



VATE member book reviews

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Victorian Association for
the Teaching of English



One Knight Stand

Reviewed by Prue Bon, Emerald Secondary College

WRITER: Amie Kaufman & Meagan Spooner

PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin, 2026, 463 pages | **RRP:** \$26.99

'Road trip!' shouts Jane, one of Lady Isobelle and Sir (Lady) Gwen's friends, as they travel the dusty medieval roads to support our heroines on their latest adventure. For Isobelle and Gwen have found themselves yet again at the mercy of Lord Whimsitt (Lady Isobel's tyrannical guardian) and must obey his orders.

Even though the knight, Sir (Lady) Gwen, and her Lady Isobelle have already won a tournament, defeated a dragon and saved a town of women from being burned as witches, they must now set off towards Galanty-Uponne-the-Sea to face down a sea monster and an evil necromancer, as Lord Whimsitt commands.

However, there are some perks to Galanty-Uponne-the-Sea, including luxurious hot springs, some fantastic tourist attractions and, of course, the opportunity for Gwen and Isobelle to discover more about themselves.

The first book in this series, *Lady's Knight*, was a rollicking good adventure – one that I spent months promoting to many students as a great read. There is something particularly refreshing about a YA novel that presents its main relationship as respectful – no manipulation or power plays, just two

characters who care deeply about one another and do their best to navigate the challenges of life together. This second book in the series continues that thread; even though the romance between Gwen and Isobelle is deepening, there is still nothing even remotely spicier than a few deep and longing kisses. The beauty in the exploration of their relationship is how they navigate the feelings that they have for one another, and the external forces that threaten their safety – in this case, an evil necromancer determined to make everyone else feel as lonely as they do.

The historic medieval setting, combined with modern characters, might be anachronistic in the hands of many other writers, but Kaufman and Spooner know how far to push the boundaries without making it seem twee. While our heroines enjoy the privilege of the hot springs, cheesecake on a stick, and 'pose for portrait artists' (there's a rather nuanced critique of the power of social media hidden throughout), Gwen is still working at the forge to create a new sword, the ladies are still managing lengthy, unwieldy skirts and the entire plot is based around the fear and superstition of a medieval community.

While I wouldn't recommend *One Knight Stand* for an independent text study, this is only due to it being the second

novel in the series. The writing style and characterisation are strong enough that using excerpts from it would serve as excellent models within any creative writing unit in an English classroom.

For example, the clear voice that has been developed through a narrator that breaks the fourth wall to directly address the reader, and the rest of the novel being told from a third person omniscient perspective, enables a demonstration of how some distinct word choices can shift voice.

Equally so, the characterisation of Gwen and Isobelle grants them very independent and different properties. As Gwen 'raises an eyebrow', Isobelle 'responds diplomatically' to Lord Bingleton's declaration that 'modernisation is the answer' to the dwindling summer tourism in his town. Gwen and Isobelle are determinedly three-dimensional characters that balance each other well and provide a strong commentary of what can be considered feminine and masculine.

It would also provide an interesting opportunity in a Year 8 Humanities class to consider how fiction can use historical facts and twist them to suit a purpose and audience. There are scenes throughout the novel, including the opening one, where the action is built around historical facts of medieval

times, but of course, our heroine wears a 'leather breastplate' to defeat the sea monster, as, naturally, 'steel would drown her in an instant if she fell into the water'. These twists are often what create the humour throughout the novel and would engage a group of rowdy Year 8s as they begin to think more critically about the texts that they consume.

Commenting on a range of ideas and concerns around gender and relationships, this text – and its predecessor – are suitable for slightly older students in Years 10 and upwards. While there is nothing entirely untoward (with the exception of a few swear words) in this novel, the social critique being made might just go over the heads of younger readers, although

certainly some more mature Year 8 or 9s might appreciate the subtleties. It is definitely a series that should be highly recommended, and there is a likelihood that there will be more stories in the series to come.



