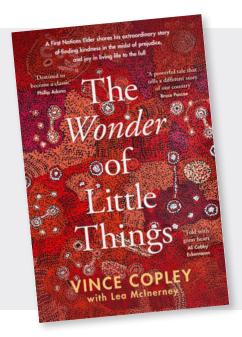


VATE member book reviews

April 2023





The Wonder of Little Things

Reviewed by Michael E. Daniel, Camberwell Grammar

WRITERS: Vince Copley with Lea McInerney | **PUBLISHER:** ABC Books / HarperCollins Publishers, 2022, 352 pages | **RRP:** \$22.99

There are, on many levels, parallels between my late father, 'Ted' (Edward) F M Daniel and the late Vince Copley AM. Both were born in rural locations in South Australia in 1936 and were from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Similarly, both spent much of their childhood in boys' homes in Adelaide, Ted in the Church of England Boys' Home in Walkerville, and Vince at St Francis House. Having vivid recollections of playing against the late Charlie Perkins, also a St Francis boy, Ted would almost certainly have played against Vince in sporting competitions.

However, this is where the parallels end. Notwithstanding the stigma at the time attached to children raised in homes, being of a European settler background, Ted had the privilege of being able to live freely in Australian society, the stigma of his childhood disguised by never referring to it. By contrast, being an Indigenous man, Vince had to endure decades of racist treatment, and in the pages of his memoir he describes and reflects upon the appalling treatment and conditions he experienced.

Many of the challenges he describes are not unique. Born into poverty on the Point Pearce Aboriginal reserve, Vince's father died when he was aged one. He also sadly lost his mother whilst still a child. In addition, his older brother Colin, whom Vince admired deeply, was to die needlessly of an infection. Refused admittance by two hospitals within striking distance of where his family was living, by the time the family had travelled to Adelaide, the infection was too set in to save him. Vince himself almost died as a teenager in the 1950s when he was refused admission at two hospitals, narrowly escaping death from appendicitis when a third hospital admitted him.

Eventually Vince and his family ended up in Alice Springs, where he came in contact with some other Indigenous boys home from holidays from St Francis in Adelaide. Established by Father Percy Smith, an Anglican clergyman, Vince begged his mother to be allowed to live in the home to further his education. Although Vince struggled with his academic learning, he excelled at sport. Vince held Father Smith in high regard. They remained friends for the rest of Smith's life, and Smith was to perform Vince's wedding. At one point, Vince notes that a number of ex-St Francis boys went on to obtain university

degrees and/or sporting success. However, he is not so complimentary about some of Smith's successors.

Another significant influence on Vince's life was Charlie Perkins, another St Francis boy, and the first Indigenous Australian to graduate from university. They worked closely from the 1960s until Charlie's death in 2000 to advance the cause of Indigenous Australians, actively lobbying politicians and other officials. Vince amusingly notes that in some instances Charlie got Vince involved in various initiatives at very short notice, such as the time they travelled together to Malaysia to meet Muhammad Ali, successfully encouraging him to visit Australia.

After leaving St Francis, Vince lived in a range of places, doing mainly manual labour. He also pursued sporting interests, and at one stage was part of the Fitzroy Football Club squad. However, he notes that the turning point was when he phoned Frank and Pat Joraslafsky, who farmed near Carramulka (where he had previously lived and worked), asking them if he could come and stay with them for a short time. Vince was accepted into the community, becoming not only a member of the football club, but also coaching it and leading it to premierships; hence he ended up





remaining in the district for a number of years. It was at this point in his life that he met his future wife, Brenda whom Vince acknowledges was an extraordinary woman. As a white woman, she was under no illusions when marrying an Indigenous man. They soon adopted a zero tolerance approach to racist behaviour such as real estate agents ripping up a completed rent application form.

