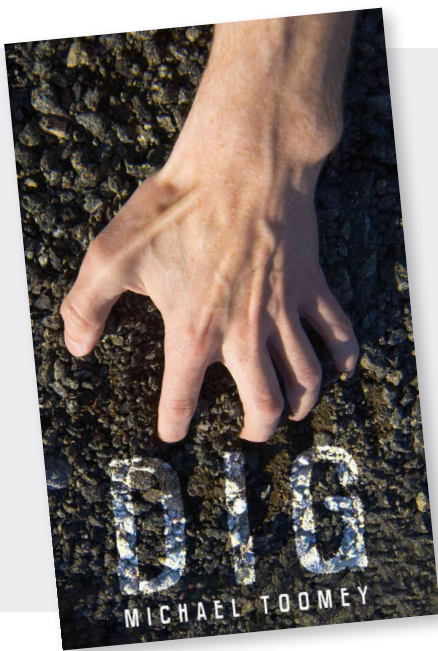




# VATE member book reviews

September 2022



# Dig

Reviewed by Mary Purcell, University of Melbourne

**WRITER:** Michael Toomey | **PUBLISHER:** Austin Macauley Publishers, 2022, 182 pages | **RRP:** \$19.50

**Set in the Melbourne suburb of Chelsea in the year 1966, *Dig* by Michael Toomey gently interrogates different constructions of masculinity through the eyes of eleven year old protagonist, Damian Foley.**

Damian is firmly enmeshed in the dominant discourses of his time and place and the sixties are powerfully evoked in the novel through specific and telling cultural references of the time. The Samurai television series and 'Lost in Space' serve as evening entertainment while Captain Cook claiming Botany Bay adorns the school walls. Academic schools are distinguished from 'Tech schools', decimal currency has recently been introduced in Australia, and the Vietnam War is dominating newspaper headlines. Within this context, Damian and his close friend and neighbour, Chris Monk, negotiate their emerging identities.

Toomey creates a convincing and accessible adolescent world; from struggles with illness to the first inklings of sexual attraction, to sparring with Mike, the local bully, only to discover he is a likeable boy struggling with difficulties of his own. All these areas play an important role in Damian's life

and as he grapples with the need to assert himself in a world in which local battles parallel international wars, he finds surprising courage in moments where he needs it. Both Chris and Damian bear the burden of childhood illnesses and therefore fail to conform to the ideal of male physical strength. They each strive to demonstrate their physical prowess in sports and develop their mental resilience in overcoming obstacles as they do when confronted by the 'Assee Tech' boys and the initiation rituals required of them. The story climaxes after the boys attend a matinee session of 'The Great Escape' and Mike as their leader is inspired to build a tunnel. After a summer of close cooperation and teamwork, as the tunnel is nearly completed, tragedy strikes and it collapses. Damian then has to learn new forms of resilience and to negotiate his masculinity in new ways.

From Master Shintaro who 'feared nothing' (p. 13) to Brian Monk who was obsessed with World Series Wrestling, there are many images in the text of normative hegemonic masculinity, that is, masculinity which can be characterised by an avid love of sports and a competitive ethic. It has also been represented as a desire for mateship, a sense of responsibility or duty, actual or implicit misogyny, and an inability

or unwillingness to express emotion and taciturnity (Romoren and Stephens 2002, p. 220). However, in *Dig*, Toomey presents a range of masculinities available (within the 1960s context) for Damian to adopt. Vince Foley, Damian's father, disappoints his son in not being confident playing cricket or football or using the Australian male vernacular. Unlike Chris' father who had fought in New Guinea in WW2, Vince wanted to stay out of wars whereas to Damian 'it just seemed right for men to go to war' (p. 43). However, as his son comes to realise, Vince commands male respect through his professional abilities and the support he offers the community. Ross, the taciturn older brother of Chris, is admired by Damian for his calm authority and while he represents Australian male norms of commitment to duty, fairness and unwillingness to express emotion, his experience in the Vietnam war leaves him troubled and grieving over his lost mates. He reaches out to Damian who also experiences the tragedy of losing mates and demonstrates that vulnerability and strength are not mutually exclusive.

