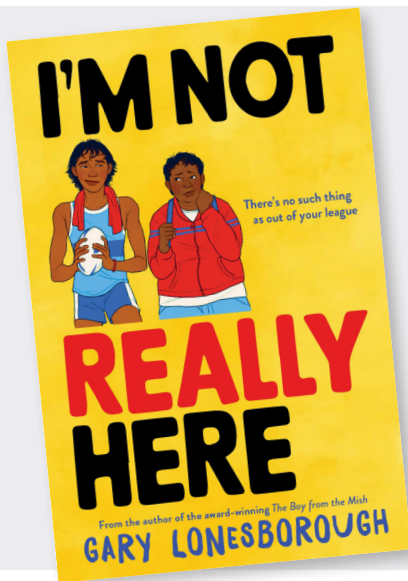




VATE member book reviews

December 2024



I'm Not Really Here

Reviewed by Emily Jackson, Xavier College

WRITER: Gary Lonesborough | PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin, 2024, 377 pages | RRP: \$19.99

***I'm Not Really Here* chronicles several months in the life of Jonah as he navigates the trials of late adolescence, a new school and his own grief. A budding writer, he searches for 'A story. A good opening line. Something to write about.' Readers will join Jonah in finding all of these things and more. Describing this novel as a teen love story would be an oversimplification because the breadth of themes extends far further. Despite the seriousness of the issues covered, this is a story filled with buoyant levity that will leave readers feeling hopeful and empowered. Contained within are warm and wonderful life lessons for all readers.**

Self-described as a 'fat, gay Aboriginal kid', Jonah soon finds himself in unfamiliar surroundings. His family is making a fresh start in a recently purchased house in a different town. His father begins a new job and finds a 'lady friend', whilst Jonah and his younger brothers begin new schools. Despite his self-criticism and insecurities, Jonah bravely throws himself into the task of making friends, joining a local sports club and agreeing

to take part in the up-coming deb ball. As readers will see, although challenging, these situations prove to be important points of social connection.

Underneath it all, Jonah's character is dealing with deep grief, having lost his mother suddenly several years before. Perhaps other readers will also shed a tear, as I did, when Jonah imagines that 'maybe in another universe, Mum never died.' Despite his persistent self-doubt, a certain strength is provided to Jonah through his mum's advice to just 'be brave for a few minutes'; wise words which prove essential in testing situations. Jonah's unflinching willingness to see a grief counselor provides encouragement and a normality to what some may see as a daunting step.

Secondary characters in the form of Jonah's peers, friends and family provide a chance to explore other issues. Jonah is a delightfully sensitive supporter of his friends as they navigate a friendship blooming into romance and another who falls victim to malicious on-line gossip. He is also an engaged older sibling, lovingly dispensing advice when his brothers endure racial taunts.

Far from being perfect though, readers will recognise themselves in Jonah as he inevitably makes mistakes. The biggest

of these, perhaps, is neglecting a close friend during a crisis in order to spend time with his crush. Reassuringly, the audience will see that this mis-step is nothing that some distance, patience and a sincere apology can't mend.

Jonah faces homophobia more than once. An incident of name calling on the footy field leaves him reeling. Another character, the villainous Jack, embodies several homophobic and misogynistic attitudes that readers may unfortunately find all too easy to relate to. It's a wonder that Jack gets away with his damaging comments and actions for as long as he does. Readers will cheer when his peers eventually stand up to him during a climactic scene. Here the power of friendship and acceptance is again revealed, affirming to readers the importance of providing support and calling out bigotry. Jack is an intriguing character, providing opportunities for rich discussion in lessons or book clubs.

Gary Lonesborough is certainly a considerate storyteller. The clever insertion of a stealth Further Reading List is an ingenious inclusion in a book intended for young adults. As Jonah peruses the 'LGBTQIA+' display at his school library, readers are provided with a concise list of titles to extend their knowledge of the issues raised in

I'm Not Really Here. School library staff would be well served to capitalise on the author's thoughtfulness and include these titles in their collections. They could consider displaying the books together.

