grandchildren can be.

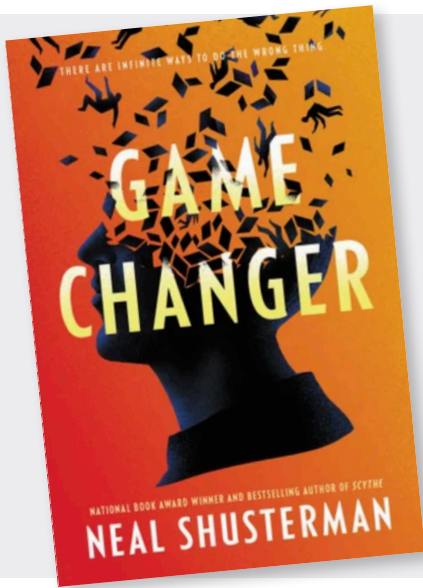
The countdown to the moon landing is a clever and constant thread throughout the story. Even Sharnie's younger cousin Lewis can't wait for this monumental event. Lewis uses a telescope to look at the moon and wears moon boots whenever he can. The buildup of anticipation to the moon landing keeps pace with the events throughout the

story, each event slowly building in significance and tension.

The story culminates with the heart-breaking loss of a family member, the creation of new friendships, a very public anti-war protest, and the successful mission of Apollo 11. The ending is satisfying as it addresses all threads of the storyline in a manner that considers both the main and secondary characters. This makes the read even more enjoyable.

The verse novel style makes this story accessible even for the most reluctant reader through to the most confident. The easy-to-read narrative and short chapter style mean a smooth and fast-paced read. It is an introduction to hard hitting topics such as war and grief, as well as the themes of persistence and friendship.

Footprints on the Moon is particularly suitable for the 10-12 year age group. However, it could also be included in the Years 7-9 curriculum for a deeper analysis of the more challenging topics discussed. The fact that the storyline references the Vietnam War is appealing as this war can often be an overlooked topic in the school curriculum.



Game Changer

Reviewed by Lauren Maserow, Methodist Ladies' College

WRITER: Neal Shusterman | PUBLISHER: Walker Books, 2021, 400 pages | RRP: \$18.99

Game Changer is a YA novel by Neal Shusterman, best known for his adventure sci-fi series Arc of a Scythe. While Game Changer is also a bit sci-fi, it is pretty different, and readers of Scythe shouldn't expect the same type of story.

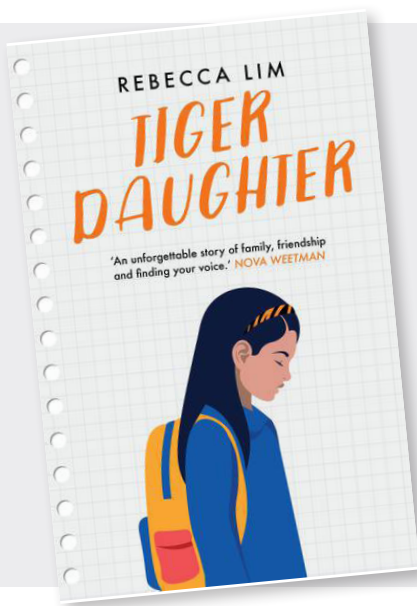
The narrator and protagonist in Game Changer is a white American teenage boy called Ash, short for Ashley; a name that apparently bothers him due to it also being a girl's name.

Ash plays football (NFL) in the unglamorous lineman position where his role is to deliver bone-crunching tackles that prevent the touchdowns from occurring. Ash is used to taking these hits that leave his ears ringing, but one day he takes a hit that leaves him with a bad headache, and some other odd changes in his world. Ash encounters more of these hits which shake up his world and with each change, things get more and more different, and as he tries to work out what is happening and why, he also has to figure out how to turn things 'back to normal' before it's too late.

The novel feels very current with the inclusion of teen-speak and the issues that the characters talk about. Shusterman is possibly capitalising on the 'wokeness' of teenagers these days and the fact that they have a great sense of justice, accompanied by an equally great desire to make the world a fairer place to live in for those who have been marginalised.

