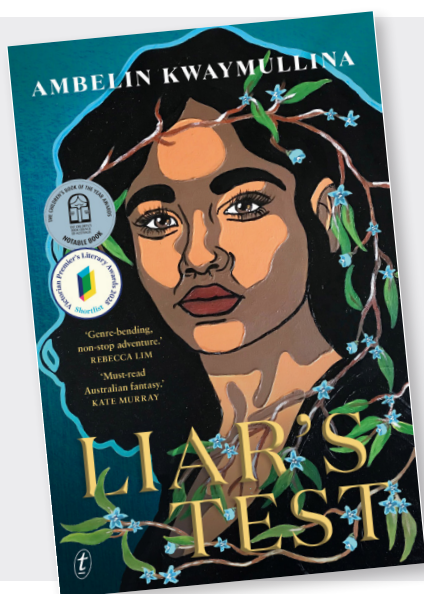


# VATE member book reviews

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VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR  
THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH



# Liar's Test

Reviewed by Prue Bon, Emerald Secondary College

WRITER: Ambelin Kwaymullina | PUBLISHER: Text Publishing, 2024, 272 pages | RRP: \$24.99

**Bell Silverleaf is a memory walker. But she doesn't really know how to use her gift since she was taken from her home and family before she had an opportunity to learn about it. Now, she is a 'blessed ward' of the sun-priests and moon-sisters, kept because she is the only Treesinger from the Falling Leaves grove that survived the terrible illness that sent everyone – and everything – else into a 'deep, frozen sleep'.**

Life for Bell at the sun-temple is challenging, because she must lie about what she knows in order to save her home and family, but it is her lies that keep her prisoner. Abused physically and emotionally, Bell never expects to be chosen for the Queen's Test; she is not a knight, trader or worker. Nor does she expect that she will have a chance of beating the competition, not while she's also trying to avoid the deliberate interference of Alasdar, the high priest who is determined to break her.

Despite the challenges thrown her way by the Queen's Test, Bell discovers herself, and all of the allies that form part of her community. Facing death is much easier when there are plenty of supporters to face it with you.

*Liar's Test* is far more than just a story about a young woman, fighting to

survive in an environment that is not her own. Whilst Kwaymullina herself refers to the genre as 'Indigenous Futurism' (Kwaymullina, 2024), it is also a history of the colonised, regardless of geographical boundaries. It is deeply rooted in not only Bell's desire to save her home and family, but also her need to protect her immediate environment by destroying the poison that has been deliberately placed into the trees by the invaders. Bell's connection to her land is never broken, even though the colonisers try their hardest to quite literally do so, and in the end, it is this fierce connection to her identity that ends up helping her to solve the mystery and save her grove.

Whilst Kwaymullina has constructed Bell as the epitome of snarky teen, she has an adult insight into both her culture and her identity. She notes early in the Queen's Test that all Treesingers draw 'something from the trees [they] are named after' and that as a Silverleaf, she may look 'grey and ordinary' until she lights up with 'a pretty silver glow'. It is this faith in her knowledge of herself that presents one of the strongest themes throughout the novel, but also connects clearly to Kwaymullina's personal views and values about the environment and how our connection to it can be affected through the actions of others.

Whilst there are some interesting themes around resilience, identity, inequality and connectedness to explore through this text, the audience is a little difficult to pin down. Bell is constructed as a fifteen year old, however the way that she speaks (and often acts) is more like a much older teen and given the experiences of both physical and emotional abuse that Bell suffers at the hands of the priests and sisters meant to be caring for her, this is not really a text that would be well situated in an English classroom.

*Liar's Test* appears on the 2025 CBCA Notables List, and was shortlisted for both the Victorian Premier's Literary Award, Young Adult (2025), and the Aurealis Award for Best Young Adult Novel (2024), making the text worthwhile reading for those more mature readers who are passionate about the environment and who are looking for something similar to *The Hunger Games*. *Liar's Test* would be an appropriate novel to add to a Literature Circle. Teaching notes are available on the publisher's website.

## REFERENCES

Kwaymullina, A. (2024). Indigenous Futurisms, Aboriginal Women, and *Liar's Test*, in [Text Publishing Teaching Notes: Liar's Test](#).