In *I'm Not Really Here*, we again see Gary Lonesborough's courage and commitment in crafting authentic own voices stories. In doing so, comfort and insight is provided to young people who will relate to the characters and storylines. This book will be a popular title for any senior secondary reading list or YA book club. I can joyfully imagine other teens finding this alongside Jonah's selection (*Holding The Man* by Timothy Conigrave) from an LGBTQIA+ reads display in their school library. Let's hope such content doesn't limit the readership of this book. It can (and should!) be placed into the hands of any teens seeking a warm and contemporary take on the modern high school experience.



My Family and Other Suspects

Reviewed by David Moore, Parade College

WRITER: Kate Emery | PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin, 2024, 326 pages | RRP: \$19.99

Kate Emery's murder mystery novel *My Family and Other Suspects* is set almost exclusively in a small farmhouse in a rural Western Australian town called Dunsborough, a few hours' drive from Perth. In this claustrophobic environment, fourteen-year-old narrator Ruth tries to solve the mysterious death of her step-grandmother GG, which occurs onsite in the opening chapters of the book. Also in the house are several other family members with tangled family relationships that result from divorce, repartnering, as well as children from previous relationships. In other hands, these convoluted relationships could become maddening to the reader, but Emery skilfully weaves these characters into the family web through the charming narration of Ruth.

Ruth is a murder mystery enthusiast who has spent her life consuming Agatha Christie novels and true crime podcasts. She is so totally enthralled by the opportunity to solve the mystery that takes place in the house where she is staying that it seems to crowd out the other dark emotions one might expect

someone to have when a family member dies. Ruth is unmoved by GG's death, deadpanning, 'The surprising thing about GG being dead isn't so much that she's dead – it's been my experience that old people only have one trajectory – it's the way she died.' This detached narration lends the novel a wry humour that keeps the tone light throughout the book. There should not be any concerns from adults about this novel triggering painful memories of students who have close experience with death; it always takes the path of comedy rather than pathos.

And Emery has shown that she has great comic timing indeed. On the second page, Ruth describes the scene where a family member gets taken away by an ambulance after trying, unsuccessfully, to pick up a brown snake with a pair of tongs: 'Turns out snake handling isn't actually 'just a matter of confidence.' There's another moment where the narrator is told that some missing jewellery has ended up at a pawn shop and she then wonders naively why the jewellery would end up at a place like Club X.

Alongside the murder mystery is the romantic tension between Ruth and her half-cousin Dylan who is staying in the same house. Dylan is the Watson to Ruth's Sherlock in the mystery narrative,

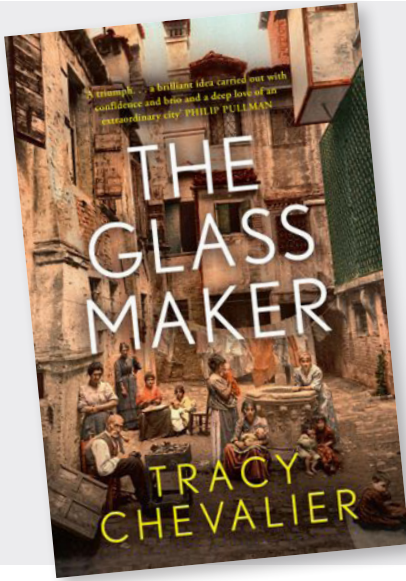
but also the object of Ruth's infatuation. Ruth grapples with the issues around lusting after a family member, further complicated by the fact that Dylan is currently in a relationship with a girl named Lisa. Ruth's detective skills are employed when she 'lurks' on social media to spy on their relationship and assess its longevity. The budding romance between Dylan and Ruth gives the reader an emotional investment in the story without detracting too significantly from the mystery.

Fans of Agatha Christie will enjoy this novel. It has all the tropes one associates with a murder mystery, including several competing motives and some red herrings. Ruth playfully teases the readers with clues they might have missed as she knowingly retells the story from the end of the narrative.