One of the great things about the book is seeing Ash's views evolve as he gains new perspectives. As a middle school home group teacher and English educator, I often speak to my students about how important it is for us to consider how what we say and do impacts those around us. To quote Atticus Finch, 'you never really understand a person until you ... climb into [their] skin and walk around in it.' Our goal is to make our students more empathetic human beings. – Ash's experiences helps him to truly understand the plight of those less privileged than him.

There is some potential for using this novel as a class text due to the themes and the nature of the cultural issues it raises. However, I think it would be better used as supplementary reading in a modern history course that examines civil rights and liberties. The writing style is accessible and I have already recommended it to a few of my students, one in Year 8 and one in Year 9 (right in the middle of the target age range for the book). Due to the crossover genre, it is suitable for a large range of students, not just those with an interest in social justice. All in all, I enjoyed reading it and my students are enjoying it too – a win in any English teacher's book!



Tiger Daughter

Reviewed by Kendall Aglinskis, Assumption College

WRITER: Rebecca Lim | PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin, 2021, 224 pages | RRP: \$16.99

Rebecca Lim's *Tiger Daughter* explores the life of thirteen-year-old protagonist Wen, a daughter of Chinese migrant parents living in Australia. Wen struggles with being a first-generation daughter of Chinese migrant parents and the high expectations and regulations that come with it – being seen and not heard, obeying her father and mother, doing exceptionally well in school in the 'important' subjects, and helping in the home.

Lim characterises Wen as a teenager who is fiercely loyal, smart and inquisitive who is also frustrated with the unwritten, however often spoken, rules of Chinese families.

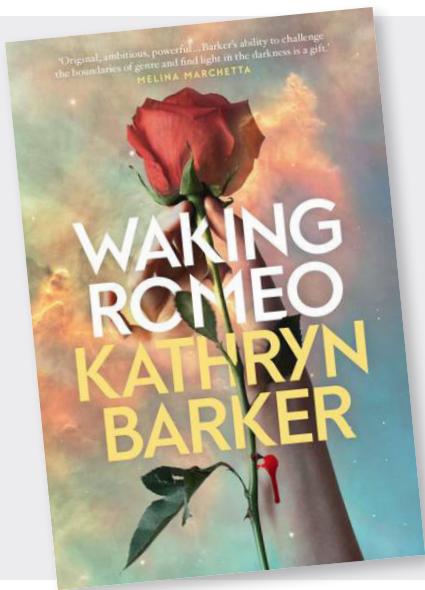
Lim creates a comparison between Wen and Henry, her best friend from school who is a newly arrived migrant. While they face similar challenges having come from China to Australia as migrant children, they are juxtaposed due to their social class, familial expectations and relationship with their parents. Both Wen and Henry are working hard to sit an entrance exam for a place at a

select-entry school; however, tragedy strikes Henry's family two weeks prior to the exam and Wen needs to encourage her best friend to continue to seek his dreams. The contrast between these two migrant teenagers and their struggles makes for an engaging read, which explores dealing with challenges and being confined due to social class.

Tiger Daughter is an insightful portrayal of the Australian migrant experience. Wen's father, previously a medical practitioner in China who had hopes of becoming a surgeon, has no choice but to manage a Chinese seafood restaurant in Australia to earn an income. Meanwhile, Wen's mother spends her day cooking, cleaning and caring for her daughter. Despite this, Wen begins to speak out and challenge the stereotypes associated with Chinese families as she focuses on taking up every opportunity offered to her within her new country. Lim challenges her readers to comprehend the complexities of cultural traditions and expectations, familial dynamics and parental pressure, as reflected in the title *Tiger Daughter*. However, it also embeds loyalty, compassion and hope throughout the narrative.

Rebecca Lim writes from a strong and authentic fourteen-year-old female perspective, with Wen narrating the entirety of the text. Lim showcases Wen's anxieties, inadequacies, struggles, questioning and reflections, as well as her challenges in maintaining her identity and sense of belonging while the world around her shifts. While the text is narrated from a female perspective, the inclusion of Henry, as well as an exploration into the role of two father figures, provides male perspectives as well to engage young male readers.