# Unhallowed Halls

Reviewed by Melanie Van Langenberg

WRITER: Lili Wilkinson | PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin, 2025, 464 pages | RRP: \$24.99

**'She rolls her eyes. "Tell them what, exactly? That our school for rich troubled teens has been taken over by demons and evil body-swapping teachers?"'**

Wilkinson's *Unhallowed Halls* opens with the teenage Page Whittaker traveling alone to her new boarding school. Set upon the moors of Scotland, Agathion College is a distinct change from her home in Lakeside, Florida. While public perception is that it is 'a school for posh f---ups', the school's administration view Agathion as 'an exclusive haven for gifted young people', with a strict curriculum grounded in Ancient Greek literature and teachings. The Shakespeare, Austen and Dickens that Page loves have been rejected in favour of the likes of Ovid, Virgil and Sappho. Page is running away from a traumatic incident in her recent past and is determined that Agathion is where she will 'learn to control [her]self' and follow 'a life of the mind'.

She is unsure as to why she was given a full scholarship to the school, one that manages to have a reputation yet is shrouded in mystery. Despite resolving to isolate herself from the other students, she is drawn to group of elite, popular students: Cyrus, Oak, Ren, Gideon and Lacey. It is soon apparent

that the College holds deep, dark and dangerous secrets, with Page an unwitting pawn, specifically brought to Agathion by the administration in order to serve malevolent plans.

Initially, this book had a lot of potential to be a studied text, in perhaps a Year 8, 9 or 10 English classroom. As a novel within the genre of dark academia, there are in excess of fifty intertextual references that both students and teachers alike may have enjoyed interrogating further, analysing the connection between these texts and Wilkinson's. Page's past and the organisation of Agathion are rendered with much mystique, providing opportunities for charting their construction and arcs. The variety of characters also permits contrasts and comparisons, not only in terms of characterisation but for their roles, reactions and relationships too.

There are interesting motifs, mainly through animals such as the pig and moths, and ideas on identity, belonging, power, intellect and nature. In a respectful and informed manner, Wilkinson has also represented a range of cultures and identities, including bisexuality and trans. However, once the dark magic that underpins the secrets of the school faculty is revealed the

novel devolves somewhat into messy and convoluted action. The pacing shifts quite markedly and the transition into fantasy can feel jarring. Demons, body-swapping, soul-splitting and murders overwhelm and detract from the novel's slower yet still intriguing beginning. It is also confusing and therefore may prevent it from being deemed suitable for study.

Wilkinson's *Unhallowed Halls* would be best suited as a recommendation for wide reading for any readers aged between 14 to 18 years of age. Young adult readers will likely enjoy the mystery of Page's past and uncovering the cruelty of the Agathion Magisters. Some may also commend Wilkinson's representation of diverse identities and interests, and be absorbed by the aforementioned intertextual references. Students may be encouraged to explore some of the texts mentioned throughout *Unhallowed Halls* – these include titles such as *Frankenstein*, *Middlemarch*, *Northanger Abbey* and *The Wizard of Oz*, and writers ranging from Enid Blyton and Terry Pratchett to Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler. The novel could serve as a great introduction to the Greek classics, too.



# I am not Jessica Chen

Reviewed by Andriana Tsikouris, Mater Christi College

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WRITER: Ann Liang | PUBLISHER: HarperCollins Publishers, 2025, 320 pages |  
RRP: \$19.99

***I am not Jessica Chen* is a novel that explores the pressure put on teenagers when in a family and educational environment that expects nothing but perfection. Jenna Chen comes from a middle-class Chinese migrant family, attends an elite secondary school, and wants to be accepted into one of America's top Ivy League Universities. This is what she thinks is her dream, as this is what her parents expect.**

This pursuit gives her a lot of stress and anxiety, but it is her perfect cousin Jessica Chen who exacerbates these feelings as she is the most popular girl in school, has perfect grades, and, to top it all off, has just received an offer to Harvard University after Jenna reads her rejection letter.

Jenna takes over Jessica's life and revels in her popularity and success:

'I've watched and wondered what it's like to be that talented, that brilliant—  
And now I know.  
I feel incredible. Invincible  
I feel like I could claw the sun  
from the sky and eat it whole.'

However, as she delves into Jessica's life, she soon discovers that things are not as perfect as they appear.

The concept of waking up as another person is certainly not new, but it works well in this context and for an age group of 14–15-year-olds. The narrative and themes have merit, but the execution is sometimes uneven. Certain parts are a little confusing and make the story lose momentum. Both Jenna and Jessica attend Havenwood Academy, although the first two chapters emphasise the socioeconomic difference between the two girls' families. They also fail by not establishing that Jessica and Jenna are in some of the same classes and are connected more than just by their family relationship.