Good Young Men

Reviewed by Jared Prentis, Kolbe Catholic College

WRITERS: Gary Lonesborough

PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin, 2026, 304 pages | **RRP:** \$22.99

'I remember feeling like I wasn't going to miss them at all. And maybe I'd still feel okay about that if Brandon hadn't died.'
(p. 96)

Set in the fictional, idyllic coastal town of Carraway's Point (NSW), *Good Young Men* is a contemporary Australian YA coming-of-age novel that has a little bit of everything that an English teacher wants in a text to recommend to students. The focus follows three Aboriginal boys – once childhood friends, now distant teenagers. Each is forever changed by the killing of their friend Brandon by a white police officer. As the trial approaches, racial tension brews in their small community and each boy deals with their own challenges. Kallum has been recently expelled from a prestigious school and has lost his AFL scholarship. Jordy is weighed down by his responsibilities to care for his family following his mother's death and navigates being openly gay with a closeted boyfriend. Dylan witnessed Brandon's death firsthand and is expected to testify.

The novel is thematically rich and poignant. You can expect to explore issues such as: racial prejudice; police brutality; questioning one's sexuality; fading friendships; parental pressure

to succeed; breaking down of family relationships; teenage pregnancy; and teenage drinking. It sounds like a heavy read, but I assure you it isn't. I flew through the novel and thoroughly enjoyed it.

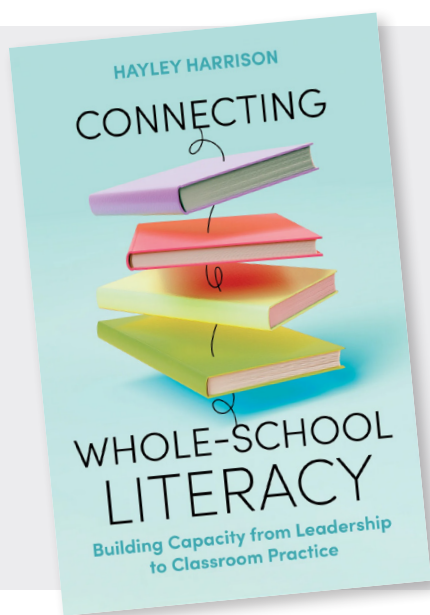
I am an avid reader of anything queer within the YA genre and have high expectations. I'm also always eager to find more First Nations representation in texts. This novel delivers both. But the true strength of the novel is the characterisation and relationships that are not necessarily romantic. The friendships between the boys felt authentic as they reconnected, and their issues are treated with care and understanding. I was grateful to see male friendships that portrayed emotional vulnerability; for example, here is a line in a conversation about grief: 'Kallum squeezes my hand gently [and says] "I'm here if you ever want to talk about your mum, or anything."' (p. 184). Even the minor characters are constructed well. The inclusion of an Aboriginal police officer (Kallum's mother) was particularly powerful in this story about police brutality, as it highlighted the internal conflict that can exist within difficult situations involving identity and authority. From a representation standpoint, *Good Young Men* scores a 10.

However, I'd say that other aspects were not entirely new reading experiences for me. It may only be relevant to other readers, but I found myself comparing the text to *The Sidekicks* (2016) by Will Kostakis which I have previously taught, as certain similarities are glaringly obvious. It is also a story of three friends (Ryan, Harley and Miles) with each offering their perspective following the death of their friend Isaac (due to a drowning accident). In both novels, there is a character questioning their sexuality and another character that channels their feelings of grief into making a film. I prefer *The Sidekicks'* playful use of screenplay structure, but prefer the queer representation in *Good Young Men*. Despite some crossover, I believe there is enough that allows *Good Young Men* to stand on its own due to a diverse range of characters. There is no singular queer or First Nation perspective, as multiple characters occupy these identities, which ultimately helps to establish nuance.

The text is appropriate for a high school student and depending on the cohort I would love to teach it. However, I would think carefully about listing it as a text to be studied in the class at my school. It's not egregious by any means, but occasionally the language (swearing) might not be appropriate for junior years.