Readers will connect with the engaging characters woven into this story and the writing style makes it accessible to students of different reading abilities. *Dig* is appropriate for the Years 7-9



curriculum with a focus on discussions around war, family and masculinity. It also opens up the possibility of historical research. Students might like to interview older relatives/friends who were alive in the sixties and record their memories. They might Google aspects of the sixties – music, films, books and newspapers. They might research the Vietnam War and debate its efficacy. The novel is an introduction to conversations around war and masculinity, the complexity of characters who are both good and bad and the acceptance of both self and others.

### References

Romøren, R., & Stephens, J. (2002). Representing masculinities in Norwegian and Australian young adult fiction: a comparative study. In J. Stephens (Ed.), *Ways of being male: representing masculinities in children's literature and film*. Routledge.



# Ask No Questions (a migrant's tale)

Reviewed by Lauren Maserow, Methodist Ladies' College

WRITER: Eva Collins | PUBLISHER: Puncher & Wattmann, 2022, 90 pages | RRP: \$25

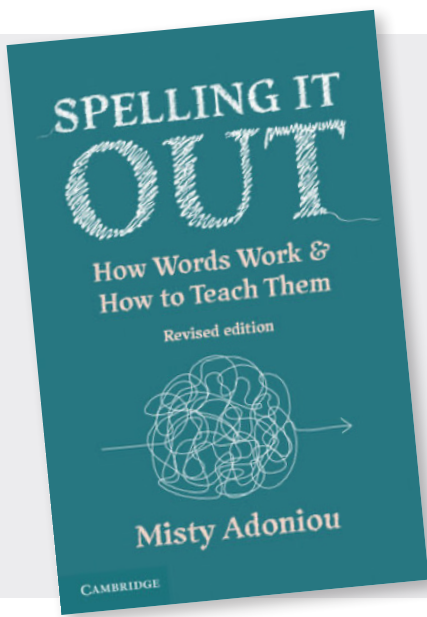
**Ask No Questions (a migrant's tale)** is a memoir in the form of a collection of poetry by Eva Collins. The preface states that it 'is a record of [Collins'] family's immigration from communist Poland to Australia ... in the late 1950s' and that it is 'told from [her] perspective as a twelve-year-old girl who was heartbroken about leaving her mother country.' Given that Australia, particularly Melbourne, witnessed a huge wave of immigrants arriving in the wake of World War 2, this is something that many students will be able to connect to in their own family's story.

Collins focuses on the upheaval of leaving her beloved home of Poland which, as a twelve year old, she struggles to comprehend. Like many migrants of the time, Collins' parents chose Australia due to the promise of a new life in a far-off place, thousands of miles away from the grips of the USSR. Settling into life in Melbourne poses its own challenges and Collins initially only sees the differences in a negative light, yearning for home because 'Christmas

in summer/feels fake', 'possums are cute/but they're only pretend squirrels', and 'eucalypts smell lovely/but ... don't change with the seasons.' However, Collins eventually begins to make a place for herself in Australia but realises that it is 'hard to be/in two places at once', a feeling many migrants are familiar with.

Not dissimilar to the poems of Peter Skrzynecki, Collins' memoir addresses themes of displacement, identity (personal, national and cultural) and belonging in her writing, but in a more straightforward way. Collins writes at the end of her preface that her work 'applies to all migrants and refugees from anywhere and at any time' and she 'endeavours to elicit empathy and understanding for people on the other side of a divide.' As important as it is for students with a post-war migrant experience in their family to be able to connect with these poems, it is equally vital (if not more so) that students who consider themselves to be 'just Australian', because they have a white English background, also develop an understanding of what it means to be 'othered'.

As previously mentioned, Collins' writing and poetry style is certainly accessible and teachers of the junior secondary years might find this text to be a good entry point to the study of poetry. While Collins mentions her family connection to the Holocaust, this is only brief and her family's reasons for leaving Poland are more closely aligned with the oppressive Soviet regime of the time. This text would be beneficial to students to help them understand the Cold War era but also the Soviet migrant experience and would work nicely as an interdisciplinary study between English and History. I would say, however, that it would also work more broadly than Years 9 and 10, perhaps even using it for Year 8s and Year 11s, depending on the cohort and the focus of their course of study.



