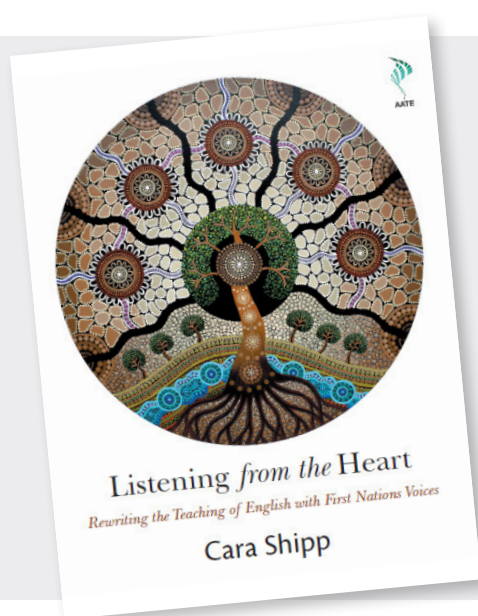




VATE member book reviews

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Listening from the Heart – Rewriting the Teaching of English with First Nations Voices

Reviewed by Anna Carrig, Northcote High School

WRITER: Cara Shipp | PUBLISHER: AATE, 2023, 150 pages | RRP: \$39.95

NB: All page references are from *Listening from the Heart*.

A former First Nations colleague of mine once shared with me a story that one of his Uncles used to tell him, that the reason we have two ears and only one mouth is because we should spend double the time listening than talking. It's a story that stayed with me and seems to resonate with the message of Cara Shipp's book about listening to First Nations voices.

Cara Shipp is an experienced English teacher with Wiradjuri and Welsh heritage, and her book *Listening from the Heart – Rewriting the Teaching of English with First Nations Voices* is a timely resource for **all** English teachers. The book supports teachers to engage in their own personal development as well as build their cultural competence on First Nations perspectives. It also equips English teachers with practical strategies for embedding First Nations Voices into the classroom. The strength of this book as a teacher resource is that it skilfully strikes this balance, offering broad principles and provocations for consideration as well as practical resources and recommendations.

In her introduction, Shipp invites teachers to adjust their approach by taking time to slow down and authentically connect with a First Nations worldview. Shipp discusses the concept of 'dadirri', which is a word from the Ngan'gikurunggurr and Ngen'giwumirri languages which refers to practices of deep listening, quiet reflection, stillness and patience (Ungunmerr, 1988, p. 1). She also discusses 'Yindyamarra', a word from the Wiradjuri (NSW) language meaning 'respect, be gentle, be polite and do slowly'. 'Dadirri' and 'Yindyamarra' are invitations for teachers to begin listening to First Nations voices within their English classrooms.

Shipp discusses the emergence of First Nations voices in literary spaces as involving processes of writing and rewriting. She explains the necessity for a rewriting by describing how writing and English were imposed as the coloniser's mode of communication and were designed to diminish First Nations voices. She therefore positions how First Nations writers today often use their writing to subvert English Literature and reclaim control over how their stories and identities are told. (Heiss, 2009, p. 4) Shipp invites readers to let the book be 'part of [their] listening

journey', implying that this should be the beginning of a longer process towards greater cultural competency.

The book is immensely practical, working as a touchpoint to a wealth of reliable resources linked by QR codes, catering to the needs of a wide range of teachers and their contexts. The first chapter focuses on terminology. One of the most practical resources within the book is the 'authenticity scale' which aids English teachers and faculties to review their text lists and select new texts with a critical literacy approach. Chapter two focuses on important protocols for working with First Nations perspectives and includes links to fiction texts that support positive, strength-based representations. Chapter Three provides tips on the historical and social contexts students would need to understand to engage with First Nations authors and Chapter Four goes into greater depth about First Nations worldviews, such as expanded discussions of the concept of The Dreaming, Country and different conceptions of time. Chapter Five looks at language in First Nations texts which may be of particular interest to VCE English Language teachers and includes useful links to perspectives on Aboriginal English, creoles and Kriol as well as



the Gambay First Languages Map and texts that feature First languages or Aboriginal English in interesting ways.

