# VATE member book reviews

December 2025

Victorian Association for the Teaching of English


# Spirit of the Crocodile

Reviewed by Lauren Maserow, McKinnon Secondary College

**WRITERS:** Aaron Fa'aoso and Michelle Scott Tucker with Lyn White
**PUBLISHER:** Allen & Unwin, 2025, 248 pages | **RRP:** $19.99

**As English teachers, we frequently face the challenging task of selecting texts to study. For the younger year levels like Year 7, this can be especially challenging as we strive to find a text that is 'just right' and can meet the diverse needs of our students, as they come from a vast range of backgrounds in their primary schooling.**

There are many tried and true options out there, but for those among us who have been scratching our heads and wracking our brains trying to find an alternative, rejoice! For there is now a new option in *Spirit of the Crocodile*.

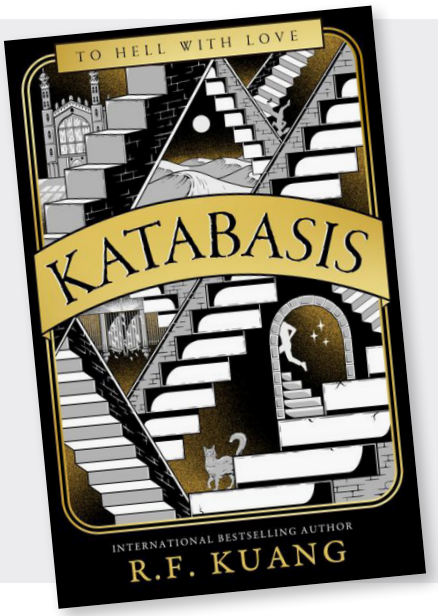
Set on Sabai Island in the Torres Strait, just off the coast of Papua New Guinea, *Spirit of the Crocodile* tells the story of twelve-year-old Ezra. It is a coming of age story with clear themes of growing up, culture and tradition, connection to country, as well as the very real impacts of climate change on island nations. Ezra knows everyone in his small island town, and is family with almost everyone (whether biologically or culturally). He and his best friend, Mason, are as close as brothers, and next year, they will be going to Thursday Island to go to high school. While Mason is excited about the changes to come, Ezra is dreading it, and worries about all the changes to his small world.

For some time now, there has been a strong and valid push to include more diverse voices, particularly First Nations voices, in our curriculum, and that is one of the many benefits to this story. Students of all backgrounds and cultures will benefit from learning more about the heritage and culture of the Torres Strait Islander peoples. There are examples all throughout the story that teach readers about the culture and its traditions and explain why they are done. These include how every family in the Torres Strait is part of a clan which has its own totem (Ezra's family is part of the Koedal clan whose totem is the crocodile) and how each clan has its own knowledge and wisdom that gets passed on to the next generation.

I loved the constant use of language (generally followed by an English translation) so readers can see how alive and strong the culture is. This provides a valuable learning opportunity for students to draw parallels between Torres Strait Isalnder culture and their own, and consider whether there are words, phrases and cultural practices that they use in their families without giving it a second thought until someone like Billy Blake, the bully in the novel from Queensland, or his mother, the seemingly judgemental Ms Blake, question them.

This text would be perfect to use in Year 7; with the topic of climate disaster, this text also presents strong opportunities for intercurricular projects and studies with Geography. For those of us who are working on implementing Vic Curric 2.0, there are many aspects of the Capabilities that can be included pertaining to the Ethical and Intercultural Capabilities in a study of this text Amongst everything else that takes place in the novel, the plotline of Ezra maturing and learning how to be more selfless is especially valuable, as he learns that growing up doesn't just mean going to high school and growing facial hair, it also means taking on the value of sharing that is integral to his people and ancestors and learning to put others before himself.

While the title of the novel is slightly misleading (the crocodile doesn't feature as much as one would expect), this text is a great read with a bucketful of lessons and important messages for our impressionable young minds to absorb.