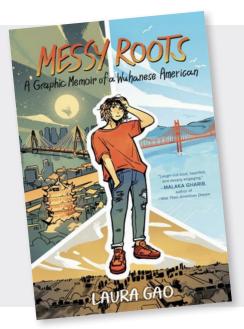
In the wake of the 1967 Referendum, Vince worked for a number of Aboriginal affairs bodies. Whilst working for some of them, he and his family lived in Adelaide, and whilst working for others, in Canberra. These various positions were to see him travel throughout Australia and overseas, advancing the cause of Indigenous Australians.

Despite the negative experiences described in the memoir, Vince maintained a positive outlook which pervades The Wonder of Little Things. A descendant of Tom Adams, the first European man to marry an Aboriginal woman, Kudnarto, in South Australia. Vince reflects on how different the lot of Indigenous people may have been and the way he was treated had society been more accepting of the Adams family. Towards the end of the work, Vince challenges readers to be more active in their efforts of reconciliation. Sadly, Vince died early in 2022, having just completed the manuscript with Lea McInerney.

The Wonder of Little Things is an engaging read. Whilst it could be used as a text for study by students in Years 10 and 11, it would probably be better suited as a wider reading book. Alternatively, sections of it could be used as mentor texts for creative writing units.







Messy Roots: A Graphic Memoir of a Wuhanese American

Reviewed by David Moore, Parade College

writer/ILLustrator: Laura Gao | publisher: HarperCollins Publishers, 2022, 272 pages | RRP: \$22.99

Laura Gao's graphic novel Messy Roots is an autobiography that traces one girl's journey from her infancy in Wuhan, China through to her early adulthood in USA. It is a poignant story that cleverly uses written and visual language to capture the challenges, confusion and joy of growing up in a migrant family in contemporary USA.

The story starts in Wuhan and introduces the reader to Gao's deep cultural and familial connections to her homeland. Idyllic pastoral drawings of rice paddies and sumptuous images of fried Chinese delicacies create an idealised view of China before the family is uprooted and transplanted to a small town in Texas. The America of Gao's childhood is a distant land with foreign customs and few Asian faces. And although the family gradually Americanises, they never fully assimilate. One farcical scene has a distressed Gao and her brother forced to play out a typical American Christmas Day scene of opening presents while their parents angrily direct the action from behind a video camera.

Messy Roots is, in some ways, a typical migrant story of someone who feels

alienated from their new country while disconnected from their home country. But it is also a coming-of-age story that includes many of the key adolescent moments such as the shame and confusion of the writer's first period, anxieties around body image, and awkward attempts to fit in with cool students at school.

This text could be used by teachers who wanted to explore issues of race and racism. Messy Roots has some examples of overt racism including offensive slurs and stereotypes, particularly in the direct aftermath of the discovery of the COVID-19 virus. But it also deals with some more nuanced examples, such as the writer's own internalised racism that she discovers when she moves to a more multicultural school in her senior years of high school. Gao is shocked to realise that some of her own perceptions of Asian-Americans are grounded in a form of prejudice, just like the bullies from her middle school.

The text could also be used as an exploration of sexuality as Gao comes to terms with her own queerness after she leaves to go to College.

To merely focus on themes is to ignore the richness of the drawings that make this text so gripping. The visual language is replete with symbolism that would reward students who look for meaning in the illustrations of the book, including the prominent symbolism of bridges that recur throughout the pages: a fitting symbol for someone who bridges two cultures.

Some of the recurring symbols, like the White Rabbit candy and the video game motif, are done cleverly and humorously. The White Rabbit, in particular, is a good example of the subversive tone of this text. Although the rabbit starts out as a fluffy bunny, the creature gradually grows into a violent, teeth-gnashing monster that plagues the insecure protagonist. Entire pages are covered in black background with only the white outline of the grotesque creature taunting Gao with threats like, 'So tell me, have you figured out what you are?' At another point, a parodic Ronald McDonald is drawn to resemble the clown of one's worst nightmares.