# Spelling It Out: How Words Work & How to Teach Them (Revised edition)

Reviewed by Jennifer Shelton, Bendigo South East College

**WRITER:** Misty Adoniou | **PUBLISHER:** Cambridge University Press, 2022, 143 pages | **RRP:** \$39.95

Misty Adoniou has been a leader in the fields of English as an Additional Language, spelling and literacy for many years. Full disclosure: I admire her work, in particular the common-sense, down-to-earth, practical nature of her examples and strategies to deal with some of the big issues for teachers, parents and students. This book tackles one of the really big issues – the one that has most people working in the area stressing or feeling varying degrees of concern. She sees the teaching of spelling as the last frontier of literacy and one we need to conquer sooner rather than later.

In advertising this book, the claim is made that: 'Spelling It Out aims to ease anxiety and crush the myth that good spelling comes naturally. Good spelling comes from good teaching. Based on Misty Adoniou's extensive research into spelling learning and instruction, this book encourages children and adults to nurture a curiosity about words, discover their history and, in so doing, understand the logic behind the way they are spelled.' It is acknowledged that spelling is one of the issues that builds

into an anxiety-inducing concern, but it presents a different way of looking at and then understanding our language better and more deeply.

Over the years, many people have been told that learning to spell English words is difficult because the letter patterns are quite muddled and unpredictable. We have all seen poems about pronouncing English words like cough, tough, through and the like, and EAL teachers know the fun of teaching some of the spellings that on a surface look, seem quite random. What this book does is show us that if we take the time to explore words at the morphological level, we might find things become less murky. It may seem like a deep dive into linguistics and in our pressured teaching situations and ever-eroding planning time, may well appear to be a step too far. But, reading the book, trying the strategies, exploring the foundations of our language, could save us some of our sanity in the longer term.

Being able to utilise strategies and, at the foundation of all, learn how words work, in classrooms, small groups or one-to-one, will over time assist our students – at every level – to understand and build up their spelling skills. They will experience more success and develop some confidence too. Going

beyond the teachers and students, there are ideas and explanations that could really help parents as well. It could even be possible to offer some handouts or information sessions to parents to 'let them in on this', to help them support their children (having themselves most probably gone through their schooling without this information). Perhaps learning more about where our words come from, how they go together and function, could encourage even the most disillusioned among us to explore.

Early in the book, Adoniou addresses the shame that is often experienced by poor spellers. 'Spelling is a learned skill. Our brains are not wired for spelling.' (p. 2). She goes on to explain that just as we all have different learning styles, so we need to ensure that teachers teach according to the way their students learn and not just the way they themselves learnt or were taught. A recognition that everyone has a role to play in spelling is helpful. It is not solely the domain of the English teacher, rather it is every subject teacher's role to teach subject-specific vocabulary (meanings and spelling) as part of their routine. Parents, too, can play a role in the teaching of spelling through simply encouraging students to explore words, meanings and where words come from.

A personal favourite part is where Adoniou speaks about how quickly audiences may judge spelling. 'Many of us correct spelling, even those not involved with teaching children. We snigger at the misspelled items on the restaurant menu or in the real estate advertisement. We tut-tut at the spelling errors in the newspaper, or on the captions that accompany our TV news. ... The capacity to spot and correct spelling errors is insufficient for anyone interested in teaching students to spell, because correcting spelling is not teaching spelling – it is copy-editing. Yet this is how we have traditionally approached assessment in spelling. So we are left with the rather sad reality that although very few teachers actually teach spelling, almost all test it, and then do very little with the information embedded in those test results. Spelling is simply considered a convention to mark as correct or incorrect (Apel, Masterson & Hart 2004) rather than a linguistic skill that provides insights into the linguistic development of the student (Apel, Masterson & Niessen 2004, Arndt & Foorman 2010, Boynton, Hauerwas & Walker 2004).'

This book should be a part of every teacher's (and dare I say also every parent's) toolbox. Learning to explore our vocabulary and not letting ourselves be defeated by the spelling, even before starting, would be helpful to us all and our students would be the beneficiaries. Some people may well take different views on this, but regardless of their stance on phonics or whatever their preferred method, this way of looking at language from a linguistic perspective is worth a closer look.