Chapter Six looks at the qualities of a culturally responsive classroom. Within this chapter Shipp proposes a 'two-way' approach, which situates learning within both an Anglo-Australian and Aboriginal cultural context, thus not allowing the Anglo-Australian content to be the 'invisible' default, dominant perspective. Shipp moves into a discussion of a multidisciplinary approach which is also the focus of Chapter Seven. Chapter Eight briefly touches upon genre with a focus on the emerging breadth and merits of speculative fiction. The final chapter is FAQs, in which teachers have posed questions at recent conferences and workshops and a panel of First Nations educators have published their responses. Simply reading these questions and answers would be great professional development for an English faculty as it may quell some commonly held fears or anxieties of teachers as well as offer advice on how to navigate the teaching for First Nations perspectives in a respectful and informed way.

'Stories and storytelling and storytellers are a part of our ancient past, part of our dynamic present and about making our futures for our continuation as people of the world's oldest living cultures.'

—Associate Professor Sandra Phillips, Wakka Wakka, Gooreng Gooreng academic, State Library of Queensland, 2022 (p. 83).

This book calls upon English teachers to ensure these stories are shared in our classrooms and that when they are that we listen to these voices deeply and from the heart.



We Could Be Something

Reviewed by David Moore, Parade College

WRITER: Will Kostakis | PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin, 2023, 416 pages | RRP: \$19.99

We Could Be Something is Will Kostakis's latest novel which explores the joys of love and the bitterness of separation. The story is told from two perspectives that seem to uncannily echo each other, though the connection between the two of them is not clear until the closing stages of the book.

One of the narrators, Harvey, is a seventeen-year-old who moves to Sydney with his father and starts working in his grandmother's café. The other narrator, Sotiris, is a prodigious writer whose muse has left now that he is comfortably in a relationship with Jem, a young employee at a bookstore.

While it is common for many stories nowadays to have a queer character, or even a queer protagonist, not many stories have the majority of the main cast as queer. *We Could Be Something* immerses the reader in this world from the first chapter, where young Harvey is woken by one of his fathers rifling through his son's wardrobe announcing, 'I'm leaving your father' as he frantically packs his son's bag.

Harvey, who we soon learn is also gay, is caught in the middle of his parents' dispute, which reveals the very worst traits of both of his fathers. His 'Ba' is callous and immature, and his 'Dad' is spineless, even to the point of driving his soon-to-be ex-spouse to the airport so that he can flee to the other side of the country.

These unpleasant traits persist throughout the book, and seventeen-year-old Harvey is witness to all of them. In one mortifying scene, Ba's Grindr alerts go off during dinner while his ex-spouse – who has flown across the country to attempt to rekindle the relationship – holds naively on to the belief that they can go back to how things were.

This is a story with very obvious queer themes, including denial, secrecy, a coming-out scene and first sexual encounters, but the tensions at the centre of this novel are universal. Harvey is a young man with parents who are separating, a great-grandmother who is suffering from dementia and a domineering grandmother who is struggling to deal with a flagging café and a messy family life. Many readers, regardless of sexuality, would identify with the problems that Harvey is facing.

How do you preserve a sense of family when your parents have separated? How do you maintain an elderly family member's dignity while depriving them of their independence?

The heaviness of the themes is offset by humour, especially around Greek stereotypes. Harvey's grandmother, Gina, has a sharp tongue and a strong backhand, and Harvey's *proyiayia* (great-grandmother) neurotically insists on packing six rolls toilet paper wherever they travel.

Readers familiar with some of Kostakis's other work might recognise some familiar themes in this text. Like *Sidekicks*, which is book-listed in several schools as a middle-years set text for English, *We Could Be Something* explores the contemporary world of young queer characters in Sydney. If there was any doubt that Kostakis was engaging in autofiction, the constant Greek phrases peppered throughout the story should settle that matter.