It is the experience of success that carries Jenna along and not want to go back to her old life and true identity. Jenna, as Jessica, is expecting to see Jessica Chen as Jenna Chen, but instead finds that people do not know where she is and make her seem insignificant. Jenna can accept this because she is experiencing all the good things that come with being Jessica. Despite this, she does try to find out what has happened to Jessica's soul.

It doesn't take long to discover that Jessica's life is not as easy as it appears to be. Reading Jessica's journal, Jenna finds out that she cheated on her Harvard admission application as she reads her confession, 'But I've never

been a good person.' Along with the note she receives, 'Not so perfect, are you?' Jenna is able to start her search for Jessica's soul. On this journey, she gets help from her childhood friend, Aaron Cai. This relationship is a subplot in the text, which provides the teen romance part of the story, but it would have worked just as well without him.

Despite learning that it's hard work and a lot of sacrifice to be Jessica Chen, Jenna is not willing to give it up. It is not until she learns that 'Success is only meant to be rented out, borrowed in small doses at a time, never to be seen completely, no matter what price you're willing to pay for it.' Once she can make this realisation, she can reclaim her life as Jenna Chen.

Ultimately, this novel would be a great option for Year 9 and 10 students in the context of wide reading. There is plenty for students to take away from it, and if you have a similar demographic of students in your school, they might be able to relate well to the characters. It is a timely reminder of the importance of not getting caught up in the pressure of school and to accept that it is okay not to be perfect.



# A New Literature Companion for Teachers (3rd Edition)

Reviewed by Rachel Stephens

WRITER: Lorraine McDonald | PUBLISHER: PETAA, 2025, 260 pages | RRP: \$60

**A New Literature Companion for Teachers (3rd Edition) by Lorraine McDonald offers a comprehensive, curriculum-linked exploration of how to use any English and Literature texts, which McDonald calls 'mentor texts', to assist students to develop a range of skills such as creative writing, analysis of text construction, visual literacy and reading comprehension.**

To help teachers include mentor texts in the classroom, the textbook is structured in four parts. **Introducing Mentor Texts** offers an overview of the power of using Literature to inspire student writing. McDonald provides an overview here of well-studied pedagogy that frames the activities and suggestions provided throughout the textbook. Examples include the: 'Tell Me Framework', a model designed to assist teachers to construct fruitful class discussions with students on what they have read; 'Funds of Knowledge' to activate prior knowledge and encourage real-world connections to texts; and the 'Four Resources Model of Reading' which outlines the different processes involved in reading and interpreting texts.

In Part Two, **Selecting Mentor Texts**, McDonald provides definitions and examples of a wide range of literary

forms and genres, including their conventions, and then suggested close reading activities to support teaching these types of texts. Following this are practical activities for students to apply what they have learned to their own writing. The poetry and figurative language section is especially useful as McDonald defines and provides examples of different poems and their poetic techniques, explaining how these can be dissected by students and used as inspiration for their own writing. There is also an engaging section on the use of picture books for all reading ages in the English classroom, with varied tips and techniques for teaching visual literacy, including literal and inferential comprehension.

The longest section in the text, **Engaging with Mentor Texts**, further breaks down all components needed for students to fully analyse and explore mentor texts, such as evaluating and identifying a text's historical, social and cultural context and the author's views and values. The shortest section titled, **Crafting with Mentor Texts**, includes an overview of how to break down and use literary techniques such as dialogue construction and vocabulary use. This section provides useful pedagogy for teaching vocabulary, such as the use of 'Four Square' model, where students put a vocabulary word in the centre of

a square and then identify definitions, examples and characteristics of this word, including associated imagery.

The mentor text examples included are especially useful for primary and middle schoolers, with some mentor text excerpts being also appropriate for older students. The strategies, definitions and activities provided, however, are quite flexible and the knowledge included can be easily applied by teachers of students in a variety of year levels, so this textbook is suitable for both primary and secondary teachers of any grade level. McDonald also regularly inserts suggestions of how to vary activities and pedagogy for both younger and older students.

Ultimately, by applying the activities suggested in this book in English or literacy classrooms, students and teachers will be further empowered in knowing how to analyse a wide variety of features in texts, as well as how to use this knowledge to inspire student writing.

*A New Literature Companion for Teachers (3rd Edition)* would be well-suited to early English teachers, as McDonald provides a comprehensive, theoretical foundation for teaching a multitude of required components in the English curriculum, with examples and ready-to-use teaching strategies.