# Katabasis

Reviewed by Melanie Van Langenberg

**WRITER:** R.F. Kuang | **PUBLISHER:** Harper Voyager, 2025, 560 pages | **RRP:** $34.99

**'"This can't be worth it."**

**But of course it was worth it. It was the only thing that was worth it. She had been fortunate to find a vocation that made irrelevant everything else, and anything that made you forget to eat, drink, sleep, or maintain basic relationships – anything that made you so inhumanly excited – had to be pursued with single-minded devotion.' (p. 260)**

The subject of Alice Law's 'single-minded devotion' is her PhD study within Cambridge University's Department of Analytic Magick, focusing on linguistic magick. However, following the gruesome death of her advisor, Professor Jacob Grimes, the 'greatest magician alive', she believes the only way she can complete this study is by rescuing Grimes' soul from Hell. Reluctantly accepting the expertise and companionship of her rival, 'genius' Peter Murdoch, the two: complete the requisite spell; relinquish half their remaining lifespan as payment; and find themselves in Hell. Hell takes on the form of their Cambridge campus, as it mutates to a place familiar and known to the individual. On their way to confront King Yama the Merciful, the Ruler of the Underworld, Alice and Peter must make their way through Hell's Eight Courts of punishment: pride, desire, greed, wrath, violence, tyranny, and a seventh unnamed court, before hoping to find themselves in the city of Dis (presumably short for the dissertations on 'why did you sin?' that are submitted here), where they can hope to achieve their aim. Along with a variety of expected obstacles, Alice and Peter must evade the ruthless Kripkes and their 'bone-thing' minions as they make their way through the courts and hopefully to the 'promised golden circle where souls returned to the world of the living'.

R.F. Kuang's *Katabasis* has been seen as a skewering satire of the world of academia. It could also be seen as a warning on hero worship, as well as on the perils of singular goals. She presents individuals whose obsessions have compromised their abilities to build meaningful relationships, show regulation, or nurture compassion and like-skills. A strength of the novel could be its exploration of mental health, with Alice acknowledging that 'it felt good, knowing how to fall', and its representation of an individual's capacity to surmount such adversity. The notion of a 'mental staircase' was compelling.

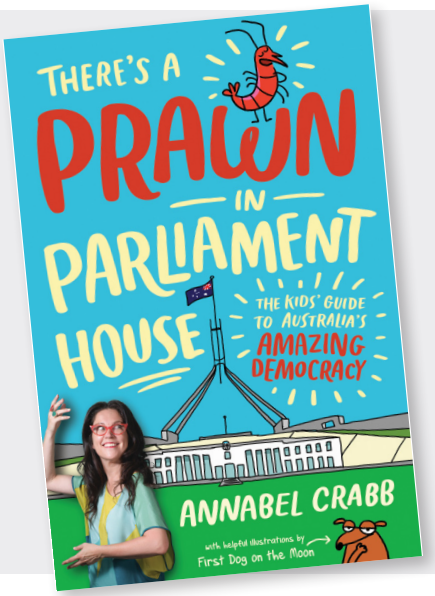
For this reason, sections of the novel may be of interest as a mentor text for a Frameworks unit, specifically Personal Journeys, however, this would be more for ideas and content than craft. If so, Chapters 20 and 22, which focus on Alice and Peter's journeys, respectively, could be used, though it should be noted that these chapters include some concerning content, notably suicidal ideation and a form of sexual assault. The feminist focus within Alice's story/chapter is done well, and is the novel's strongest section.

It is likely, however, that many readers will feel alienated by the novel's pompous pretensions related to style. Repeated diversions to exposition that explain the multitude of references throughout the novel also serve to disrupt the narrative, while relying on readers' interest and knowledge of precise terminology. Unfortunately, the world-building, something many would deem crucial to works of fantasy and adventure, is not defined as effectively as possible, and the reader is expected to suspend belief a bit too much.

Some readers may want to be cautioned that the novel includes some confronting and potentially distressing content, as well as mature themes. This includes, but is not limited to: gruesome

descriptions of death and gore; coarse, and what some may consider vulgar, language; sexual content; animal cruelty and animal testing; suicide (predominantly in Chapter 16) and suicidal ideation; infanticide; mention and promotion of disordered eating; horror; self-harm for magicking; and bloody violence.