# Finding Jupiter

Reviewed by Melissa Wray, Newcomb Secondary College

WRITER: Kelis Rowe | PUBLISHER: Walker Books, 2022, 256 pages | RRP: \$18.99

**Kelis Rowe's debut young adult novel *Finding Jupiter* takes us on a journey between two teenagers told through alternating points of view. It is a coming-of-age story, but it is also a journey of two people trying to overcome a past they didn't create. We get to know their families and understand their world as they try to get to know each other. It has strong leading characters but also includes some loveable support characters.**

Ray (Jupiter) is a strong independent young lady who is home for summer from boarding school. She's not interested in love and wants nothing to do with the good-looking young man she meets at the roller-skating rink. She just wants to write poetry, create art and work at her part-time job before going back to boarding school for her final year.

Orion is a hopeless romantic who wears his heart on his sleeve but lacks the confidence to follow through with any actions. That is until he meets Ray at the roller-skating rink. He shouldn't be distracted by this beautiful girl, though,

because he is about to go off to college and has swimming championships to compete in.

The two begin this backwards and forward exploration as Orion tries to woo Ray whilst Ray tries desperately to resist, despite the very obvious chemistry between the two. The writing style as the relationship blossoms is like a breath of fresh air for teenage love. It is realistic, it is genuine and it is respectful. The sexual attraction has Orion putting the brakes on as Ray takes the lead, whilst both being aware and respectful of the other person's needs. Caring, sensitive and consensual.

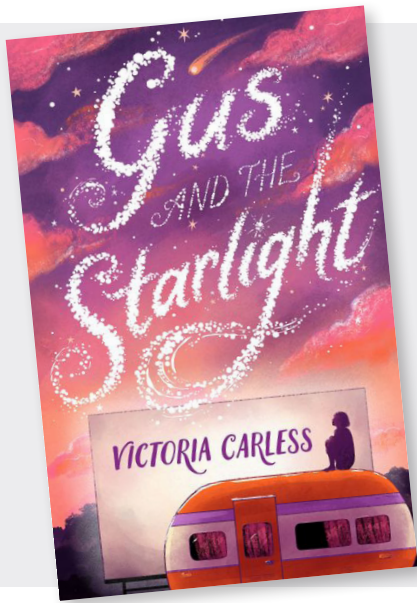
This is a beautifully written first love story, however, the book also introduces storylines of family trauma and how that plays out over the years. Ray's father died the day she was born and Orion's sister was killed when he was a young boy. Both still grieve for their loved ones, but it is the secrets their parents are hiding that will spin their new world out of control.

Layered within the book is the language of poetry and the power of words. Scattered throughout the novel is the artwork and blackout poetry created by Ray. It links perfectly to the storyline

and adds further substance to the action within the book. It helps to show the vulnerable side of Ray as she grapples to understand the things around her.

Readers will enjoy getting to know both characters through the two-person point of view style. They will fall in love with Orion's sweet and considerate side and Ray's tough yet vulnerable side. A perfect combination to keep the story moving and reflect on what they both want in their lives.

*Finding Jupiter* is particularly suitable for the 14+ age group. It would link in with a poetry unit around the analysis of language and the power of words. It is also absolutely perfect for the current conversation around the mandated teaching in Victorian public schools of giving sexual consent.



# Gus and the Starlight

Reviewed by Virginia Danahay, Berwick Secondary College

WRITER: Victoria Carless | PUBLISHER: HarperCollins, 2022, 320 pages | RRP: \$8.99

A young child sits on the roof of a caravan, gazing at the cosmos. By the time I'd finished reading, I wished I was sitting up there, too. Sunset tones and a star-splashed font form the cover of *Gus and the Starlight*, a gently written and evocative story from Victoria Carless. This novel is for the dreamers and the travellers, and for those who are looking for a place to belong.

Middle-child Augusta 'Gus' Able, considers herself 'lucky' in Chapter 1, lucky that she does not have 'anyone to miss'. Protagonist Gus finds herself on the move again, going from one house to another, possessions cracked and nearly broken, worn down and out by wear, jumbled inside a suitcase. Gus is adept at ensuring she does not make friends – inventories in her head – of books or names of pet fish, anything to distract herself from the present moment and the reality of leaving another place behind.