However, established English teachers may also find this text highly beneficial to deepen their knowledge of textual features and ways to teach English texts to students, as they are likely to discover new strategies to teach close reading and creative writing. Consequently, teacher-librarians who are doing class reading or literacy workshops, and other literacy specialists, may also find this textbook suitable for their needs.

McDonald proposes that this textbook does not have to be read in chronological order, encouraging readers to 'dip in' to relevant sections as needed. That said, the information in this textbook is comprehensive, so a full first read-through of the textbook could be a useful way for readers to receive an initial, clear grasp of the key information and how the textbook is structured, before then revisiting and 'dipping in' to different sections, as required.

Overall, McDonald imparts a high level of knowledge of the English Curriculum and how to achieve relevant learning outcomes, delivering a detailed, exhaustive account of how to use Literature to encourage the development of reading and writing skills in the classroom.



# Darkest Night, Brightest Star

Reviewed by David Moore, Parade College

WRITER: Barry Jonsberg | PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin, 2025, 271 pages | RRP: \$19.99

**Barry Jonsberg's *Darkest Night, Brightest Star* is told from the perspective of thirteen-year-old Morgan Pickford, a student who struggles academically and spends his lunchtimes on his own. He lives with his father and older brother, who represent a particular kind of emotionally stunted Australian masculinity. They like sport, hate women, have contempt for school, are quick to anger and violence, and live by the motto: 'Never tell anyone you're scared.'**

The novel is, at times, a difficult read as it exposes the vilest attitudes of this family who use racist and homophobic language with no hesitation. And their attitude towards women is no better. Morgan has no real memory of his mother who left when he was two years old, but the image of her he does have is filtered through his own father's hatred. The father tells his young son that 'Everyone has a mother. You never had a mum.' It is, according to the father, the children's mother's fault for tearing the family apart, and the children accept this version of reality. The family's misogyny is on full display later in the text when Morgan's brother brings a girl home to stay the night – much to his vulgar father's delight – who is deemed to be merely a 'slut'.

Like the fish that cannot describe the water it swims around in, Morgan accepts these bigoted views and finds himself repeating them uncritically. He even finds himself calling his gay friend a 'homo' and punching him without really understanding why he does it. Jonsberg deserves credit for being able to tell a story from the perspective of a young man who does not seem to have a very sophisticated inner voice. In trying to capture the emotional stuntedness of a young man, Jonsberg has created an unreliable narrator who finds themselves telling a story he cannot fully understand. All narrators need a degree of introspection to tell their story, yet young Morgan struggles to understand why he acts as he does, and does not even seem to grasp the fact that he is experiencing some sort of depression.

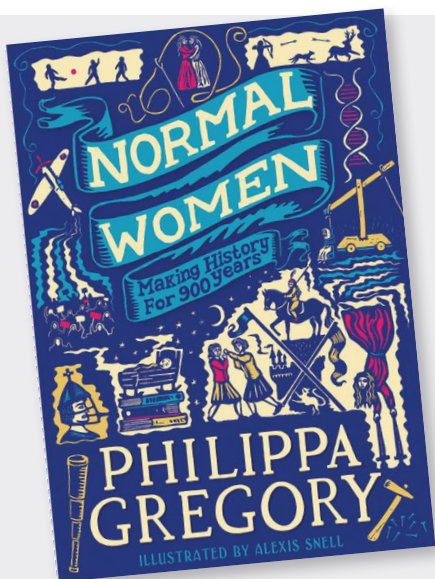
The character who does provide the introspection, and who can correctly identify that there is little joy in Morgan's life, is a schoolmate named Gray. The ironically-named Gray is a source of colour and warmth in Morgan's previously lonely life. Gray supports Morgan at his soccer games and helps him with his part-time job. Gray's interest in Morgan is not romantic; he sees something in Morgan that others miss: 'I think Morgan Pickford has a heart as big as a mountain, but he's never had the opportunity to show it.' Gray perseveres with his friend – even

after Morgan physically attacks him when he learns about Gray's sexuality – and gets Morgan to the point where he finds some purpose and joy in his life.

This is a story of friendship and redemption, and how young men can overcome toxic masculinity. When referring to his father, Morgan's mother observes, 'toxic masculinity ... poisons everyone around them. It poisons the men themselves, even if they're not aware of it.' And this is certainly true of the pathetic father who is always imploring his son to never be scared, even though it is clear that the father is the one who is most fearful of the world around him.