Hookup culture is definitely present in queer spaces, and I won't be naïve to suggest that older students are oblivious to this either; however, I could imagine that the indirect reference to the social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people Grindr (renamed Maneatr in the text) could make teachers a little nervous. Apart from kissing, there is no explicit sexual content in the text so perhaps I'm being overly cautious.

Good Young Men is a suitable novel for a secondary school library and a recommended text for Year 10 English in a school community that is supportive of diverse representation.



Connecting Whole School Literacy

Reviewed by Lauren Maserow, McKinnon Secondary College

WRITER: Hayley Harrison | PUBLISHER: Amba Press, 2025, 198 pages | RRP: \$42.95

If you have been teaching English for a while, or even if you're a graduate teacher, you have probably heard Hayley Harrison's name before or even been to one of her workshops. Hayley is a literacy specialist and has been helping English teachers all over Victoria enhance their practice.

Hayley's new book is designed to help teachers (not just English teachers) to improve secondary students' literacy skills, while also targeting school leaders, to assist them in implementing changes which enable teachers to follow through with the improvements.

Even though Hayley's book is about 'literacy', she illustrates throughout the text the vital connection between a student's ability to communicate well with their ability to think critically and to dig deeper with their reasoning. As an English teacher with a deep passion for language (having also taught English Language), I have always been fascinated by words and their meanings and how they are constructed. This book provides a method to break down words with students and ensure they understand the parts that make up the whole. She explains that, too often, we try to improve students' vocabulary by

simply exposing them to new words, rather than following a strategic method so that they can learn the new word but more importantly, learn how to use it and also understand why they are using it in that context.

Unsurprisingly, improved reading literacy is also connected with critical thinking and having the patience to sit with a complex text. We are all too aware that many of our current students lack reading stamina, but Hayley states what many of us have suspected for a long time; that reading on a screen is not as good as reading it on paper. She states that when reading off their screens, students are 'browsing, scanning and skimming; reading widely not deeply.' This text guides teachers with strategies to select the right texts, but then ask the right questions so that students can be scaffolded in their thinking and reading.

One of the things that impressed me most about this book is the author's ability to help all teachers realise the role they play in improving students' literacy skills. We've all heard the cliché that 'we're all teachers of reading and literacy', but as English teachers, we know that a lot of it still falls to us. However, Hayley explains in her book that without a consistent and targeted whole school approach, students

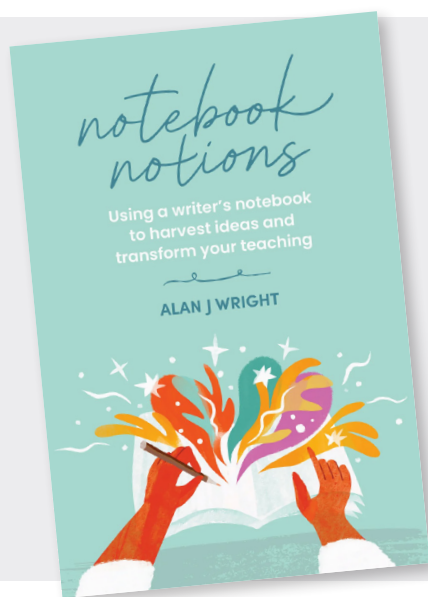
will continue to have gaps in their vocabulary and knowledge when it comes to literacy skills. She states early on that 'by considering and connecting the differences (and similarities) regarding literacy skills across different subjects, a school can find time for multiple exposures of different words and strategies [which leads to improved retrieval practice, which] promote[s] and maximise[s] transferability of language and skills between subjects (and into the outside world).' And ultimately, that's what we are wanting to achieve for our students, right?

This book is filled with practical advice, strategies, and resources targeting the areas covered in each chapter (Vocabulary, Reading, Writing), plus descriptions of what a classroom example looks like so we don't have to imagine how it would work. I found myself highlighting many sections within the text to take back to my school's Literacy Expert Teachers to share and use as we continually strive to improve the literacy skills of our student cohort.

