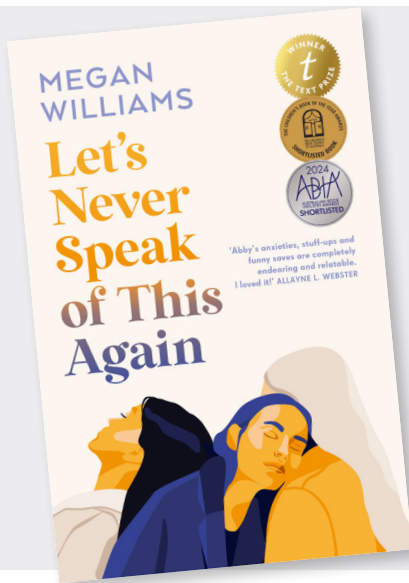


The background of the entire page is a vibrant orange-red color. It is filled with numerous stylized, 3D-rendered books of various sizes and orientations. The books are depicted in shades of orange and red, with some showing white pages. They are scattered across the frame, creating a sense of depth and abundance. The lighting is soft, giving the books a realistic yet slightly ethereal appearance.

# VATE member book reviews

April 2024



# Let's Never Speak of This Again

Reviewed by Melanie Van Langenberg

WRITER: Megan Williams | PUBLISHER: Text Publishing, 2023, 224 pages | RRP: \$24.99

**'... every now and then I have this gut reaction where I wish bad luck or disappointment on someone I love ... I worry that these thoughts reflect my true self. I worry that I'm a jealous and petty person who only pretends to be kind. I worry that it's only a matter of time before I slip and say what I really think before I can stop myself. I worry that when my friends find out who I really am, they won't like me.'**

The teenage concerns of *Let's Never Speak of This Again's* Abby will resonate with many within its target audience. As a 16-year-old Year 10 student, she navigates complicated family, friend and romantic relationships and the expected trials of growing up. She has a stable friendship group with whom she has strong bonds, however, this equilibrium is weakened when a new student, Chloe, starts at their school. Most at threat is the special dynamic and favouritism she shares with her best friend, Ella. The usual comfort of her family life is also being unsettled with rising conflict with her mother, and with her Meema's (grandmother's) ailing health. The central premise of the novel, however, explores the angst

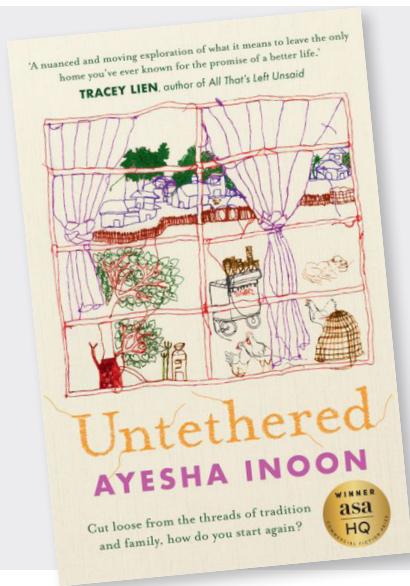
and confusion that ensues following a tragedy for which Abby feels some abstract responsibility.

The novel's strengths lie in Williams' characterisation of Abby. Though she makes expected mistakes, and sometimes lacks good judgement in her choices, Abby is portrayed as a young person with good intentions. She is earnest in her attempts to navigate life's many obstacles, obstacles that appear insurmountable, particularly in adolescence. Of note is Abby's self-reflective nature, one that seemed mature, generous and forgiving of those around her. Her ability to empathise with the experiences and motives of those she may be in disagreement with is commendable, as are her attempts to improve herself based on the things she admires in others. When unsure of how to assert herself and be more sociable, she remembers the way she observes that the new girl Chloe 'volunteers lots of information'. Following an argument with her mother, Abby thinks back to why her mother may have said or responded in the manner she did, and the rationale for the decision that caused unrest. Williams also portrays Abby as a young person striving to be honourable, as seen when she forsakes an interstate trip to see a concert

with friends, instead prioritising her commitment to her netball team. Abby transforms from someone reliant on the approval and acceptance of her peers, to someone open to uncertainty and new opportunities. She can say 'I don't care that my best friend doesn't tell me anything and I may not even be her best friend anymore' and 'feel good'. She can feel 'energised rather than exhausted' at 'spending time with other people', something that once would have been nerve-wracking for her.