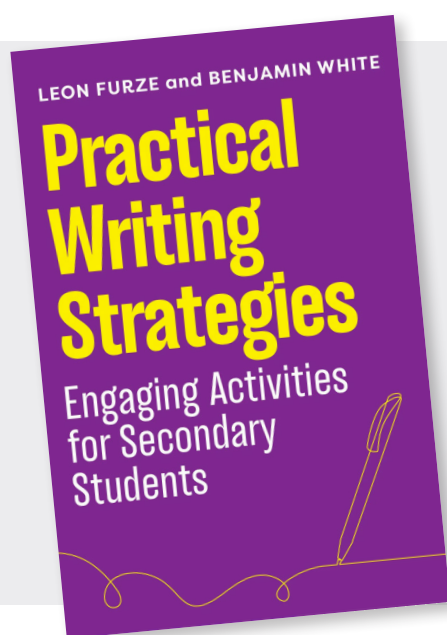
Kostakis resists the temptation to tidily resolve the tensions in this novel. It is not clear how *Proyiayia*'s final days battling dementia play out. Nor is it clear whether Harvey will end up in a long-term relationship with Brad. In fact, the



novel's disinterest in classifying Harvey as gay/bisexual/whatever is a refreshing commentary on the fluidity of sexuality.

This text would be appropriate for readers from Year 9 upwards. Although there are allusions to sex, there are never any explicit references to sexual activity. There are occasions where characters wake up in the same bed, and some chapters that end tantalisingly, like when one character reaches for another person's belt buckle, but nothing ever too graphic. For some teachers and schools, these allusions would be perfectly harmless; for others, it might be uncomfortable territory.

This text would be a good inclusion in any school library and should be on prominent display during IDAHOBIT Day or other days that celebrate inclusivity.



Practical Writing Strategies: Engaging Activities for Secondary Students

Reviewed by Lauren Maserow, McKinnon Secondary College

WRITERS: Leon Furze and Benjamin White | **PUBLISHER:** Amba Press, 2023, 170 pages | **RRP:** \$39.95

Leon Furze is a well-known name amongst the English teaching community, and with good reason. Along with his co-writer, Benjamin White, Furze has produced an excellent guide for teaching the craft of writing to secondary students of all ages. With the new English VCE Curriculum currently being rolled out in Year 11 and the new Year 12 Study Design starting next year, this is a timely publication and one I recommend purchasing for your English Department.

In the early part of the book, Furze and White comment that often teachers hand out a task and then tell students to 'start planning' their writing without giving much more guidance than that. To combat this, they came up with the Writing Cycle which 'maps out [the] stages of the process, avoiding the temptation typical to education to skip straight from purpose (you need to write an essay) to publication (please submit the essay).' The stages are split into Pre-Writing, During Writing, and Post-Writing and are comprised of Purpose, Exploration, Ideas, Skills, Collaboration and Publication.

The book is divided into two parts; the first part explaining the Writing Cycle and the second part showing how the Writing Cycle can be used as part of a broader unit, providing two approaches for constructing a unit of work around the cycle. As aforementioned, the VCE English Study Design is in the process of changing and these changes are largely centered around 'crafting' and 'creating' texts. What this book does well is it equips teachers with a clear idea of how they might help students access and demystify the writing process and it is practicable across all year levels, not just VCE. In fact, the Writing Cycle is able to be applied across a range of subjects, and not just the Humanities-based ones either! In one of the later chapters, the writers provide examples of how it could be used in Geography, Music and Languages.

Furze has been encouraging teachers to move away from formulaic TEEL paragraph writing for a number of years. What often prevents educators from doing this, however, is the lack of time to create new resources. This book does much of the hard work by providing a large selection of practical activities for teachers to run with their classes. Each activity comes with Teacher Instructions

and Student Instructions as well as an example, and reflect and extend activities. While the book does indeed provide 'practical writing strategies', it is also useful in teaching critical thinking skills as students are led to reflect on language choices and build connections between words and ideas. Students are also encouraged to develop their own writer's voice and become more comfortable with drafting and the overall process rather than striving for perfection in the first attempt.

Throughout the book, Furze and White stress that 'writing isn't done in isolation', and the focus is on providing us (the teachers) with the necessary tools (including the notorious AI!) to help students become more confident and competent writers. If you are looking to inject some thoughtful and engaging activities into your lessons as you teach the craft of writing, then this is a worthy investment.