Tiger Daughter would be suitable for 12-15 year old students. The novel would be effective for use in a classroom in Year 6 to Year 8, particularly in a unit exploring identity, belonging and what it means to be Australian. This age group would be able to connect with the ideas in the text and the narrative voice of Wen. This novel is recommended for an upper primary or lower secondary school library and a Year 6 to Year 8 wide reading list.



Waking Romeo

Reviewed by Lisa Worthy, Haileybury College

WRITER: Kathryn Barker | PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin, 2021, 396 pages | RRP: \$19.99

'... I imagine a scene from my play. Romeo and me, both dead in the crypt, full period costume. There's zero blood; it's totally poetic. I've just delivered my final line – O, happy dagger! This is thy sheath; there rust, and let me die – like it's some epic love story.'

'Then I let myself remember what really happened that night in the crypt. The mess and the pain and the blood and the absolute panic. That there was nothing serene or beautiful about it. It was the total opposite of poetic. Because sure, a lot of my story was fiction ... but the knife in my hand was real.'

Kathryn Barker's second novel, *Waking Romeo*, is a wonderfully imaginative exercise of 'what if?' What if William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was mashed up with Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (or rather, Emily herself). What if it was set in the future when time travel (of a sort) was possible? What if a reader could explore the eternal themes of love, fate and destiny when the impact of climate change and the issues of sustainability were as real as they are today? What if some of the most iconic stories of western literature were retold from a different perspective?

'Darkened with the smog of pain, polluting. Oh wretched grief, a poison to thy soil.'

Jules has used metaphor to link human suffering with damage to the natural world, as though people and the planet are not separate, as though all is connected.

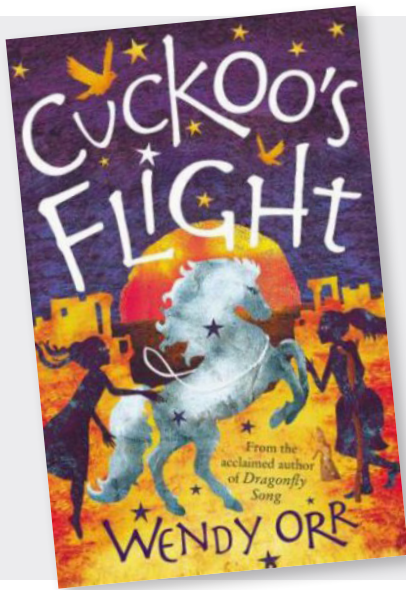
In London, 2083, time traveller Ellis has been given a mission. Although time travel is possible (however, only forwards), he has been sent back (which should be impossible). The mission: to wake Romeo, the love of Juliet's life who is still in a coma. Jules has shut herself off from her family and friends in the aftermath of their turbulent romance. Ellis' arrival causes Jules to question everything she has understood about her world.

'All of them,' he says, quietly. 'Every single era of humankind – past, present, future. Every "time", the colour of my skin has been an issue. Hate has been an issue.'

Shifting perspectives between Jules and Ellis, Barker's novel covers a lot of terrain through an intricately plotted genre-bending adventure. The various settings are recognisable as dystopian versions of a broken future, evoking countless images from films

that critique the present-day conflicts and social crumbling. The potential to investigate intertextuality through this novel could prove an engaging project for Year 9 or Year 10 students. Along with the duelling perspectives, the fifty-three chapters split into five acts, with reciprocal visual motifs, offer opportunities for analysis of narrative structure. Readers will be fully immersed in time, place and character.

As with most YA fiction, the characters demonstrate hope and maintain their agency. While the time shifting may be a little jarring for readers to conceptualise, the energy and voice of each character, and that of the friends and foes they interact with along the way, ensures there is a broad cast that quickly proves to be more complex and subtle than is often the case in stories from such distinct inspiration. The conflict and tension build steadily, creating an intricate map of interconnected events and timelines. The strength and flaws evident in both Jules and Ellis reflect relatable dilemmas that students would be able to engage with. As an example of adaptation and transformation, *Waking Romeo* really does tick all the boxes.