It is the visual language of this text that has the greatest potential for student engagement. I could imagine students and teachers having a lot of fun drawing their own fears and anxieties as anthropomorphised creatures. There could be a great deal of therapeutic value in giving shape to one's worst fears and revealing them for the empty threats that they often are.



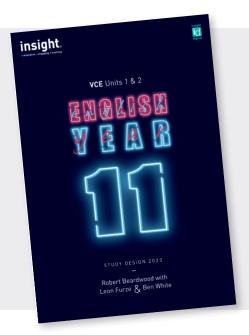
This text would be appropriate for a Year 9-10 classroom. Although there is occasional swearing and some references to sexual activity, it is usually indirect and never gratuitous. The humour throughout the text takes the edge off the most sensitive moments that some teachers might baulk at confronting in a classroom.

The text would be particularly appealing to Asian and queer students, but the coming-of-age themes of identity and belonging are so universal that most students would be able to relate to these concerns.

At 272 pages, with most of the page being taken up with visual language, students could comfortably read this text in a few hours. If not used as a set text, each secondary school library should have a copy of this in their collection for students who – like the young Gao – need to see their faces and experiences reflected in the texts around them.







Insight Year 11: VCE Units 1 & 2 – 2023 Study Design

Reviewed by Elizabeth Little, Christian College Geelong

WRITERS: Robert Beardwood with Leon Furze and Ben White | **PUBLISHER:** Insight Publications, 2022, 234 pages | **RRP:** \$44.95

The latest offering of the VCE English classroom textbooks from Insight provides a rich range of materials to be used by teachers and students. It is clearly organised and structured in a way that is approachable and useful. The four Areas of Study are reflected in the three sections of the book: reading and exploring texts; crafting texts; exploring argument.

In the Reading and Exploring Texts section, there are a number of activities on reading for meaning, discussing contexts and values and analysing the features of the texts. Without a set text list in Year 11, the activities have to be general in nature, and the authors have chosen to explore classics such as Romeo and Juliet, To Kill a Mockingbird, and Othello in the examples. Nevertheless, the examples and tasks are easily adaptable to individual schools' needs. Chapter 3, Features of Texts, provides content that I know I will regularly use in my classroom. The discussion of cinematography techniques and camera angles is always a go-to in my classroom.

The Exploring Argument section provides a range of sample texts that

could easily be used in classrooms. Time-poor teachers always appreciate a lesson that is ready to go, and this section of the book provides just that. With content on news articles, editorials, opinion pieces, and letters to the editors, there are ready-made discussion questions and analysis tasks to implement. The discussion of tone, and word choices and connotations will help push mid-level students to higher responses.

This section finds a challenge where many teachers do too – how to explore the construction of argument without focusing on the names of persuasive techniques. The five page table (pp. 195-199) of persuasive techniques manages to move beyond just naming them, and I always bring my students' focus to the second column - how it influences the audience. It is worth noting that students can get bogged down in memorising this content, and I do question its continued inclusion in text books for senior classrooms when this learning should have been addressed in Years 9 and 10.

Chapter 15 is dedicated to the new element in Exploring Argument – audio and audiovisual texts. The textbook provides QR codes to link students with examples from The Project, an ABC Podcast Australia, If You're Listening, an ad from Cancer Council Australia, and Greta Thunberg's speech at the 2021 Youth4Climate summit. These examples provide great starting points to introduce a range of audio and visual texts to students.

Perhaps of most interest will be the new Crafting Texts section, which provides activities to consider the audience, context, purpose, text types and key ideas of crafting texts before exploring how to actually craft a text. The annotated samples of texts are a highlight of this section. They provide students with clear examples of how to apply the knowledge being offered by the textbook.

Of course, the openness of the Study Design in Crafting Texts, which I believe to be its strength, places some limitations on the textbook's usefulness. While there are suggestions for mentor texts that could be used to explore key ideas, such as identity, nature or the past, it is evidently challenging to create in-depth tasks in this section. The ways different schools adapt their curriculum to include their mentor texts will be unique, and that is reflected in the depth of activities which are general in nature.