Murder mysteries are somewhat harder in the twenty-first century with ubiquitous mobile phones that undermine the sense of vulnerability and isolation that one often associates with this genre, but Emery resolves this by having the mystery take place on a farm with no mobile reception. Nevertheless, there are frequent references to internet slang like 'thirsty' and current teen heartthrobs like Timothée Chalamet that younger audiences would appreciate.

The novel is thoroughly enjoyable. It would work well as an option for students who are studying a unit on crime writing. It is, perhaps, not a great choice for a set text for an English class as there are not many meaty themes to explore in a serious way, but for students who enjoy mysteries or are after something light-hearted and enjoyable, it would be a great recommendation. The language is accessible, but never condescending. It confidently uses terms like 'rendezvous' and 'ostensibly' with the expectation that readers can keep up.

Readers from fourteen years and up would enjoy this book.



The Glassmaker

Reviewed by Michael E. Daniel, Camberwell Grammar School

WRITER: Tracy Chevalier | PUBLISHER: HarperCollins, 2024, 383 pages | RRP: \$34.95

Popular historical fiction author Tracy Chevalier, whose previous works include *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*, has once again produced an engaging work of fiction. Like her previous works, her protagonist is once again a female trying to negotiate both the clear and unspoken constraints placed upon women in a chauvinistic milieu.

This work explores the experiences of Orsola Rosso, a female from a glassmaking family on the island of Murano, an island close to Venice, famous for its glass. The glassmaking industry was consigned to the island during the Middle Ages due to the danger of fire from glassmaking furnaces. The novel begins in 1486. Prior to the European discovery of the Americas and sea trade routes to the Far East, Venice is still at the height of its power as a commercial trading hub. The sudden death of her father, a skilled glassmaker, creates a precarious financial situation for the family. To assist them economically, Orsola learns the skills of making glass beads from a rival glassmaking family member, Elena Barovier, after approaching the matriarch, Maria Barovier, for assistance. Working surreptitiously, she gradually acquires the skills and supplies an

Austrian merchant Gottfried Klingenberg with glass beads.

Beginning with the concept that Venice runs on its own time, and that Venice is frozen in time, the narrative moves forward to 1574; however, Orsola and the other characters have aged only a few years. A successful bead maker, Orsola and her family now have to contend with the ravages of the plague, from which not all of them survive. In subsequent chapters, the narrative leaps to 1631, then 1755, the early nineteenth century, the early twentieth century before finally ending in the 2020s. These time shifts enable Chevalier to explore the effects of various historical events and trends on Venice's glass trade. For example, during the Age of Enlightenment Venice's commercial wealth had diminished as it was by then no longer a major trading hub; furthermore, the development of glassmaking in other European locations such as Prague, rivalled Venice's hold on the glass making industry. However, various wealthy gentlemen tourists on the Grand Tour provided glassmakers the opportunity to sell portable souvenir items to such customers. The Napoleonic invasion of Italy followed by the Austrian occupation of the Venice put further strain on the family's glassmaking fortunes.

The time shifts also enable Chevalier to explore the fortunes of the few women actively involved in glassmaking. She depicts Orsola as a resilient woman in the face of various challenges such as attempts by her family to control her, and tragedies such as the plague early in the novel, and COVID towards the end, as well as natural disasters such as flooding. Falling in love with Antonio, a Venetian who learns the glass trade, but whom her family members regard as being beneath them, she is unable to marry him when he flees Murano to pursue the glass trade in northern Europe. A wanted man, he has to keep his identity hidden, lest he be tracked down and killed for having 'stolen' the secrets of Venice's glass making; however, he periodically sends Orsola glass dolphins surreptitiously as a sign both of his enduring love but also that he is still alive. Eventually Orsola marries Stefano; however, they have no children.