I found myself reminiscing about my own childhood as I read – the playground feuds, the class projects,

the sibling squabbles. I also fondly remembered the trips to the local drive-in and the viewing of classic films. *Gus and the Starlight* is a very modern story, cleverly written to appeal to contemporary readers and the healthy dashes of nostalgia help the text appeal to their teachers and parents, too.

The move to Calvary, land of movie magic and mango trees is where the story of her Gus and her family really develops. Mum Delphine takes a job as caretaker of the local drive-in theatre, the *Starlight*. Ethereal older sister Alice and Transformer-loving younger brother Artie settle into a mouldy caravan and begin the task of cleaning and preparing the drive-in and its adjacent *Moonlight* café for a grand reopening. Like me, many adult readers will likely remember their own childhood inclusive of visits to outdoor movie theatres and viewings of blockbusters such as *Ghostbusters*, *The Neverending Story* and, more recently, the very Australian, *Strictly Ballroom*.

A strong supporting cast of characters includes the overly theatrical Deirdre, director of the local Amateur Dramatic Society, sassy class mate Nicole and her 'primary caregiver' mother, a maker of dream catchers and kale smoothies.

The mysterious Stevie and dependable Sergeant Peters make memorable cameos, as does my personal favourite, classic hero Henry

Carless uses the novel to explore relevant issues such as single-parent families, financial difficulties, and the trauma of being an outsider. A missing father, a mysterious presence, and a strong sense of the supernatural are woven effortlessly throughout the plot. The star of the story, however, is Gus. A poignant protagonist, her courage and determination show a maturity beyond her chronological age. Her story is a beautiful progression of her ability to impact those around her. Navigating a new home, a new school and a new job, all with a strong sense of justice, Gus develops but so does her immediate family, uncovering unique abilities and finding a happiness not evident at the beginning of the text.

Likely of most use for middle primary years, the text has much to offer in the way of companion activities:

- viewing and discussion of films mentioned in the text (*The Princess Bride*, or *ET*)
- film reviews





- narrative writing (focused on the supernatural or suspense)
- descriptive writing (describing a setting from the text)
- writing of newspaper articles
- writing to a character or as a character
- list-making (from facilitating mindfulness to making lists of student hobbies, books that should be read or interesting places to visit)
- class reading or individual reading of the texts that Gus mentions (e.g. *Matilda*)
- inquiry-based learning (comets, space, the past).

By the end of the book, Gus no longer feels it necessary to make lists to squash her rising panic. There is no need. Gus, the story's own star, becomes more than 'able' – both in name and nature – capably reminding readers that, when a movie finishes, the house lights inevitably shine on.



# The Greatest Thing

Reviewed by Belinda Engelman, Geelong Lutheran College

**WRITER:** Sarah Winifred Searle | **PUBLISHER:** Allen & Unwin , 2022, 352 pages | **RRP:** \$19.99

**The protagonist of *The Greatest Thing*, Winifred Rose Cunningham, is commencing Year 10 at Ockett Cove High School, minus her two best friends who have recently transferred to a more elite school and left her all alone.**

This graphic novel comes with a warning in relation to the sensitive content, and for this reason is most suitable for young people aged 13+. This graphic novel 'contains descriptions of and references to self-harm, eating disorders, biphobia, fatphobia and mental health issues.' The writer warns that 'some readers might find certain descriptions triggering and are advised to take care while reading.' Having said that, this is an excellent book for young people to connect with uncomfortable and potentially personal topics; and witness the main character navigate through her own self doubt to triumph in the end against all that ails her.