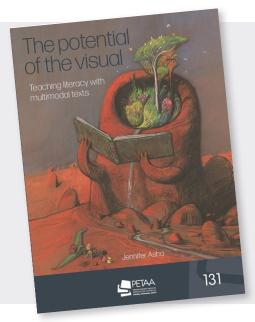




This book would be extremely useful for educators creating lessons and for students in classes. Teachers would find the lesson ideas and activities helpful in crafting their own lessons designs, or could easily implement the text books' use within lessons. Schools are always looking for ways to cut costs, but I believe including the Insight English textbook on book lists should continue to be a priority.







The Potential of the Visual: Teaching Literacy with Multimodal Texts

Reviewed by David Moore, Parade College

WRITER: Jennifer Asha | PUBLISHER: PETAA, 2022, 117 pages | RRP: \$39.95

Jennifer Asha's The Potential of the Visual: Teaching Literacy with Multimodal Texts is a teacher resource that focuses on strategies to explicitly teach visual literacy to primary school students. In an age when students are exposed to more and more visual information, this text is a timely resource to assist teachers in their planning and delivery of units on literacy.

Whereas literacy has been traditionally viewed as being concerned with the modes of reading and writing, this text reminds teachers of the importance of the mode of viewing. As educators, we often make the mistake of assuming that students can naturally 'read' visual texts, but like other modes of literacy: reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing, students need to be taught how to make sense of the visual language that pervades their world.

The teacher resource, at 117 pages, is short enough that it could be read in a few sittings, but it is also designed to be dipped into as needed. Part II of the text has sample lesson sequences organised by year level so that teachers can go directly to the section that has most relevance for them.

The guide is full of excellent pictures that illustrate the concepts being introduced in the written text. There is a wide variety of texts referred to throughout the guide, with an extensive reference list at the back. Asha has used many of the most popular children's books used in primary classrooms across the country, including texts by Bruce Pascoe, Anh Do and the peerless exponent of picture books, Shaun Tan. The texts used for illustrative purposes feature a high number of Australian creators, including Aboriginal voices, as well as some texts from overseas.

Asha bases her lesson sequences around existing pedagogical frameworks that would be familiar to Australian educators such as The Gradual Release of Responsibility model by Pearson and Gallagher, and by using the functional grammatical terms of Participant, Process and Circumstance. Throughout the text, Asha applies a framework she calls Critical Visual Literacy Practices as a way for teacher and student to make sense of a visual text. The four verbs at the centre of this framework - noticing, engaging, responding and critiquing guide the way readers interact with a visual text.

In addition to the wealth of helpful pictures, Asha includes some examples of sample dialogue to show how teachers might use the metalanguage being introduced in this text. The dialogue is authentic and helpful; it manages to convey difficult concepts in an age-appropriate way without sounding condescending or overly simplistic.

This text is principally designed for primary school teachers. Those who design curriculum at their school or are looking for new texts to introduce to their classes could get many ideas from the extensive list of multimodal texts throughout the book. Asha includes not only imaginative texts, but also informative and persuasive texts that many teachers may overlook. The text includes resources on film trailers, print advertisements, and short educational videos like World Vision's First 1000 Days that are rich in visual meaning for students to analyse.

Some lower-secondary teachers would find this text useful as well, particularly those who are teaching English, Media or Visual Communication. Preservice teachers, especially those who are teaching visual texts on a teaching round, would benefit significantly from this text.



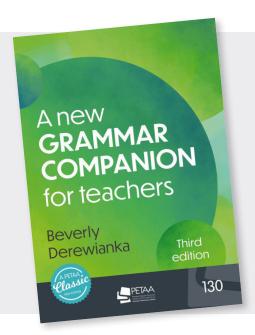


While the importance of explicit teaching of metalanguage is reinforced throughout this text, at times, the terminology is arguably too technical for a primary school classroom. The lack of a glossary at the back of the text also means that when visual literacy terms like 'offer' or 'demand' are used later in the text, it takes some investigation to find what these terms mean in this particular context.