Although a work of adult contemporary fiction, R.F. Kuang's *Katabasis* may be suited as a wide reading recommendation for 17- and 18-year-olds, particularly those with an interest in the genre of dark academia, puzzles and mathematics, and adventures.




# There's a Prawn in Parliament House

Reviewed by Louise Dower Amor, Horsham College

**WRITER:** Annabel Crabb with illustrations by First Dog on the Moon
**PUBLISHER:** Allen & Unwin , 2025, 234 pages | **RRP:** $24.99

**'We can't change the mistakes of the past. But we can do the very best we can – as a democracy – to learn from them, to correct them where that's possible, and to ensure they aren't repeated.'**

Annabel Crabb explores our government from where it all started to our present day in an interesting, informative and well-written read for children, highlighting the importance of history. This guide is an incredibly important resource in sharing our country's history with the next generation and teaching them that their voice matters and sharing such powerful knowledge is the key for future change. 'History is full of acts and decisions that we look back upon today and think, "that was wrong and ignorant." It's why studying history is important.'

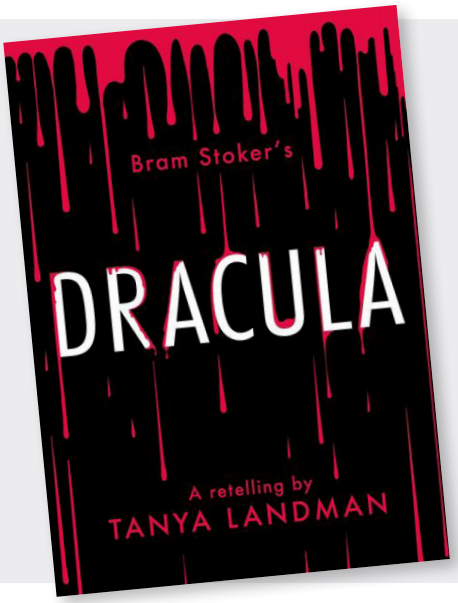
Crabb explores everything there is to know about our democratic system, keeping the facts simple to capture the attention of her targeted audience, whilst also making sure that the language she uses enables her readers to understand complicated information. The addition of illustrations helps engage her readers in this educational journey, as well as the clever use of humour which has been woven throughout, as evident when describing our constitution as a 'pizza with the lot,' a perfect example of how Crabb knows her audience, as they are kids and there is sensitive information that is covered about the past within the pages. The text covers everything there is to know about Parliament House, from the building itself, to the constitution, to voting and to making laws, capturing a basic understanding of all there is to know. In what can be complicated and not the most engaging information for children, Crabb covers everything that students need to know to capture their curiosity, their interest and desire to want to understand and know more. This is a great introduction into politics.

The main message in this text is that 'Power begins and ends with ordinary people.' This is the strength of Crabb's guide as it is important for our students to understand that their voice matters and that every vote counts. We want our young people to be well educated, to understand the past, and to make a positive impact on the future. It is through these pages that children are handed the important tool of knowledge, and knowledge is power.

This is a very informative text that would be best suited for Grades 4-6 students as they learn and develop an understanding of Australia and our system of democracy. It is never too early to start these conversations.

Crabb has written this guide in a way that explains everything there is to know about our government in an easy, engaging and relevant manner. As a mother of a ten year old child, I will definitely be giving this book to him to read as an introduction to our government. This text would work perfectly in a unit that combines both Humanities and English and I do believe should be a resource in every Grade 4-6 classroom. I have no doubt that all children who read this book will want to make their way to Canberra to look for Shawn the Prawn in the grand Marble Foyer at Parliament House, and continue to add to their knowledge of Australia's democracy.

This text is the perfect foundation for students to have read as they enter secondary school and start to specialise in specific content around history and government. However, it could still be utilised in the junior classrooms of high school, although it would be better suited for the Humanities classroom or a cross-curricular study involving English, rather than an English text alone. Shawn the Prawn concludes the text with a powerful message to our children about 'imperfect people', and the importance of being open to all voices, noting that 'sometimes you win, sometimes you lose, but you keep showing up.'