This would be a great book in a wider reading collection, or a novel that could be used, even in excerpts, on a unit on gender. It could be used as a set text for a class to study, but teachers should be aware that there are racist, sexist, and homophobic slurs used in the text. The novel does not endorse these terms, obviously, but it is worth preparing for the conversations around them. There is also a reference to suicide ideation.

The novel has positive messages around mental health, and reminds young people of the value of hard work and helping others. Students between Years 8-10 would enjoy this touching, life-affirming book.



# Normal Women: Making History for 900 Years

Reviewed by Melanie Van Langenberg

WRITER: Philippa Gregory | ILLUSTRATER: Alexis Snell | PUBLISHER: HarperCollins, 2025, 288 pages | RRP: \$34.99

**'This book is about "normal women" but not "ordinary women". The normal women in these pages do extraordinary things as part of their normal lives. Being exceptional or heroic – or deviant and inadequate – is normal for women. This history records the everyday heroism of "normal women" and – in a sometimes heartless world – the loving power of sisterhood, and the possibility of freedom.'** (p. 277)

*Normal Women: Making History for 900 Years*, strives to enlighten teen and young adult readers on the way women of history have been misrepresented. Gregory seeks to dismantle the depiction of historical women as being placid, amenable, quiet personalities, by reestablishing them as being extraordinary examples of 'ingenuity, diversity, rebellion, survival – and sisterhood' (HarperCollins Publishers, 2025: para.4).

Gregory manages to cover just over 900 years (1066 to 1994) in this slim volume, providing some engaging insights into the lived experiences of British women over these centuries.

Readers may be interested in:

- realising where the custom of marrying before a priest derives;
- reading about times when equal pay was normalised;
- learning what wife sales were;
- that the first theatre in England was built by a woman;
- how common it was for women to disguise themselves as men;
- that baby boys were once dressed in pink as it was believed to be a 'strong' colour;
- how women were perceived as 'naturally innocent', with judges therefore disinclined to convict them for crimes;
- women having to leave the workforce once married, and;
- neurologist Paul Möbius' belief that 'If we wish women to fulfil the task of motherhood fully, she cannot possess a masculine brain. If the feminine abilities were developed to the same degree as those of the male, her material organs would suffer, and we should have before us a repulsive and useless hybrid' (p. 195 the section for 1857-1928).

*Normal Women: Making History for 900 Years* is incredibly well researched, however, the brevity of the text means that sometimes the information reads as fragmented and underdeveloped

The necessary absence of a narrative means that the information often appears as though an arbitrary list of names. The more successful entries are those where the identity and context of the woman is elaborated, permitting stronger engagement and resonance for readers. Some confusion as to the exact target audience also means that the annotations that are scattered throughout the writing are quite uneven. The style of these annotations shift from asides, attempts at humour to explanatory notes, with this range sometimes confusing the intent and audience to whom these are addressed, especially when while some annotations appear juvenile and frivolous, other explain terms such as 'abortion' and 'contraception'. The text is illustrated by Alexis Snell, whose linocuts are in a style that lends some sense of period authenticity to the historical contexts explored throughout the text.

Whilst Gregory's *Normal Women: Making History for 900 Years* is a valuable title to recommend to school-aged readers for wide reading, it would also be suited as a teacher resource.

Given the expansive timeline it covers, and the engaging details it provides, many teachers may find this a useful tool for researching historical, political and social contexts of studied texts.

Extended analysis of the stories and cases raised in this edition can be found in Gregory's *Normal Women: 900 Years of Making History*. There is also an eight-part podcast, also called *Normal Women*, that provides discussion between historians and other guests, providing a modern perspective on these underacknowledged and underappreciated realities of 'normal women'.



# Write Now! Literacy Through Creative Writing Craft

Reviewed by Jared Prentis, Kolbe Catholic College

**WRITERS:** Dr Shelley Davidow & Dr Paul Williams | **PUBLISHER:** Amba Press, 2025, 151 pages | **RRP:** \$39.95

**Write Now! is a teaching resource to help students write better narratives. The twenty one-hour-long practical lessons include exercises aimed to engage students and focus on the 'craft' of writing. We know students often struggle to be effective storytellers, especially if they have a limited history of reading 'good' fiction. However, this textbook aims to combat this problem using tools to unlock an appreciation for words and one's imagination.**

I have always advocated that English teachers see themselves as creative artists. Whether this description rings true to your own craft, we can all agree that the teaching of subject English involves the teaching of effective writing. There are well-known 'teachable' structures for analytical writing (perhaps, you are familiar with TEEL? Or is it now TEEEL? What/How/Why?). Regardless, if these terms make you eyeroll and sigh audibly, students are frequently provided with a scaffolded template. Yet, the challenge in teaching creative writing is that we do not want students to apply a cookie-cutter approach. Instead, we desire original, thoughtful pieces that engage the reader.