Though delivering a compelling story, some of the novel's limitations exist in a variety of structural choices. Williams has not divided her narrative into chapters, instead using subheadings to segment the various ideas and to shift between plot points. The wording of the subheadings seems arbitrary and occasionally thoughtless, at times undermining the intended pathos and emotion of the narrative. The title of the novel also feels incongruous with the central premise and the narrative's driving action. The novel takes its title from the subheading preceding a moment in the story that is frivolous and an eventual joke, which makes the choice to use it as the title for a book about grief and coming-of-age a curious one.

*Let's Never Speak of This Again* would be most suitable as a recommendation for wide reading, with 16-year-old girls the audience most likely to enjoy and connect with Abby's story. Some readers may feel affronted by some of the content, particularly the normalised excessive underage drinking. Other content includes: coarse language, drug use, and discussions of sex, consent and virginity. For the novel to be considered for study, teachers may desire greater sophistication and complexity in its style and ideas. Ultimately, this novel is compelling and introduces readers to a sympathetic and endearing protagonist.



# Untethered

Reviewed by Melissa Wray, Newcomb Secondary College

WRITER: Ayesha Inoon | PUBLISHER: HarperCollins Publishers, 2023, 320 pages  
| RRP: \$32.99

**Untethered is a compelling read that draws the reader in from the beginning. It draws partially on the author's own experiences for this debut novel. Zia has grown up in a loving and supportive, but very traditional Muslim family in Sri Lanka. Whilst she does what is expected of her, secretly she has big dreams for her future; dreams that deep down can never be achieved because of the traditions and expectations placed upon a Muslim girl. When it comes time, Zia agrees to a traditionally arranged marriage to Rashid, a man she barely knows.**

Zia's life in Sri Lanka is a privileged one, with strong links to and support from her loving family. Rashid is a successful man who is very capable of supporting them financially. After the initial ceremony and some trepidation, Zia settles into married life with her new husband as they try to get to know one another, and maybe even fall in love. As Zia starts to understand her new role and the expectations that this brings, she also still wonders if she can achieve some of the things she would like to.

With hints of political unrest in the country, the story really picks up once Zia and Rashid migrate to Australia with their young child. It doesn't take long for them to realise that the new life in Australia they had imagined, is quite different to their new reality. Inoon writes with a delicate balance of tenderness, wonder and sadness as she shares Zia's challenge to adjust and accept her new environment. The storytelling is exquisite to read, in fact, it is hard to believe this is a debut novel. Zia is forced to make decisions that push her way outside her comfort zone. Conversations with strangers, making new friends, changing her clothes style from traditional to modern, and learning to drive a car – all experiences Zia could have avoided but chooses not to.

At times, *Untethered* is told from both Zia's point of view, and then that of her husband, Rashid. Whilst this pattern is not consistent throughout the book, it does offer a glimpse into the mind of Zia's husband. Rashid's character is portrayed in such a way that it is hard to decide if he is very difficult to live with or just misunderstood by his moods and actions. It is his dark moods that eventually force Zia to question the future she desires and the life she wants

to live. In Australia, Zia has choices she never would have had in Sri Lanka.

Whilst the characters in the story are of a more mature age, the themes within the story would generate much discussion for teenagers. Zia encapsulates a young woman on a journey of discovery from a life she should live, to a life she has to decide if she wants to live. Her strength of character to overcome adversity is admirable. Her battle with family and cultural traditions and expectations is one with which some readers might be able to connect strongly.

This novel would provide students with many opportunities for discussing a variety of topics: tradition, love, loyalty, grief, independence, and resilience, to name a few.

*Untethered* is suitable for the 16+ age group.





