

## **Southern Cross University and Central Queensland University**

**Jessica Seymour and Denise Beckton**

### **Young Adult writing: setting the scene**

It has never been a more exciting time to be a Young Adult (YA) fiction scholar. Over the last several decades, the genre has risen in popularity, and the deep complexity and thematic density of the stories has become more and more widely accepted – both among readers, researchers and critics. The assorted narratives of contemporary YA are rich with mature themes, often throwing the reader's world and experiences into sharp clarity, but they are also capable of light-heartedness, irreverence and suspension of reality. YA fiction explores identity, growing up, and environmental, social and political concerns, often portraying violence and sexuality with startling precision and empathy. Australasian YA fiction, in particular, frequently draws on the relative isolation of the setting to bring issues of identity and belonging into sharper clarity. Ironically, while YA fiction is considered a genre for adolescents, these narratives are attracting a wider age-defined readership. Whatever the themes and concerns of the text, however, at the heart of every good YA narrative is a good story. The authors of this *TEXT* special issue have contributed their own perspectives on these stories with fresh research insights and voices, and together they provide a panoramic overview of contemporary Australasian young adult fiction.

*TEXT* Special Issue 32 presents a range of scholarly papers on the theme of 'Young Adult fiction in Australasia', edited by emerging YA scholars Jessica Seymour from Southern Cross University and Denise Beckton from Central Queensland University. This special issue also showcases a small selection of contemporary YA short stories by emerging Australasian YA fiction writers, and concludes with a collaborative review of contributors' favourite Australasian YA novels. Our purpose when proposing this special issue was to expose, and give credence to, the complex and extensive influence that Australasian Young Adult fiction has both within the region, and also internationally.

While it is true that YA scholarship, in response to the genre's growing popularity, has become more common in the last few decades, this scholarship is generally considered to be an offshoot or subcategory of the more established Children's Literature criticism. The purpose of this special issue is to provide an exclusively YA space for Australasian scholars and writers. Given that the YA genre is one of the most dynamic and economically progressive in the contemporary marketplace, we are eager to highlight Australasian YA fiction, scholarly research and creative practice in order to garner exposure and recognition for critical theory and discourse related to contemporary Australasian young adult fiction.

The diversity of submissions we received for this special *TEXT* issue indicates the exciting research being done in this area, as well as a need for a YA-specific publishing space. The contributors' reflection on what constitutes contemporary YA fiction in Australasia allows for discourse on the influences and issues that have contributed to, or are continuing to contribute to, YA authorship and readership, as well as its place in the literature industry and the wider community.

In 'The spaces between: examining young adult creative practice within an academic context', Anthony Eaton draws upon the ideas of practice-led research within the context of creative practice, to explore the intersections of the positions of writer-as-teacher, writer-as-artist and writer-as-scholar. Eaton draws upon his own published creative works to examine the degree to which his construction of young protagonists has been shaped by, and has in turn shaped, his changing habitus as a practicing 'young adult writer' and a scholar of children's literature. He argues that the liminality of the scholarly/creative space emerging from this nexus has impacted upon the ways he considers and constructs his own 'child' characters, and his position in relation to them.

In 'Bestselling Young Adult fiction: trends, genres and readership', co-editor of this issue Denise Beckton<sup>1</sup> explores research that, in scholarly terms, has eluded significant inquiry thus far by questioning how increased stakeholder involvement is impacting upon patterns of readership, content, and genre trends. Beckton reflects on the growing appeal YA fiction has for readers, writers, publishers and filmmakers, and extends discourse relating to international bestselling YA fiction and its relationship to Australasian YA fiction. Her article pinpoints the strategies and behaviours exhibited by invested groups and institutions, which are affecting change within Young Adult fiction.

Jessica Seymour explores the gap in literary theory as it applies to young readers – who, unlike other marginalised readers such as women, people of colour, and LGBTQ+ people, do not have a literary theory devoted to exploring their issues as they are represented in media. 'Youth theory': a response to aetonnormativity' explores the notion of aetonnormativity, or adult normativity, as a construction of power and disempowerment, and proposes a 'Youth theory' of analysis which attempts to respond to the needs of this marginalised readership.