Here's where *Write Now!* can be a source of support. Both authors have impressive credentials as educators, researchers and published writers. Their combined knowledge presents the teaching of creative writing in two parts: **Playing with words** and **The hero's journey**. I like their approach in focusing on words and sentences before constructing the bigger narrative elements (character, setting, plot, etc.). I find that most issues lie in written execution rather than ideas.

The structure of each lesson is simple and familiar. To experienced English teachers, most of the content will not be groundbreaking; however, it is handy to have all these exercises in one resource. Personally, I would pick and choose from what's available, rather than follow the lessons faithfully in order. All lessons begin with a two-minute free write which 'increases the flow of ideas and blocks the inner censor' (p. 5). A small number of students are encouraged to share, ideally by reading aloud. This helps the writer(s) hear the 'music, the cadence, the voice and tone of the writer' and improves overall literacy (p. 6). I found a useful tip offered was the question 'Did anyone write something that was completely unexpected and just fell in your lap out of nowhere?' to evoke responses from a classroom of hesitant volunteer readers.

I found Part A to be the most helpful section. There are a range of interesting exercises for student writing. Some highlights: writing poetry (p. 18); crafting voice through adopting different attitudes (p. 35); epistolary exercises (p. 46); and writing purple prose to then 'trim the fat' (pp. 70-71). Once students finish Part A, an extension activity is to develop their exercises into a portfolio (p. 88) which is an effective teaching tool, encouraging writers to return often to previously written drafts. For those starting out, Part B is worthwhile to read. I would say that for most teachers teaching the standard hero narrative arc is something we have heard before, but at least this resource works as a good refresher.

The following section discusses publication ideas which I agree is an important tool for engagement. Lesson 20 (pp. 132-135) is a user-friendly guide for creating an anthology and outlines the logistics of a book launch. Using this guide, I'm setting myself a goal to showcase my VCE Literature student creative responses this year.

The appendix offers three sample rubrics, one for marking an individual story and the other two for portfolios. I'd recommend adapting the individual story marking template but give the others a miss as they seemed to be a simplified version of the former.

I appreciate the writers' sentiment for using language that connotes encouragement, i.e. 'emerging' rather than 'limited.' However, I tend to judge rubrics that use a numerical scale for a single criterion, for example 'emerging' awards between 0-3 marks (what is the difference between 1 or 2?). I would personally modify these to be more student-friendly and easier to interpret.

There is a focus on mechanics and the presence of techniques in these rubrics. Initially, I was hesitant to frame the evaluation of good fiction as ticking off a checklist, for example 'use[s] long and short sentences' or 'use[s]

strong imagery, metaphors or similes' (pp. 143-144); but, upon reflection, it is transparent and immediately useful for students. The challenge in communicating feedback is whether these techniques are effective.

Writing creatively alongside students is inspiring and fulfilling but it can be emotionally taxing to be the source of all the ideas, hence *Write Now!* will be added to my go-to resources for creative writing ideas.

*Write Now!* is a suitable resource for teaching creative writing in all secondary and upper primary classrooms.



# We Do Not Welcome Our Ten-Year-Old Overlord

Reviewed by Melanie Hayek, Hume Anglican Grammar

WRITER: Garth Nix | PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin, 2025, 237 pages | RRP: \$17.99

Although aimed at a younger audience than novels like *The Left-Handed Booksellers of London*, Garth Nix's quirky style is still evident in his newest novel, *We Do Not Welcome Our Ten-Year-Old Overlord*.

Set in 1970s Canberra, twelve-year-old Kim, along with his best friend Bennie, are tasked with saving their families, and possibly the world, from the strange glowing globe Aster, that was found in an artificial lake by Kim's 'super, super smart' sister Eila. The globe has the ability to control those who touch it, as well as the ability to influence other beings in its vicinity. Eila initially defends the globe, believing that 'she' simply wants to learn and help, only realising when it is too late that she had 'misunderstood Aster,' and that she needs to fight to maintain control and stop Aster by forcing her into the sun.