Asha's The Potential of the Visual pays tribute to the richness of visual texts and reminds teachers of the central role images play in the lives of students in the twenty-first century.







A new Grammar Companion for teachers

(3rd edition)

Reviewed by Jennifer Shelton, Bendigo Senior Secondary College

WRITER: Beverly Derewianka | PUBLISHER: PETAA, 2022, 172 pages | RRP: \$39.95

Anyone who has been involved in teaching English in this country for any length of time is probably familiar with the name and work of Beverly Derewianka. She has been working in the field of language education for at least forty years and has been involved in the development of curriculum in Australia and internationally for some of that time. Today she is Emeritus Professor at the University of Wollongong. All this is to say that she knows what she is talking about.

This book makes it clear from the outset that it is not intended to be a complete guide to English grammar. Rather, it contains a comprehensive overview of the grammar used in schools. It begins with a solid and functional definition that for the purposes of this book, grammar is defined as how a language (English) works to make meaning. Even better than that, in my view, is the rationale for why we learn about grammar: '... to be able to reflect on how the English language works, to be able to use language effectively, appropriately and accurately, to understand how different kinds of meaning are created through the use of different grammatical forms so we can control and shape those

meanings more skilfully and effectively, to critically analyse texts so we can understand how grammar has been used to achieve certain effects, to examine patterns of language and word choices so we can appreciate, interpret and create well-constructed texts and to have a shared language for teaching and learning about the main features of the English language.' (p. 1).

In short, this book is a tool to help any, and all teachers to be empowered to know the relevant grammar to further empower our students to write, to analyse, to understand and to use our language powerfully and with some level of skill. The introduction goes on to direct teachers needing help to specific parts of the book so that little time would be wasted studying every chapter if you need information about meaning or form for example. You can dip into and out of chapters, exploring relationships between meaning and form with quite specific 'troubleshooting' boxes that highlight areas where students might encounter challenges.

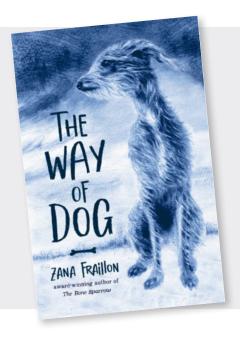
Derewianka offers hints and tips, also pointing out things such as teacher's 'correction' mindset that can so easily become a mountain in front of us. She focuses on Functional Grammar as it arises from Michael Halliday's work in the Systemic Functional Linguistics

field. This essentially keeps us looking at language in context and how that language helps us all to function successfully in our daily lives at school and in our communities.

This is not a book that all students necessarily need for personal use. although I can imagine some (albeit rare ones) wanting it. It is, though, something that I think every teacher everywhere should have access to. It provides clear and well broken-down information on the aspects of language we are teaching and learning regularly. There are even sections where she points out how we might monitor the use of key points of learning. I say it would be useful for all teachers, not because every teacher might want or need to teach a specific part of grammar but because I think we could all improve our own use of language, and this would be one of the best references I have ever accessed.

What lifts this book over others, for me, is simply that it is relevant to the kind of grammar work teachers use all the time. There is no excess information, no totally obscure and barely used points of grammar covered and it is written in plain, clear and therefore powerful and effective language that even someone who did not learn grammar at school can use to teach English and EAL.





The Way of Dog

Reviewed by Jennifer Shelton, Bendigo Senior Secondary College

WRITER: Zana Fraillon | **Publisher:** University of Queensland Press, 2022, 272 pages | **RRP:** \$16.99

I have not seen myself as a dog person to any great extent before but reading this amazing verse novel, I believe I have some insights and a better understanding now. Zana Fraillon has told a very real story from the point of view of Scruffity, a puppy from a tired mother in a puppy farm. We see him grow and learn the ways of cats, rats, shoelegs, Manpups, foxes and BigCity dog packs as we do as well.