Depicted through blue/grey tones when it is night, the reader is exposed to Winnie's self doubt and persistent thoughts that keep her awake at night. The tone throughout the book see-saws between melancholy, angst and hope. It is set against the backdrop of the early

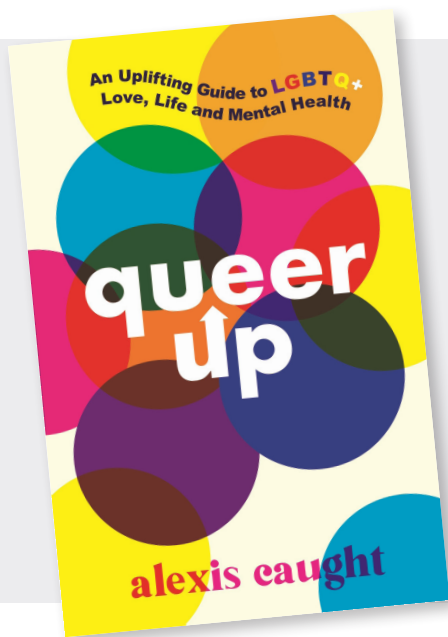
2000s, prior to the rise in popularity and use of mobile phones and social media. To this end, it is somewhat nostalgic and allows for identity and mental health issues to be explored without the additional complication of social media. The graphic novel is beautifully illustrated and has the added delight of containing the zine that Winifred is writing with the encouragement of her teacher Mrs. Fransson and in collaboration with her new friends Oscar and April. The zine really empowers the main character to believe in herself and be proud of who she is and what she can produce.

Interspersed throughout the story are Winnie's insecurities and, at times, this is explored through her reflections, where she considers the tightness in her chest 'felt like drowning'. The open honesty of the writer includes the author's note at the end of the graphic novel, where the writer Sarah reassures her readers that 'you're never alone as you think you are' and helpfully lists organisations who may be able to offer support if you, or someone you know, is struggling. This is an honest and deeply personal graphic novel that is endearing in its honesty and will resonate with its readers long after finishing it.

Given the heavy themes contained in the book, I would be reluctant to use this as a classroom text; however, if choosing to use it this way, the upmost care would be required. It certainly is informative and accessible for teachers to bear witness to contemporary adolescent themes. Additionally, teenage readers may enjoy this graphic novel, provided they are well supported and won't find any of the content too heavy or potentially triggering.

The text is proactive in portraying the benefit of adult allies, as Winnie is well-supported by her single mum, her guidance counsellor, and her teachers. In contrast, her friend April appears to have absent parents who are not aware of their daughter's needs; this works to highlight the support that Winnie receives from those around her.

To support the unpacking of this semi-autobiographical text, Allen & Unwin have [teacher notes](#) available on their website. I would recommend this for higher levels, perhaps Year 9 +, mostly due to the heavy themes and content.



# Queer Up: An Uplifting Guide to LGBTQ+ Love, Life and Mental Health

Reviewed by Thomas Watts, Baimbridge College

WRITER: Alexis Caught | PUBLISHER: Walker Books , 2022, 256 pages | RRP: \$18.99

I thoroughly enjoyed reading this text throughout the holidays. As an openly gay teacher, I do everything that I can to create safe spaces for LGBTIQ+ students. I jumped at the opportunity to review *Queer Up* as it looked like a great text to be able to explain the complexities of gender identity, sexuality, the difference between sex and gender, and understanding what cisgender/transgender actually means, for both students coming to terms with their identities, but also for allies (both friends of students or education staff who support students), as well as further fostering safe spaces.

Although I studied gender studies at university and have a sound understanding of LGBTIQ+ topics, this text was thorough but simple in the language used and left me walking away from the text having learnt a whole range of new LGBTIQ+ topics and concepts. I believe that this text will help the next generation of rainbow folk understand themselves and lead to self-acceptance.

The text explained gender, sexuality, transitioning and a plethora of other concepts, in a simple and easy to understand manner to both educate a range of students and staff. In an English classroom, this text supports students to further understand a range of diverse perspectives, for example, it allowed me, as a teacher, to further explain a memoir of an intersex person which was in the *Growing Up in Australia* anthology.

The only thing that I would change about the text is to update the support services information to ensure that people reading it are able to access LGBTIQ+ support services in Australia.

I would recommend this text to students from Years 7 to 12 as a wide reading text, to support students to become allies for their classmates and friends. I recommend this text to all education staff too as an educational resource, as it provides adults with the knowledge and skills to create and sustain safe school environments for LGBTIQ+ students.



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