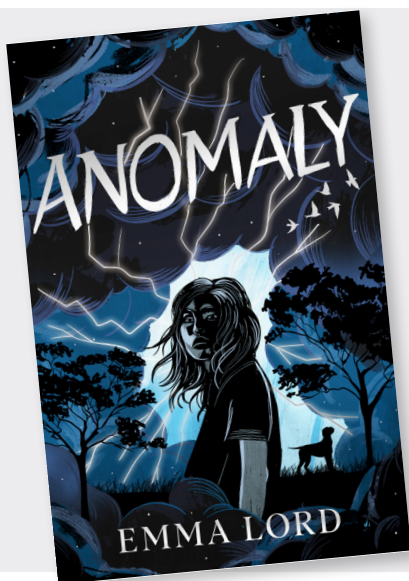
Whilst Orsola's character develops, particularly in the last section of the novel set in the modern era when women gain considerable freedom, the consistency of character Chevalier establishes is such that there is the sense that the Orsola of the fifteenth century through to the nineteenth embodies attitudes more akin to those of females in the twentieth and twenty

first centuries. This makes Orsola a less convincing and somewhat less authentic character than most of Chevalier's other female protagonists such as Griet in *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*.

Notwithstanding this observation about Orsola's characterisation, once the reader becomes accustomed to the time shifts, *The Glassmaker* is an engaging read. Chevalier successfully maintains readers' interest in wanting to learn what ultimately becomes of Orsola, and whether she will ever be reunited with her true love, Antonio. It introduces readers to aspects of European history with which many of them, particularly most secondary-aged students, would

be unfamiliar. Hence, if this novel were to be taught, some unpacking of various major historical events in European history would be required, including a survey of Venetian history, the Thirty Years War, the Enlightenment, Napoleonic Invasions and the two world wars. If it were to be taught as a text, this novel would work best with senior secondary students in Years 11 and 12. Whilst it would serve well as a wider reading text for Years 11 and 12 students, and more academically able students in younger year levels, average ability students in middle secondary years would probably struggle to understand aspects of the text.

Whilst many students, particularly EAL students, may struggle with studying a text of some 380 pages, the language is accessible, including for the average EAL student. However, teachers are advised that the work contains a few explicit references to sexual activity in the text.



Anomaly

Reviewed by Emily Jackson, Xavier College

WRITER: Emma Lord | PUBLISHER: Affirm Press, 2024, 400 pages | RRP: \$22.99

Whether the appetite is for a post-apocalyptic survival tale or a gruesome fantasy, cravings will be satisfied with *Anomaly*. Initially, the story presents an exploration of the struggle to exist in isolation following the aftermath of a civilisation-ending epidemic, such as *The Road To Winter* or *Station Eleven*. Soon, the narrative shifts with the inclusion of eerie horror elements reminiscent of *Stranger Things*.

The story follows Piper, a teenager who has been living alone since a mysterious disease caused seemingly every other person to perish. She's unsure of how or why she survived, having contracted the sickness herself. Since awaking from her illness, a series of disturbing incidents have occurred

Snippets of her backstory, disclosed in the form of memory sequences, reveal her above-average abilities in boxing, a tempestuous disposition and a trauma event from which she has yet to recover. When she unexpectedly encounters another remaining teen, a quest is initiated. Whilst Piper seeks answers and a possible solution to her new-found problems, her companion's motivations are mysterious. As the duo face supernatural threats, the

blend of survival grit with suspenseful, imaginative twists will compel young adult readers.

Notably, *Anomaly* contains many thrilling action sequences. Supernatural fight scenes, high-speed car chases and explosions abound. Intense and descriptive imagery creates vivid mental images in rapid succession. 'We yelled in unison, thrown sideways as the car fishtailed. The burning night swirled. ... I pumped the brakes, switched to the accelerator – and slammed my foot down.' Each one of these scenes presents a classroom opportunity for use as a mentor text to analyse effective action description. Creation of images, storyboarding or planning film, cartoon or anime adaptations will highlight the strong illustrative writing of these episodes.

Also evident are the many conspicuous literary devices employed by the author. For example, switching between third and first person is a vehicle for presenting current action as opposed to flashbacks in the form of characters' memories. Italics and dashes are used to effect in indicating monster thought-processes:

'Further and further back this time –
– years and years –
– short legs skinned knees –
– tiny, flesh bag, the girl –'

In the classroom, the highlighting and examination of these devices will inspire students to experiment and apply such techniques in their own writing.