# The Visitors

Reviewed by Michael E. Daniel, Camberwell Grammar School

WRITER: Jane Harrison | PUBLISHER: HarperCollins Publishers, 2023, 304 pages  
| RRP: \$32.99

The lives of First Nations people were changed irrevocably when the First Fleet arrived at Sydney Cove in late January, 1788. Indigenous writer Jane Harrison explores the Aboriginal reaction to the arrival of the First Fleet. A substantial portion of the plot focuses on a meeting of elders and others representing the various Nations in the vicinity of Sydney Cove, as they debate how they should respond to the strangers' arrival. Whilst the account itself is fictional, there is an air of authenticity to the deliberations, as the various characters try to understand the visitors' equipment and behaviour in terms that they understand.

Harrison conveys the sense that First Nations people were at a loss as to how to respond to the arrival of the First Fleet. Their frame of reference, to which they hearken back repeatedly, is what readers infer to be Captain Cook's first voyage, which occurred 18 summers previously – i.e. 1770. However, in that instance, Cook stayed for only a few days before departing. Ironically, during the course of the novel, Aboriginal attitudes towards Cook's party are revealed. They not only note that they

smelt disgusting, but their forages through the bush indicate that they had no respect for the vegetation and country. However, Cook departed after a short time. They are amazed that eleven nowees (or ships) have arrived, but are uncertain as to the Europeans' intentions – whether they in fact intend to stay or whether this will be a fleeting visit.

Although they initially resolve to expel the arrivals, in the end they agree to welcome them. It is debatable whether the Aboriginal people would have succeeded in repelling the First Fleet given the superior weapons that Europeans possessed such as muskets – referred to as 'thundersticks'. However, any successful attempt at repelling the arrivals would have required an immediate united, decisive, and forthright response. Towards the end of the novel, the tragic consequences of European settlement for First Nations people are foreboded. For example, the characters note that the Europeans are taking food resources gratuitously, and have begun to clear the land. In addition, the death of one character, who had fleeting contact with the new arrivals, after rapid onset of an illness that the medicine man is unable to comprehend and for which he is unable provide a remedy, presages the deaths of a significant percentage of Indigenous

people from European illnesses. Having little to no immunity to diseases with which they were unfamiliar, various historians estimate that as much as 50 % of the Indigenous population died of diseases within a handful of years of contact with Europeans.

Whilst this work was interesting for this adult reviewer to read, unlike Harrison's other works such as *Stolen* and *Rainbow's End* – the latter of which is currently on the VCE text list and which is proving to be a popular text – I query the extent to which *The Visitors* would engage the average secondary student. The second section of the novel focuses on the discussion between representatives of various Nations, which some students may find tedious. Much of the narrative describes various Indigenous customs and attitudes. Whilst Harrison uses the narrative to familiarise readers with aspects of the culture of the First Nations peoples whose lands were where Sydney now stands, many students may find these sections of the novel dry.

Unfortunately, the descriptions of Indigenous culture are offset with references to characters wearing European style clothing such as cravats, short sleeved shirts and jackets. Whilst it would seem the writer has chosen

to have various characters dressed in contemporary (or near contemporary) European clothing, it jars with the otherwise interesting re-creation of Aboriginal culture. Furthermore, in teaching this text, a teacher would have to unpack for the average teenager some of the distinctions the writer is making between the various characters based on their dress – I wonder, for example, how many modern teenagers (apart from the students I teach who see me wear one on 'casual clothes day') would even know what a cravat is! In addition, the characters have European names rather than Aboriginal ones.

If *The Visitors* were to be taught, it would probably not work well in mixed ability classes below Year 11 as a certain amount of maturity would be required to work through the ideas raised in the text, and the power dynamics and interplay within the deliberations. However, this work would be an appropriate wider reading book, and a welcome addition to a school library collection.