Cuckoo's Flight

Reviewed by Prue Bon, Mooroolbark College

WRITER: Wendy Orr | PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin, 2021, 288 pages | RRP: \$16.99

In *Cuckoo's Flight*, the reader is introduced to Clio, the youngest daughter in a family of potters. But it is not pottery that Clio wants to dedicate her life to, and when a raider's ship appears off the coast while Clio is out tending to her beloved horses, she raises the alarm and sets in motion a series of events that will change the course of her life.

The setting of the Bronze Age provides a different perspective for a young female character – Clio is part of a matriarchal society, where the priestess holds the power. When it is declared that a young woman from the community must be presented as a sacrifice, Clio is certain that it will be her. But Clio's disability – a badly damaged leg as a result of a horse-riding accident – means that she is not suitable for sacrifice. Clio is both relieved and disappointed by this turn of events, which forces the reader to consider the differences between loyalty and duty.

It takes a little bit to warm to Clio – her internal monologue during the opening scenes verges on self-pity as she describes her injury and details how it prevents her from riding her horses, but when she meets Mika, a slightly younger

girl from a neighbouring fishing village, she becomes more relatable. Her initial prejudice against a girl who is clearly more 'other' than her (even with her disability), her creeping jealousy, as she sees that she is not the only one who cares for the horses, and eventually her realisation that she and Mika must work together in order to protect what they love is, in the end, what pulls Clio together for the reader. It was not necessarily Clio's story, but her growth that I found myself attached to by the time I finally reached the last page.

On the surface, *Cuckoo's Flight* seems little more than an opportunity to bring a text with strong female representation to your students. It contains a lovely balance of history and plot, adventure and bildungsroman and it is easy to see how it could fit seamlessly into the coursework of a Year 7 or 8 English classroom. However, for students needing a challenge, the themes of family, loyalty, sacrifice and friendship are evident, and allow for much deeper discussion supported by a teacher willing to bring in a bit of literary theory – from a feminist lens there is much to explore, but consideration of how the environment protects and works with Clio, Mika and the other characters would also lend itself to an analysis through the lens of ecocriticism.

I find that I have begun looking specifically at a text's symbols and deciding from there whether or not it is appropriate for my classroom; *Cuckoo's Flight* fits the criteria. There are a number of easily identifiable symbols – the horses, pottery and the clay priestess that Clio's grandmother makes to replace the human sacrifice – and each one offers deeper analysis along with the overarching story.

Adding to its potential as a novel study is the change of prose – sections of the text are written in verse, which has an uncanny ability to remove the reader from their immediate surroundings and focus on the language. The change between prose and verse is far more powerful than reading an entire text in either, and it also encourages further discussion of authorial intent; why would Orr choose to write only certain parts in verse?

Wendy Orr's latest offering is a treat. Although the third in her 'series' of Bronze Age adventures, it stands alone, however, I would suggest having the other two (*Dragonfly Song* and *Swallow's Dance*) available, because you will want to read them the moment you have finished *Cuckoo's Flight*.



The Social Dilemma – Teacher Pack

Reviewed by Lauren Maserow, Methodist Ladies' College

PUBLISHER: White Space Words, 2020 | RRP: \$39 (individual), \$179 (school licence)

You would need to have been living under a rock for the past decade to not know that social media and smart phone technology have taken over our lives. For our teenage students, they have grown up with social media and are savvy when it comes to navigating which apps are cool and which are not.

What they (and we) may not realise is how they have been programmed to want and need to check their phones regularly. Indeed, most of us have probably seen this in our classes! The recent Netflix documentary film, *The Social Dilemma* (2020), seeks to explain this but more to the point, it explains the spiderweb that we have found ourselves tangled in. More schools have become aware of the need to educate students about fake news and the responsibility to develop them as responsible users of digital media and the Teacher Pack for *The Social Dilemma* does a great job of doing just that.