Scruffity learns the ways of the world through a range of experiences and in the process we gain some insider knowledge of what it might mean to be a dog: to belong, to be hurt, to share and to have hope. We learn a lot about the importance of schnuffles to a dog, and to us as well. Fraillon has created some great words that describe or show us the different point of view of a dog here. You do not need definitions because it is as if we know them already but have not used them in a while.

The use of verse in the story is critical – we need no more words than what we have before us, and the pacing helps to build suspense or drama or to emphasise emotion and feelings. We are drawn right into the dog's world.

At times it is almost lyrical, gentle and soft, at others harsh and insistent but my favourite is possibly when it becomes rap-like.

'Just tasting each trace on the Wind as it passes

rolling in Grasses all full up of Flowers

schnuffling the tumbling towers of Trees

sound-snatching the whispers that call on the Breeze

pouncing on Creepers that skattle and skittle

bouncing in each and

every little

puddle

again and again and again ...' (p. 59).

Or, describing an incident with the BigCityDogs:

'The Leader of The Pack is

Not fooled by a patchy old Fox

Who has decided to be

A diversion

a distraction

the main attraction

for a Pack who just wants something

furry

to attack.' (p. 149).

Ultimately though, Scruffity keeps learning and growing physically and mentally as well. He encounters the best and worst of humanity along with parts of the animal kingdom.

Not only are Fraillon's words special, but Sean Buckingham's illustrations add another level right from the paw pad prints at the start. They reinforce the gentle nature of the story throughout. His drawings of Scruffity show a dog that so perfectly fits his name and allows us to 'see' the dog as the adventures unfold.

I would make use of this book at a few levels. It would work well and be accessible to middle years students of all abilities – dog lovers or not.

Teaching at senior level now, it would not seem to be the most likely text to use. With English as an Additional Language students, though, this makes a good option for looking at language. The made-up words, the pacing, the way the words take up space on the page and the illustrations all make for learning opportunities in a light but very meaningful and relatable way.

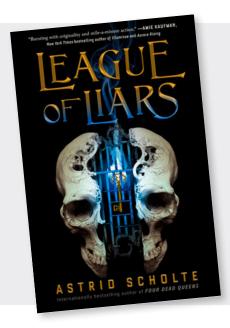


The Way of Dog introduces people to issues relating to mental health, domestic violence, homelessness and authority in a positive and nonjudgemental way, demonstrating that the way of dog has much to teach us.

If nothing else, The Way of Dog is purely and simply a great read. It is a different experience for anyone who has not read many verse novels but once you let go and get into Scruffity's world, you will experience a story that is unique and engaging on so many levels.







League of Liars

Reviewed by Melissa Wray, Newcomb Secondary College

WRITER: Astrid Scholte | PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin, 2022, 432 pages | RRP: \$19.99

Astrid Scholte's third novel League of Liars takes us on a journey of mystery and intrigue with extra-dimensional magic included. It is told through alternating points of view between Cayder, Jey, Leta and Princess Eleanora – although it is mostly told by Cayder who is the link between all of the characters. Through the alternate points of view, the reader learns more about each character's background and current situation, but never too much that it makes it easy to guess what happens next. In fact, this approach keeps the reader guessing until the very end. Scholte's ability to squeeze out just enough information for the reader is exceptional.

League of Liars has strong, well-rounded leading characters each with their own secrets and motives. Cayder lives in Telene and is on a one-way track to studying law and working in the criminal system as a prosecutor. He is young and ambitious and determined to carve out a career, even with the strong disapproval of his father. Studying under the guidance of an old family friend, Cayder meets their first client, Jey.

Jey is a young person of similar age to Cayder who is accused of killing his father through the use of Edem, a substance forbidden to be used by anyone. It is a charge he confesses to willingly. Jey is charming, confident and unrepentant for his crimes, regardless of the seriousness of his crime and possible life sentence. He is also hiding something of great significance.