# Wednesday's Child

Reviewed by Lauren Maserow, McKinnon Secondary College

WRITER: Yiyun Li | PUBLISHER: HarperCollins Publishers, 2023, 256 pages  
| RRP: \$32.99

To be completely honest, I had not heard of Yiyun Li before, but after reading her short stories in the collection, *Wednesday's Child*, I am becoming a fan. The first story in the collection is the titular 'Wednesday's Child' which comes from the well-known nursery rhyme 'Monday's Child' where it proclaims that 'Wednesday's child is full of woe'. Indeed, the stories in this collection are 'full of woe', but they are also full of the gamut of human emotions.

As I was reading, I couldn't help but think this collection would work perfectly either as a mentor text or as a supplementary text for the Personal Journeys Framework in the new VCE Study Design. VCE teachers who are looking to inspire their students with the 'Express' purpose and short story form will have no difficulty doing so with Li's lyrical prose. There are ample examples of beautiful imagery and tight writing, but one example that stood out to me was in the story 'A Small Flame'; "Memory lane was barely wide enough for one traveler."

Many of the stories centre around the experience of motherhood, but also, what it is like to be someone's daughter, friend, wife, nanny. They also are anchored around the theme of loss, whether that be through death, divorce, distance or something else. Another line that resonated for me was "a shared pain was ... a permanent presence of a permanent absence in both their lives." For students who are struggling to conceive of ideas around the Framework of Personal Journeys, this collection will illustrate the many ways a person grows, changes, or responds to the events that occur in their life.

The stories are predominantly told through the third person perspective of a limited narrator, providing insight into the female protagonist in each story. Li seems to shine a light on characters who may not otherwise have their stories told. It's not that these people's stories are so mundane, but rather that they are ordinary in the most beautiful way, as they are relatable; a mother grieving the loss of her teenage daughter who is replaying conversations in her head; a nanny who worries about the newborn she is caring for due to the

mother's emotional state; a woman who is concerned about her childhood friend because she dislikes their husband while she also grieves the fact that her daughter is growing up; the ice-skating octogenarian who has had to take on a carer as a result of a bad fall and step back from her active life. These ordinary 'personal journeys' are all told in Li's collection and provide a masterclass in short story writing.



# Secret Sparrow

Reviewed by Melissa Wray, Newcomb Secondary College

WRITER: Jackie French | PUBLISHER: HarperCollins Publishers, 2023, 256 pages  
| RRP: \$17.99

**It's 1917 and everyone is making sacrifices to contribute to the war effort. For 16-year-old Jean, that includes her two older brothers who enlisted and are off fighting a war on the other side of the world while she works in the post office. That is, until one day, Captain Balfour arrives to speak with her. After that meeting, in which she is sworn to secrecy, her world will be changed forever.**

Jean should have been at school. Instead, she works at the local post office to fill the gap in the workforce that has been created because the men have all left to fight in the war. One day she has a meeting with a captain of the Royal Australian Army. He has come to offer her a position that, with her need for adventure, she cannot refuse. She is also required to be 21 years old to enlist which her father confirms is accurate, and she can tell nobody about what has been asked of her. Her mission is top secret, and she can never speak of it. Ever.

This meeting sets off a chain of events that will put Jean into the thick of the action on the front line of World War 1 as a morse code decoder. Her mission is to interpret and send codes to the Allies to help try and win the war. With shelling and gunfire and wounded and dying soldiers all around her, Jean must get the messages through. Thousands of lives are depending on that coded communication.

This book is told through a time slip. In 1978, Jean has a chance encounter with a young man and they both find themselves trapped in flood waters. It is atop one of the highest hills that Jean shares the story about her time during the war – a story she has never before spoken about. This takes us back to 1917 when she served her country, but sadly, no records were ever kept about it. Or about any other women employed to undertake jobs previously thought to be unsuitable for a woman.

This book highlights the sacrifices made by women during war times, and the research also reveals the lengths that were taken to cover it up so there was

no record of the women completing such secret missions. Nor were there records for the extraordinary work many women did in service for their country. The WAAC, Women's Army Auxiliary Core, was the name given to the women enlisted. *Secret Sparrow* is a shout-out to the strength needed by women at a time when little rights were afforded to them. It is an acknowledgement of the determination so many women demonstrated in completing their jobs without complaint. And it is a declaration of girl power and the belief that women can do work just as well as men.