Kim is a responsible big brother to Eila, despite his resentment of her. He assists his parents when required, travelling up the hill alone to check in on his elderly neighbour and working in the greenhouses. He loves Dungeons and Dragons and takes on the role of dungeon master for his friends despite his desire to actually play himself. He knows that the globe is dangerous and continually tries to remove it despite the

danger to himself. In the end, Kim needs to take care of Eila and actively keep her safe, and Eila has to trust Kim to do what needs to be done to defeat Aster. His invitation to Eila to play Dungeons and Dragons with him and his friends symbolises their unification at the end of the novel.

Nix explores the family dynamics of the two sibling pairs in the novel. The Basalts, Kim and Eila's family, live on an 'experimental farm' and are overprotective and 'dedicated to what they called an "alternative lifestyle"'. Kim and Eila are not allowed to read fiction, watch television or get pocket money. Their parents are present and involved, however, insisting that they eat together every night. Bennie and Madir's parents, on the other hand, are mostly absent; their dinners are 'generally late and unpredictable,' and they had never attended a parent teacher night at the school. Kim is noticeably jealous of Eila's intelligence and seems to feel that he cannot measure up while Bennie is protective of her little sister, Madir, but does not particularly want to engage with her too much; she is happy to watch from a distance. Bennie and Kim do not really understand each other's family dynamics, and neither is able to fully empathise with the frustration the other feels about their parents.

In his usual style, Nix uses interesting words and vivid descriptions to colour his writing. The vocabulary is always used in context, in a way that invites but does not require readers to look up unfamiliar words, and the imagery helps readers to immerse themselves in the novel. Thus, this text could be useful in the classroom as a mentor text to model good writing.

There are a number of key themes explored in the novel, in addition to family dynamics and sibling rivalry. The misunderstood intentions of Aster alludes to ideas around trust and right and wrong, as well as the unintended consequences of choices. In the end, it is discovered that Aster is actually 'of a maturity of an equivalence to ten ... years,' and did not understand the gravity of her actions, despite having been forbidden to enter the human world. This would allow for good classroom discussion about responsibilities and whether or not intentions matter, and when they matter.

Overall, this book could be useful as a set text in a classroom or as part of a Literature Circles unit, allowing for both analytical and creative responses. It would also be a good wider reading text for students interested in the fantasy elements, those who like creepy stories, or those who would benefit from

discussion around different family types or friendship. The novel would be most appropriate for students aged ten to thirteen, although competent younger readers would also enjoy it. Likewise, older students looking for an easier read, or those who might have more limited life experience, will also find this an interesting novel. This novel is likely to be a gateway for younger students into Garth Nix's other works.



# Graphic Novel Builder: The Illustrated Guide to Making Your Own Comics

Reviewed by Dr Hugh Gundlach, The University of Melbourne

WRITER: Edward Ross | PUBLISHER: HarperCollins, 2025, 160 pages | RRP: \$24.99

**Graphic Novel Builder is meta. It's a graphic novel about creating graphic novels! This beautifully illustrated, full-colour book uses five diverse characters to present a broad mix of material for story design, character development, and text and artwork.**

At 160 pages, it's lengthy, but much of each page is taken up by artwork, with text content generally fitted within captions. This results in simply expressed material that suits the target audience well.

The 'chapters' are structured around key aspects, namely: idea generation; character design; world-building; story development; planning; writing; drawing; and publishing.

The character design section is particularly strong, covering 'fatal flaws', costume, pose, facial expression, and colour themes. The world-building section offers innovative ideas for adding detail and using maps to plan locations. The story planning section discusses how conflict, dichotomies, and character growth help develop more complex plots.

Practical sections on dialogue writing, speech bubble layout, sound effects, page layout, managing space within

frames, and using perspective are engaging and informative. The book shines in its 'meta' sections towards the end, where the characters guide readers through the stages of thumbnails, pencils, linework, and colours, illustrating each stage as they discuss it.

The linework section provides excellent illustrations of various styles and their effects on readers, along with material on style, colour, and lighting that could serve as great prompts for lesson activities.

The sections seamlessly connect due to the immersive graphic novel format, where text boxes and captions whip the reader through the content. Clichéd as it is, it is a page turner. The frames are very full, so the page layout and narrative format may not lend itself to photocopying pages for class use, but this could be its strength. Students won't see this as a textbook or an explicit learning resource, making it more appealing.