Leta is Cayder's sister who, after the death of their mother years before, becomes obsessed with understanding Edem better, until one day she finds herself in the very prison where Cayder works, on the charge of mass murder through the use of Edem. She soon finds herself looking at life in prison even though she claims her innocence in the matter. Cayder immediately becomes involved in helping to defend his sister, but she is not being completely truthful with him.

Princess Eleanora is a high-profile prisoner accused of murdering her brother, the King of Telene, with the use of Edem. She pleads her innocence on the charges but nobody is listening, until Cayder steps in to help. Three separate charges, three separate cases, three people from different lives; that is, until Cayder becomes involved, desperately trying to put all the pieces together for

all three clients. But time is running out and all appeals are being quashed. Soon Cayder will have to take desperate measures to do what needs to be done.

League of Liars is full of twists and turns. It is a world where Edem-based crime is punishable by life in prison. The world building and detail makes it easy to imagine each character's life before being incarcerated. With a sense of the supernatural mixed with science fiction, it is realistic enough to keep the storyline grounded with a smattering of magical realism thrown in. This makes for a delightful combination of storytelling.

Readers will enjoy getting to know all the characters through the multiple point -of-view style of writing. But most of all they will want to keep reading until the very end to uncover the truth of each of the accused.

League of Liars is suitable for the 12+ age group.







The Seven Skins of Esther Wilding

Reviewed by Sophia Marsden-Smith, Geelong Grammar School

WRITER: Holly Ringland | **PUBLISHER:** HarperCollins Publishers, 2022, 560 pages | **RRP:** \$32.99

The Seven Skins of Esther Wilding is Holly Ringland's second novel after her stellar debut. The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart, Esther Wilding is the titular protagonist of Ringland's novel as she embarks on a quest to find out what happened to her beloved older sister Aura. Aura was last seen walking into the Tasmanian sea when she disappeared, her clothes neatly folded but left abandoned on the beach. The last words anyone heard from Aura was her calling out Esther's name.

The novel begins a year after this tragic event where Esther drove homewards as 'light was painfully golden'. Esther and her family are struggling profoundly with Aura's death and want to understand her motivations, so they enlist Esther to go to Denmark with the help of Aura's diary which contains the seven fairy tales of her, alongside seven cryptic verses that Aura had secretly tattooed onto her body. The girls' native homeland is on their mother's side and was the last place Aura was in when she was happy. Esther's travels

take her from Lutruwita, Tasmania to Copenhagen, to the Faroe Islands, following the trail of Aura's stories she left behind. In doing so, Esther comes to terms with her vices, grief and loss, ultimately finding love and joy in life again.

This a deeply poignant novel showing the power of sisterly love and illustrating how wearing your heart on your skin (paraphrased from Sylvia Plath), you can transform your life from grief and sorrow to find joy and love. Another beautiful aspect of this novel is the power of mythology, enhancing the novel's luminosity and shedding light on Esther, Aura and Sophus' relationship.

This novel can certainly have uses in the English classroom from Year 10 upwards, using some of the chapters to explore the Creating and Crafting Texts unit under the themes of grief, joy and love, coming of age, journeys etc. The parts that can be specific to this unit are: 'The First Skin: Death' (chapters 1 and 4); for hope there is 'The Seventh Skin: Homecoming' (chapters 43, 44, 47 and 53). For redemption, there are chapters 45 and 46. The limitations of this novel, despite its strengths, are that it comes

with many trigger warnings, including: sex, suicide, abuse, rape, miscarriage and death. It also would not be a strong enough text to set as a text response, too, without the literary depth.

This novel could also be made available in senior school libraries for students from Year 10 and upwards, as well as for English teachers to read as a resource and a contemporary novel by a talented female Australian author. It offers important lessons about the ability to learn to live with deep grief when we find hope, love and acceptance of those we have lost.





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