This historical fiction novel is such an interesting read about females in a time when so much information is provided about male soldiers, but not the women who enlisted. Instead, their role has been, at times, glossed over in the history books. Jackie French is an exemplary storyteller who has made sure that this is not the case any longer. *Secret Sparrow* is suitable for a 12+ readership.





# Blight Street

Reviewed by Grace Elkins, Flore Education

WRITER: Geoff Goodfellow | PUBLISHER: Walleah Press, 2021, 48 pages | RRP: \$20

**Geoff Goodfellow's catalogue strives to give voice to those not typically found in poetry. This verse novella is no different. Set on the titular Blight Street in Adelaide, the text grapples with the effects of intergenerational poverty, the impacts of addiction, and hope for the future throughout.**

The novella is structured in three parts, giving voice to three interconnected characters – Carl, Larissa and Sean. Within each part, compelling free-voice poetry builds the narrative. Each fictive, yet confessional, poem feels like a conversation highlighting Goodfellow's commitment to voice. Throughout the novella, there is no shying away from difficult entanglements of violence, addiction, and trauma, alongside the work of individuals to break intergenerational patterns.

A highlight of the novella is the depth and complexity with which Goodfellow's characters speak from the page. Amongst it all, we see each character trying to navigate their place in the world and are drawn into the internal dialogue of Carl, Larissa and Sean. Through each perspective, the impacts of the past on the present are made clear. From Carl's introduction we see both his toughened exterior, 'i'd tap 'em if they did' and a rich awareness of self:

'it's just that i can take / a bit of pain / i'm used to it'. There is a commitment throughout the text to show the multifaceted, contradicting, and complex experience of growing up, be that at sixteen or thirty-one.

It is through the perspective of each of these primary characters that we as readers gain insight into the resonate impacts of intergenerational poverty and addiction. At times, the messaging embedded into these perspectives can feel overly didactic. The brevity of the writing, whilst powerful in creating voice, emphasises teaching points shared by each character in a way that feels discordant with the broader voice of the character. Notable examples include the verse 'Good Ears' in which Carl's mum sits Carl and Larissa down to talk positively and supportively about safe sex and the teens take this in their stride and go to the clinic the next day as they 'are not too young to listen / to professional advice'. The scene is reasonably consistent with the characters, though, the haste of the narrative simplifies the scene in a way that detracts from the complexity of the experience.

At only 48 pages, *Blight Street* packs a lot of story into each verse. The nature of the verse novella is it is a quick and accessible read, and this text in particular, feels like a stylised

conversation. Each verse can stand independently, however, together they are layered such to create a collage of Carl's life on Blight Street. The structural choices in *Blight Street* present an approach to narrative that is quite different to many mentor texts we encounter and share in the classroom. Further, the use of unconventional grammar and spelling choice aims to echo the style of each perspective. This could also provide an interesting launch point for conversations regarding (non) Standard Australian English in creative writing and its effects. It is in these structural and linguistic choices that *Blight Street* could have the most use for the classroom, particularly within VCE Unit 1, Area of Study 2: Crafting Texts.

However, it is important to note that the themes, language and references to violence, addiction and sex, limit the text's suitability to the senior classroom, however, it would be essential to consider the needs of the individual cohort to determine the appropriateness or benefit of using this text. Depending on student groups, the difficult knowledge encountered in the text could be a powerful talking point and show the possibilities of fiction, non-fiction and hybridised stories to reclaim difficult experiences through creative writing.

*Blight Street* is a worthwhile text to consider for the classroom to facilitate a whole class exploration of form, linguistic features and voice, or simply to have in the school library as a reference. *Blight Street* showcases experiences of intergenerational poverty and trauma and creates main characters from life stories that are often left to the sidelines. Outside of specific uses as a class text, this is a valuable book to know and recommend for individual students who seeking new ways to express themselves, or who simply need to know that they and their lives are worth writing poetry about.



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

1/134-136 Cambridge St  
Collingwood VIC 3066

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