Inkflower

Reviewed by Michelle Maglitto, Fintona Girls' School

WRITER: Suzy Zail | PUBLISHER: Walker Books Australia, 2023, 384 pages | RRP: \$22.99

A gritty, poignant yet hopeful young adult novel that explores the personal journeys of both sixteen-year-old Lisa and her father. Weaving back and forth between 1944 and 1982 allows for the dual first-person narrative to explore the importance of family, identity, survival and acceptance across generations. Inspired by the experiences of the author's father during the Holocaust, this book is a heart-wrenching homage to Zail's father and to all survivors of the Holocaust. In fact, the heroism and capacity to endure in the face of extreme adversity exhibited through the characters in the novel serves as a tribute to all people worldwide who have maintained or who continue to maintain hope and their humanity despite the persecution they experience.

The story starts with the seemingly innocuous words 'There are a mountain of lessons you learn at school ... you commit them to memory because you want to survive' (p. 1). Then, using the first-person narrative voice of Lisa, the

reader is exposed to the realities of being an Australian teenager at Glenrock Secondary School in 1982, navigating the confusing world of adolescence and school. Presenting itself as a typical young adult story where the teenage protagonist describes her teenage angst, her first relationship with a boy called Adam, the dreamy heart-throb, and her escapades with her best friend, vivacious Deb, the reader is falsely led to believe this story will follow the typical trajectory of the young adult fiction genre. However, in the second chapter we, along with Lisa, are catapulted into shock as we learn that Lisa's father has a terminal illness, and he may be dead within six months. Following this confronting revelation, we discover that he lived through the Holocaust and survived Auschwitz. It is at this point that the true significance of the opening lines of the story are made apparent. Like Lisa, the reader is propelled into a journey of truth-telling, as Lisa's father candidly recounts his harrowing childhood experiences as a Jewish boy living during the Nazi regime of 1930s and 40s Europe. Within this new context, the true meaning of survival is explored and established. This is not your typical young adult fiction novel; it is so much more!

Following his diagnosis with motor neuron disease and the revelation he only has six months left to live, Lisa's father decides to tell his family about his past; a past he has, until that moment, kept secret. The first-person narrative voice engenders an intimacy that allows us front row seats to Lisa's father's story as it's being told. Along with Lisa, her older brothers and her mother, we, gather every Friday night for the newly established ritual around dinner time, as we learn about the horrors of Auschwitz and how Lisa's father maintained his humanity even when the Nazi regime was designed to destroy Jewish culture, identity and existence through mass extermination. We are afforded inspiring lessons from Tante, Lisa's grandfather. While she never gets to meet him in person, through her father's recounts, Lisa gets to forge a spiritual connection with her paternal grandfather every Friday night for six months in 1982.

Added to this, Lisa's father's identity, as Emil, is revealed. Through his disclosures, Lisa's identity is challenged. Over the six-month period she grapples with learning that she is Jewish, her father is a Holocaust survivor, and he only has six months to live. She will be fatherless. Feelings of frustration, anger,

fear and confusion ensue. The roller coaster of emotions Lisa faces become the reader's own, and we marvel how Emil never 'lost sight of who [he was]' when the Nazi regime sought to obliterate his identity and personhood. We learn how he retained his humanity in Auschwitz, encouraged by his father, Tatte, to remember that a person's heart is a metaphor for '... where your memories [reside] and your sense of right and wrong live[s] ...' (p. 95).

Inkflower's applicability in the secondary English classroom is unquestionable. I would recommend this novel for Year 9 and Year 10 students, as either a class text or as a mentor text in a crafting texts unit exploring ideas around identity, survival, experiences of conflict and/or intergenerational family connections.

This young adult novel is most appropriate for these year levels as there are mature and at times confronting themes addressed in it that are most suited to an upper middle secondary readership. While this is a fictional account, insofar as the main protagonist Lisa, her friends and family are not actual people, the experiences of her father are based on real historical events. Zail has been meticulous in ensuring that the account of the Holocaust experience explored in the novel is historically accurate. Thus, this text could be used meaningfully in a Year 9 or 10 History class as well.