In the pack is a PowerPoint, a Teacher Guide and a Student Booklet. The PowerPoint is designed to introduce what a documentary is, how it differs from a feature film, and what students should be looking for to critique it. It then guides students through a range of hook activities to get them thinking about how they engage with social media and the internet before introducing the documentary itself. There are activities and questions that are there for during the watching of the film, as well as for afterwards and there is scope to extend the unit of work as well as make it an inter-disciplinary unit with subjects like Psychology and Media Studies. The questions are accessible and range from comprehension and recall type questions, to higher order questions that require students' own independent critical thinking and evaluation.

The questions are not geared towards a particular age group as we know that all teenagers are using the internet, social media, and smart phones, however, given the rising rates of anxiety, depression and the compounding effects of COVID-19, I would recommend this for Years 8-10. Students may have already seen the film outside of school, but it is a valuable task for them to study the documentary and reflect deeply on their own usage and how their own habits are impacted. Overall, this is a useful teaching resource, and I would certainly recommend it especially for English teachers looking to teach a unit on documentary films and digital citizenship, and potentially also to pastoral care / well-being co-ordinators who are wanting to help their students comprehend the potential dangers of the internet.



The Stolen Prince of Cloudburst

Reviewed by Rachel Towns, St John's Regional College

WRITER: Jaclyn Moriarty | PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin, 2020, 544 pages | RRP: \$22.99

This novel is focused around Esther Mettlestone-Staranise, a young girl, and is set in a magical world where there are Shadow mages and Spellbinders who fight to use magic in both good and evil ways.

The main character is someone who is normally successful in her lessons and normally has friends, but this year her two friends have moved away from school and suddenly her new teacher Mrs Pollack, although fun and exciting, makes her doubt her abilities. Though the title is *The Stolen Prince of Cloudburst* and by the end of the novel this seems linked in to the story, the focus is more on Esther and her experiences. We learn of her skill in speaking and the regular dreams that haunt her.

When Esther returns to school she finds that she has two new classmates, Autumn and Pellagia, and there are whispers around the school that there is an Ogre who is teaching at the school and that there is a Spellbinder working in the school. Their fears seem groundless when they meet Mrs Pollack, their new teacher, a small lady who likes to make jokes in her class. Throughout the year, Esther's confidence begins to

diminish as she receives demerits for activities that hardly seem problematic and her results lower dramatically. Her two sisters are able to go out to the Poker tournament but Esther is forced to remain behind. Similarly, both her sisters are able to leave the school, one to help the Mayor identify liars and the other to work on her swimming with Mr Dar-Healey. One of the new girls is revealed to be a Whisperer, a member of a group who were viewed as enemies in their society. Esther befriends the girl, Autumn.

When Esther is invited with her family to a ceremony for the Prince of Cloudburst who was stolen and then returned, she learns that there is a problem in the waters that is causing issues. Her father is concerned about this and is suggesting to a conference that a particular magical creature called a Fiend is the issue. While on this trip, Esther sees the location from her dreams making her wonder if she has been there before. Finally, Esther is forced to remember the event that led to her dreams and chooses to become a saviour for her world even though this involves significant sacrifice.

This is a lengthy novel which makes it attractive for younger readers who want more of a reading challenge. It is

aimed at a 10-14 year old audience and focuses on a fantastical world. The style of writing is largely informal and often from a first person perspective, allowing students to become more engaged in the storyline than from a third person perspective. This novel would probably not be suitable as a class text with the length of the story, but it would certainly be good as a wide reading or a free reading text. With its focus on a female protagonist, it is perhaps more likely to suit a female audience, though there is certainly lots of action and some male characters as well. The start is slower, perhaps because of the necessity of world building such a complex place with such detailed and different forms of magic. I found the exposition handy though it sometimes took me out of my focus on the story. As the story began to progress and I had a greater understanding of the character and her experiences (struggling in school, excluded from events and the unfairness of it all), it made it easier to get caught up in the story and although the start took me a while to read, I had to binge-read the ending to find out how all the elements linked back together, including the story at the beginning.



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

1/134-136 Cambridge St
Collingwood VIC 3066

www.vate.org.au