I highly recommend this book for heads of departments and school leaders (such as Directors of Teaching and Learning) to read and take on board the author's expert advice. For the school leaders, Hayley provides

guidance and instruction for how to embed whole school literacy into the school environment, providing models, term overviews, and even suggested activities for National Literacy Week.

Our students are only getting more diverse in their needs and abilities, and professional texts like this are worth their weight in gold to help us meet those complex needs and try to bridge some of the gaps.



Notebook Notions: Using a writer's notebook to harvest ideas and transform your teaching

Reviewed by Melanie Van Langenberg

WRITER: Alan J Wright

PUBLISHER: Amba Press , 2026, 200 pages | RRP: \$39.95

'When a teacher chooses to write, it allows less experienced, highly impressionable writers to see firsthand the process of writing – from the spark of an idea through to the organisation of the text, through the struggle and problem-solving to the eventual sharing of words with an audience. It is a demonstration of powerful creative actions. It is the sharing of a lifelong gift.' (p. 2)

Alan J Wright is an Australian education consultant, writer and poet who, since 1983, has maintained the practice of a writer's notebook. He is, therefore, well-positioned to endorse the benefits this has on creativity, curiosity and cultivating a writing habit. Wright promotes the idea that if teachers are to inspire the expressiveness and imaginations of their students, it is imperative that they keep their own writer's notebook. In *Notebook Notions*, Wright guides teachers on how this can be achieved and how it can be used as an instructive model for supporting students in developing their own. Wright supports the view that 'writing is all about the forming of a habit. Writers are not born; they are created by action and deed' (p. 22). He sees a writer's notebook as an action that enables this habit.

Users of Wright's book will be guided through how to:

- select an appropriate notebook
- create an environment conducive to maximising a writer's notebook's potential
- collect inspiration within the writer's notebook, including words, overheard conversations, memories, artefacts and ephemera, and photographs of the writer's world
- be inspired by the writing of others
- start
- read like a writer
- establish 'ownership and engagement' (p. 141)
- progress from inspiration and recordings within the writer's notebook to writing projects
- instil agency in student writers, or those who Wright identifies as 'inexperienced writers'.

Wright also encourages teachers to be brave in sharing their notebooks with students, and suggests activities that enable this. He acknowledges that this is something that takes some courage, even for teachers, regardless of the fact they are 'the most proficient writer in [the] classroom' (p. 3).

In addition to this, he believes that teachers must encourage their students to recognise the storytelling potential

within their lives and to foster a classroom environment that develops this. For Wright, 'it is ... incumbent on teachers to set up for the sharing of these stories. It creates an environment that feeds ideas and launches possibilities' (p. 93). Wright relies on personal anecdotes and experience to give credibility to his ideas, supporting these with quotes from other writers, and endorsements from students who have participated in his workshops.

Wright also uses *Notebook Notions* to question elements of curriculum that stifle students' creativity. He believes 'standardisation is a sad global phenomenon' (p. 119) and goes on to provide advice on how this can be resisted. Chapter 12 is arguably the strongest section of the book, where Wright provides clear guidelines on the use of the writer's notebook and its potential.

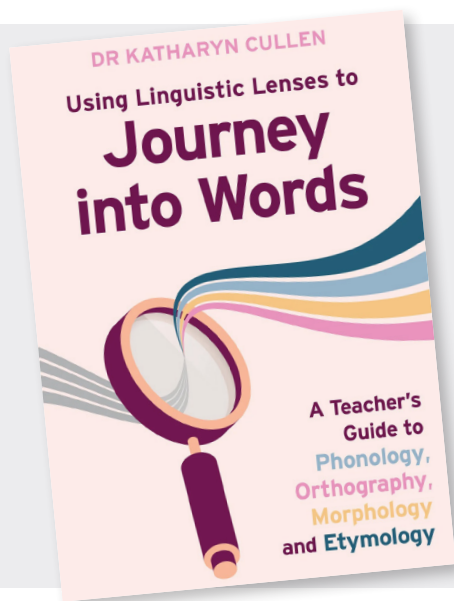
Aspects of Wright's book are a little repetitive, particularly in the mentions of how to choose a notebook, and early sections were heavy on platitudes about the joy of having a notebook and the abundant benefits of maintaining one. However, Wright's enthusiasm for the practice is indisputable. He is to be admired for his genuine belief that a writer's notebook is an authentic way to nurture students' confidence and

conviction in their voice, and the way in which he encourages this through this book and the work he does in schools.