The inclusion of monsters in the narrative offers opportunities for students to exercise their imaginations. Some sections of the novel provide rich descriptions of the monsters' appearance and behaviour – 'A man missing his skin. That had been my first thought when I saw it out in the yard ... Corded with muscles, ropey with sinew, its limbs longer than a human's.' These would lend themselves to visualisation and illustration activities in the classroom. This can lead to students inventing and designing their own monsters – appearance, actions, motivations, back-story – and creating writing using these imagined characters.

Promotional material provided for *Anomaly* highlights 'snarky banter' as an appealing element of the novel. It's a narrative that certainly features many examples of this current trend in young adult fiction. Classroom discussion can focus on Lord's inclusion of descriptions of the characters' body language to enhance understanding of the dialogue. Movements including eye rolls, shoulder shrugs and side-eye signal where characters are employing sarcasm or irony – with the bonus of

inviting discussion of the difference between the two!

The ending of this novel is a set up for a sequel. At this stage, there is no indication as to when the sequel is due for release, but it's sure to be on its way. In the meantime, students and fans exist within that wonderful window of opportunity to unleash their own imaginings on where the story could go next. Teachers can capitalise with an English writing task or creative writing club activity that explores a next chapter, an outline for a sequel or an alternate ending that more definitively resolves the narrative.

Anomaly is a worthy recommendation for students in Years 9 and beyond who are seeking literature from the post-apocalyptic, fantasy, horror or action genres. Contained within is an action-packed, fast passed storyline alongside accessible and teachable writing design.



Compass and Blade

Reviewed by Melissa Wray, Newcomb Secondary College

WRITER: Rachel Greenlaw | PUBLISHER: HarperCollins, 2024, 384 pages | RRP: \$19.99

Compass and Blade is the kind of epic fantasy story where you need to just settle in and enjoy the ride! Mira lives in an extremely remote location where the inhabitants wreck passing ships on purpose in order to survive. They use the recovered loot to trade which ensures they have the necessary things for survival for the whole community. Mira's unique ability to swim deep, far and fast makes her perfect to be a member of the retrieval team. A team that must rely completely on each other to return safely to shore after swimming out to the wrecks.

When the community is raided and Mira's father is taken away with the threat of death, Mira must turn her world upside down and risk everything to secure his freedom. She has never left the safety of her community before, but with the help of Seth, the survivor of the most recent shipwreck, she forms a plan to free her father. However, Seth has his own secret agenda, and Mira must decide how far to go, how much help to seek and who is truly trustworthy.

They set off with Mira not fully trusting Seth but having no other choice but to believe what he tells her. Along the journey Mira will seek answers to the questions she has about her own destiny as well as her mother's past – a past where the secrets of it died with her mother. Mira soon discovers that not everything she has believed her whole life is true and that sometimes you must risk more than you want to, but there is always a cost.

Greenlaw has created a world with a perfect blend of description of both above the water and below the surface. The affinity Mira has with her need to be in the ocean is expressed through a lovely lyrical writing style. Greenlaw has also created a range of support characters who are fierce, and independent as well as loyal to each other. As Mira tries to decide who to trust in this new world she has discovered, she also finds an attraction brewing that catches her by surprise. Torn between two attractions, she must decide who to trust and who to resist. There are some mature descriptive romance scenes to be aware of within the novel.

The storyline is fast-paced and action-packed with plot twists and deceit aplenty. Mira is determined to free her father, but her vulnerability haunts her as she also seeks answers to her questions about her mother. Her father is the only person she has left so she is determined to save him and return to her life. However, there are others around Mira who have different plans for her – ones that might not let her reach her goal. There are villains and sweeping seas and dangerous lands for Mira to navigate. There are also themes of family, friendship and loyalty that she must consider throughout her high stakes voyage.

Compass and Blade is suitable for the 14+ age group.



VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

1/134-136 Cambridge St
Collingwood VIC 3066

www.vate.org.au