A truly contemporary text, it features characters of diverse gender, ethnicity, and personality in an understated, non-tokenistic manner. Characters vary in body type, and the book includes representation such as a character with a rainbow flag, one using crutches, and one wearing a hijab.

*Graphic Novel Builder* is a self-contained, easy-to-read title that strikes a balance between being informative and fun. While not as comprehensive as some resources, it effectively guides students in creating cartoons or graphic novels, simultaneously developing their skills. The content's applicability to general creative writing is an added bonus.

Although not specifically designed as a companion for analysing complex works like *Maus* or *Persepolis*, this book is a valuable addition to middle years libraries. With the publisher recommending it for readers aged eleven years and up, it serves as an ideal resource for young aspiring cartoonists and writers, offering a solid foundation in graphic novel creation.



# All the Beautiful Things

Reviewed by Prue Bon, Emerald Secondary College

WRITER: Katrina Nannestad | PUBLISHER: HarperCollins, 2024, 334 pages | RRP: \$24.99

**Anna's little sister is different, and the Nazis don't like people who are different. They take them away from their families and lock them up, and sometimes they don't come home. Anna must protect Eva and keep her safe, and she's doing a really good job until the Nazis come hunting.**

Eva is sent into hiding, separating her from everything that is familiar and reducing her already small world to a tiny little room. But Eva's big heart and her propensity to see the 'beautiful' in everything will help her to survive, along with the support of her friends and family.

Nannestad has an uncanny knack for being able to present a group of people who are often dismissed as implicit in the atrocities of World War II in such an empathetic light that one often has to wonder if they've been looking at things the wrong way all along. *All the Beautiful Things* is no exception, and it should – like most of Nannestad's other books – come with a box of tissues.

Whilst aimed at an upper primary level, there are some very important messages in this novel that would support English classrooms all the way to Year 9. This includes, in particular, the

idea of acceptance and, with that, the understanding that who we are is based on the connections we choose to make with others. Even though this novel is set during World War II, the message rings just as true in today's society.

Eva has a 'gift for loving', an ability to hug and light up a room with her smile despite the disability that she lives with. In contrast, her older sister Anna is 'smart, tall, strong and athletic', the 'perfect German girl on the outside'. Anna knows that the society she lives in has just one goal, and that 'if you're different, you don't belong'. Despite being only twelve, Anna is often contemplating the harsh realities of her world, especially when she is surrounded by the bullies that make up the Young Girls' League, wondering at the 'sort of leader who picks on the weak'. But it is Anna's fierce bravery, and her desire to protect everyone in her orbit, that shines true.

It is particularly the characters of this novel that set it apart. There are a lot, and each time a new character arrives, one wonders how they will all fit into the story. This is what makes Nannestad's writing so beautiful – it is an excellent model for character development.

The wide cast of characters utilises some historical figures, such as Eva Braun and Mrs Goering, ably bringing

them to life through recognisable snippets of their historical realities. The created characters fit each archetype, providing them with purpose not only to Anna and Eva, but also to the stability of the novel. Seamstress Linz is both the hero and a mentor to Anna, as she pretends to be a Nazi sympathiser while secretly undermining the entire system. Manfred, the young Hitler Youth who is secretly in love with Anna but desires to serve his country, is both the innocent and the fool. And Udo, Anna's best friend, acts as a sidekick, messenger and hero.

Whilst the story is told from Anna's point of view, Eva's confinement allows her to craft a different perspective of the story, as she observes what goes on outside her little room. Spending time drawing the people who surround her in her daily journal, she builds almost a parallel narrative in images, giving both Anna and the reader insight into an alternative way of viewing things.

Study of this novel would easily be supported through the construction of similar activities – having students create visual representations of the way they see the text and the things that Anna misses as narrator. There are plenty of gaps in this novel to explore which would lead to some very interesting interpretations from students.

Additionally, Anna spends the novel collecting scraps and bits and pieces of things – old menus, used train tickets, ribbons and buttons – to use in the dresses that she makes for Eva’s paper dolly. Each ‘treasure’ that Anna uses to create something new comes with a story, a metaphorical piece of hope and wonder within a reality that is often harsh and destructive. This idea would provide a wonderful opportunity to have students look for the beauty in ordinary things, by gathering their own collection of scraps and creating stories for them.

The strength of this novel lies in its adaptability within a classroom – it would work as a novel study, a creative unit or as part of a Literature circle. Teaching notes are available on the Publisher’s website.



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