# Bram Stoker's Dracula: A retelling

Reviewed by James Torpy, Ballarat High School

**WRITER:** Tanya Landman | **PUBLISHER:** HarperCollins, 2025, 106 pages | **RRP:** $8.99 (ebook)

**Tanya Landman's retelling of *Dracula* is an adaptation of Bram Stoker's 1897 novel of the same name. It follows dual narratives as the young solicitor Jonathan Harker aids Count Dracula in purchasing property to move to London, as well as Mina's narrative recounting Dracula's terror and the havoc reigned when the figure arrives in London.**

New readers unfamiliar with the original text or its many film adaptations will find a lot to enjoy in the narrative of the enigmatic Count Dracula in his castle, the fate of Lucy, the guidance of Van Helsing and the confrontation of the figure in the text's finale. Landman establishes the high stakes of the original text, as Van Helsing warns 'he will make us the Undead: foul things of the night without heart or conscience, who will prey on the bodies and souls of those we once loved best' (p. 61). Akin to the original, this adaptation features rich gothic iconography that younger readers may find familiar yet engaging. Whilst it features the riveting narrative of the original text, the structure of Landman's text proves to make the story much more accessible for inexperienced readers. Stoker's original novel featured the narrators of Jonathan and Mina Harker, Dr John Seward, Lucy Westenra and Abraham Van Helsing, as well as excerpts from letters, diary entries and newspaper articles. In contrast, Landman simplifies the narrative, instead utilising only the voices of Jonathan and Mina Harker as a means of streamlining the narrative into six parts and deviating from the potentially overwhelming amount of structural features and narrators found in the original text. The reader is left alternating between the two voices as they encounter the journal entries of the two narrators spanning from early May to early November before ending the narrative with an epilogue set seven years after the events of the text. The text is nevertheless still interesting in its narrative structure and may gently ease readers with lower levels of literacy towards sophisticated narrative structures with the text's focus on dual first-person perspectives told in reflective journal entries.

Whilst published in Australia by HarperCollins, this text is a new addition to Barrington Stokes' line of classics retold for younger readers. Just like their other titles, this edition is printed on yellow pages with a dyslexic-friendly font. Whilst the formatting supports a younger audience, so too does Landman's writing style as she offers a clear and abridged retelling of Bram Stoker's original gothic novel *Dracula*. As such, due to the simplified language but compelling plot of Stoker's original text, Landman presents an accessible text for readers with high interests but low literacy abilities. The text may therefore be useful for some reading recovery programs or literacy intervention (depending on the age of the student), as well as selected by students for independent reading who may be intrigued by the story but will find the language of Stoker's 1897 novel too intimidating or inaccessible.

Whilst this text would be more suited for independent readers, if this was to be utilised in a mainstream classroom setting, excerpts of it could be used in a creative writing unit. As many schools often study gothic literature (particularly around Year 9), excerpts of the text could be used for differentiation and to assist students in accessing the text. Additionally, this text could be used alongside Stoker's original text to compare how authors can express the same ideas and narrative in different ways – leading students to focus on the literary and aesthetic qualities of both texts. For example, it is within Stoker's original text that Dracula is introduced as 'a tall old man, clean shaven save for a long white moustache, and clad in black from head to foot, without a single speck of colour about him anywhere'. In comparison, Landman encapsulates the

same ideas of Stoker's prose through her simpler retelling, with her titular figure introduced as 'a very tall old man – deathly pale, white-haired, dressed all in black'. Overall, the two texts introduce the figure in a similar manner, whilst the 'deathly pale' complexion of Landman's Dracula reflects the colourless figure in Stoker's text. For this reason, the two texts could be used to examine how the voice of a text may differ or shift when responding to a different context, audience and purpose – with Landman's novella being written in a modern context for an intended modern, younger teenage audience than the original text. Although this might be used briefly in a gothic literature unit in junior-middle school English, a comparison of excerpts from this text to Stoker's original could make for an engaging lesson on writing styles – which may then prompt a class activity of students experimenting with adapting or revising pre-existing texts for new audiences.