Ultimately, it is a story of hope as the story ends with Lisa describing, '... a light burning bright, deep inside [her] ...'. Like Lisa, we are all connected to the past by the stories of our ancestors as '... the past, the future and the right now, [are] all rolled into one' (p. 369).



Project Nought

Reviewed by David Moore, Parade College

WRITER/ILLUSTRATOR: Chelsey Furedi | PUBLISHER: HarperCollins, 2023, 336 pages | RRP: \$24.99

Chelsey Furedi's *Project Nought* is a science fiction graphic novel about a young man who loses consciousness at the end of the twentieth century and wakes up in the year 2122. The text explores the traumas of time travel, and changing social attitudes to gender and sexuality.

The story starts in New Zealand in 1996 with the main character, Ren, reading a letter from his pen pal, Georgia. Illustrated with a sepia tone, this section of the text is full of 1990's imagery that some students would recognise from television or their parents' photographs. There are answering machines, phone books and the unmistakable middle part that topped the head of most adolescent school-boys.

It is clear that Ren is feeling a bit lost at this moment in his life: his school-mates are bullying him, his plans for his post-school life are unclear, and his parents – who tellingly do not physically appear in any of the illustrations – are considering sending him across the country to stay with an aunt as a way to get him away from his computer games.

To lift himself out of this malaise, Ren summons the courage to hop on a

bus and visit his 'Ren pal' Georgia on the other side of the country. Halfway through the journey, Ren loses consciousness and wakes up in what looks like a sterile hospital ward in 2122. These scenes, dominated by blues and greys, then explain that Ren has travelled over a hundred years into the future.

Known as 'SUBJECT 350' Ren is assigned to a young man named Mars who will complete school assignments on the 1990s drawing on his subject's experiences. Mars' interest in Ren is obsessive. The exaggerated body language, bright colours and repeated use of exclamation marks from Mars all seem to unsettle Ren, who by contrast has understated clothes, dialogue, and body language. Furedi has drawn Mars in a different style to the other characters: he is more like an androgynous character from a Japanese manga. Mars' obsession is soon revealed to be romantic and thus begins the love story that runs throughout the text.

The year 2122 is far more accepting than 1990s. The text has numerous queer relationships as well as characters like Jia who use the 'they/them' pronouns. Whereas science fiction often explores the many ways that society can go wrong, in this way at least, the

text is optimistic about how humans will treat each other in the future. It is pleasing, also, to see the many different representations of queer people that go beyond mere stereotypes. Alongside Mars' flamboyantly camp personality are characters like Ren who do not outwardly present as being recognisably gay.

The text does a good job of presenting healthy behaviours in the relationships modelled by the characters. When Ren tries to explain why he rejected some of Mars' initial romantic advances, Mars tells him, 'Ren, it's okay. You don't have to give reasons for things you don't want to do.' There are also positive representations of a diverse range of people of different races, genders, sexualities, body shapes and levels of disability.

Project Nought is full of traditional science fiction tropes like time travel, cloning and robotic animals. Reading this text, I found myself looking at some of the other illustrations and wondering whether people will still be using mobile phones and computers with keyboards in 2122, and whether rock bands will still comprise guitars, keyboards and microphones. Perhaps they will, but it seems more doubtful that youths in 2122 will be using contemporary slang



like 'macking' for kissing or 'stanning' for obsessing over. I suppose this sort of speculation is part of the fun of reading science fiction.

The text presents some interesting ideas that could be explored in a classroom. Would you, for instance, want to know what happened to yourself in a different dimension? Would you behave differently if you thought all of your thoughts would be wiped?

This text would be most appropriate for students in Year 7 or Year 8. It would be particularly good for an English class where they are doing a genre study on science fiction – excerpts could be used to prompt students into predicting what aspects of the text are likely to be true and what aspects are likely to be false.

Project Nought is funny and engaging; it would be a good addition to a school library for students in lower secondary school.



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

1/134-136 Cambridge St
Collingwood VIC 3066

www.vate.org.au