Alan J Wright's *Notebook Notions* would be best suited as a teacher resource for primary school and lower-secondary teachers. The majority of the testimonies, examples and photographs included throughout the book are either from primary-aged students or are geared toward that age group. Teachers supporting students

in courses related to Frameworks of Ideas may also appreciate the sections where Wright espouses the need to be flexible with form, and the distinction he makes between teaching students *how* to write rather than *what* to write. Wright is earnest in his belief that writer's notebooks and a writing habit is essential and his celebration of the teacher's role in this: 'In classrooms where brave teachers dwell, there are signs of genuine progress towards

authentic writing practice. In these classes, curious learners are encouraged to write for their own purposes across a range of genres. They are alerted to the craft of writing. Their teachers enlist the support of numerous mentor authors to teach students to write with greater confidence and clarity. Be this teacher ...' (p. 140).



Using Linguistic Lenses to Journey into Words

Reviewed by Maria Nardo, Saltwater P-9 College

WRITER: Dr Katharyn Cullen | PUBLISHER: Amba Press, 2025, 278 pages | RRP: \$44.95

Dr Katharyn Cullen's resource provides English and Literacy teachers, school leaders, and educational experts with an instructional framework for teaching vocabulary using four key linguistic lenses known as the Framework for Orthographic Analysis: Phonology, Orthography, Morphology, and Etymology.

This text unpacks Dr Cullen's research into how to use these linguistic lenses to teach a deeper understanding of vocabulary that moves well beyond the realm of rote learning and the teaching of antiquated language rules and exceptions.

Each chapter provides a roadmap for what follows, providing an outline of what will be unpacked, an explanation of the key features of the lens in focus, an abundance of teaching tips, as well as guiding questions for the investigation of the lens in the classroom environment. This resource provides the audience with an explanation as to how each of the linguistic lenses leans into the next and provides the reader with some fantastic real life case studies that Dr Cullen speaks to with authenticity from her time as a teacher, a curriculum leader, and a specialist. Throughout

the book, she provides a myriad of opportunities to reflect and consider the content prior to continuing to unfold another aspect of the different lenses.

With her prior knowledge and experience of leading literacy teams in schools, the author goes the extra mile, providing the reader with professional development opportunities and activities to support the adoption of the Framework within a school's context. Further support is provided by free access to the Linguistic Lenses Graphic Organiser and other support material that can be downloaded from Dr Cullen's site for use in the classroom, as well as links to other useful sites that can be accessed by staff as well as being suitable for students.

This resource takes an holistic view of the current status of the literacy landscape in schools and offers a solution to improve results across the curriculum. Through the author's guidance, the reader gains an insightful understanding of each lens and how these combine to create a deeper knowledge and understanding of vocabulary from the primary years through to secondary years of education. Using her experience of the literacy landscape, Cullen has addressed any objections or hurdles that a literacy

leader might come across and assists in addressing the introduction of this research into the English curriculum in schools.

Dr Cullen's text provides a fantastic resource for any literacy leader as to how to revamp a tired literacy scope and sequence across an entire school, starting with the early years and extending through to secondary years. The book does include theory, as well as technical language and content, that might be daunting to some teachers who may not have a strong literacy background – the text does require some upskilling in literacy terminology (which Dr Cullen acknowledges). The challenge for the reader is having an leadership team, or principal, who would welcome a whole school long-term revamping of the vocabulary curriculum. A further challenge is how to integrate these ideas into the teaching of English without overloading the lessons and keeping the ideas in line with the requirements as outlined in the curriculum standards, and also by the School's Strategic Plan and/or Annual Implementation Plan.

Overall, this text is an ideal teaching resource suited to both an English teacher, a leader and a principal.



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