Whilst Tanya Landman's text does not necessarily add anything that readers already familiar with the text will find rewarding, it is, all the same, a simplified, well-written introduction to Stoker's original narrative and an array of famous gothic tropes and characters still prevalent in popular culture today.


# Catch

Reviewed by Bianca Devlin Rose

**WRITER:** Sarah Brill | **PUBLISHER:** Allen & Unwin Children's, 2025, 304 pages
**RRP:** $24.99

**What should one reasonably expect a teenager to sacrifice in order to help strangers? And does the ability to save others from certain injury or death make you obligated to do so?**

Beth's family is atypically functional. Her sister is in Year 12, pregnant, and determined to keep the child and finish her education at the same time with the support of her family and the father. Beth's love interest is the boy next door – kind and complex in equal measure. Her parents are loving and supportive to a fault; Mum says all the wrong things and Dad struggles to talk at all, but their love transcends their foibles. Their family is imperfectly perfect, finding rhythm in the chaos of life.

This is the context in which Beth discovers she has an unnatural ability – she can catch people. From this simple premise Brill builds a skilful exploration of character and the impact such an odd superpower can have on a girl starting to form the foundations of her life.

This novel departs from the script of what superhero adventures, coming of age narratives and love-triangle romances have conditioned us to expect. Brill constructs a plot that prioritises the lives of complex, messy people over the well-worn cliches of the hero's journey. It's refreshing to engage with a text dedicated to centring characters that feel real.

Beth keeps her ability a secret, until that no longer serves her. She tells her friend, her sister, her parents, even her crush. One by one she extends trust and builds her support network, inviting the central conflict of the text. Is it worth it? Only Beth can feel the pull to catch someone, to feel their feelings of confusion, pain, joy, inattentiveness. Beth can connect with the stranger and feel the last moments of life they have before they fall and in that moment she has a choice – stay in calculus or leave class to save someone?

We as readers are invited to consider: What obligation does Beth have to herself – to give herself a fulfilling life, to protect herself from physical and mental harm, to support her health and happiness? As the pressure on her mounts, will she take the advice of those who can see the bigger picture? Of those who love her and value the sacrifices she is making? This climax alone offers more heart and emotional impact than the typical 'defeat the villain, save the romantic interest' plot point that inevitably lures in all spandex-clad superheroes. Because the villain isn't a monster to defeat, it is the question that hangs over the heads of those who love Beth.

What won't Beth sacrifice for the benefit of a stranger? Strangers who, without this superpower, she would have no obligation to?

The language of this novel makes it accessible to Year 8 and Year 9 students, particularly in generating responses interrogating the expectations of heroes, the consequences of living a life for the benefit of others and not yourself, even the dynamic of a family unit where the daughters are willing to ask for the support that they need. There is tremendous potential for deep and critical thinking, particularly in constructing a text response essay. However, its suitability as a class text depends entirely upon the context of the class and how appropriate the sensitive topics covered are for your cohort.

In celebration of the complexity of life, and all the different situations that might result in someone falling, it is important to indicate that there are trigger warnings for this novel. Suicide is one heavy topic that may be expected, where Beth catches a classmate who decides to jump. Other topics that need to be carefully considered include domestic violence, where there is a woman who is in a violent relationship who is pushed. This forms a pattern where Beth is confronted with the fact that although she has witnessed

a murder attempt, the victim feels no recourse other than to return to the perpetrator. Also, there is a suggestion of child endangerment, gently indicated by a stricken mother's claims that she was not aware of the fact that her baby could roll.

Class teacher guidance to support students through the themes of teenage pregnancy, suicide, depression and child endangerment is required. However, Brill creates a safe, non-confrontational space in which students can encounter these heavy themes and build an understanding of them. This is an excellent starting point for developing an awareness of such challenging topics that children are often sheltered from.

At its heart, this is a book for teenagers, written without the lecturing, pandering, unnecessary dramatisation or patronising tone often adopted in texts that try to appeal to teens. It stakes its claim over its subject matter and is respectful in its exploration of the world of a sixteen-year-old.

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