Shivaun Plozza's 'The troll under the bridge: should Australian publishers of young adult literature act as moral-gatekeepers?' analyses criticism and praise for two controversial Australian YA novels, and argues that 'issues-books' are necessary to the development of teens. As a project editor, manuscript assessor and writer of YA fiction, Plozza is uniquely positioned to analyse the moral obligations of YA publishers, and concludes that publishers should continue to 'push the envelope' of YA fiction by making an effort to produce strong, sensitive and thought-provoking books for the readership.

Eugen Bacon's creative short story 'Diminy: conception, articulation & subsequent development' is complete in its incompleteness. There is no intended larger story. It is not a chapter of, or to, a novel. When the narrative abruptly ends it is without apology, but with boldness that tantalises readers to draw their own conclusions. This short

story empowers the reader to finish it. It integrates an invented world of ‘Londinux’ in a past that embeds advanced technology as found in character Freudo Brio’s futuristic clinic. It focuses on the innovation of science fiction, where an epoch of cyberspace and the borderless world, of thrall of other worlds and other cultures, of scientific and other advancements, makes place and setting (i.e. whether a work is set in contemporary Australia or elsewhere and elsewhere) irrelevant to the reader – whether young adult, or adult.

Catriona Mills traces the increased participation of marginalised authors in ‘Minority identity and counter-discourse: Indigenous Australian and Muslim-Australian Authors in the young adult fiction market’. Mills engages with data from the *AustLit: The Australian Literature Resource* database to examine the extent to which YA publishing discourse provides a platform for marginalised authors by specifically examining the writings of Indigenous Australian and Muslim-Australian authors. The paper incorporates reader-response-driven dialogues (such as from Twitter and Goodreads) to conclude that novels by marginalised authors remain a minority, but that the burgeoning field of YA fiction is creating more space for their work.

Gyps Curmi’s ‘Kelly 4 Shannon 4eva’ work is a creative exploration of one person’s intersectional trans experience – a perspective currently underrepresented in YA fiction – and told through first person point-of-view. Curmi uses humour and language as an inclusive tool for both a trans and broader readership, as well as creating a space for trans identification – particularly female-to-male. Curmi’s work does not discount the struggles of multiple subject positions, but disrupts and troubles negative associations by inserting an alternate conversation that emphasises resilience, and the importance of support in the acquisition of agency into this discussion.

Donna Lee Brien’s introductory study titled ‘What about young adult non-fiction?: profiling the young adult memoir’ identifies the YA memoir as a form of life writing that has attracted minimal scholarly attention. Brien outlines the history of scholarship and interest in YA non-fiction, surveying a number of examples of the contemporary young adult memoir in order to provide a preliminary narrative profile of the form. In identifying some common and more unusual subjects and narrative styles and forms, as well as remarking on the voice utilised in these texts, her article posits that the young adult memoir can be described as a distinct subset of both young adult and life writing texts which is worthy of further detailed investigation.

Jodi McAlister explores the Australian YA post-apocalyptic tradition in ‘Girls growing up Gordie: the post-apocalyptic heroine and the Australian girl reader of Isobelle Carmody’s *Obernewtyn Chronicles*’. McAlister draws on several different critical theories, including postcolonial theory, feminist theory, girlhood studies and auto-ethnography, to unpack the appeal of Australian post-apocalyptic narratives to a young female audience, and explores the ways in which fans have responded to the *Obernewtyn* series in particular, which remains largely uncelebrated outside the Australian context. McAlister concludes that the utopian fantasy at the heart of the books, which appeals to female fans both past and present, celebrates the non-normative and gives power to those aspects of personal identity which can set a young woman apart in a mainstream setting.

Maree Kimberley's exciting and thought-provoking short fiction, 'Fleur', explores the biotechnology and posthumanity in a YA context. The circus setting provides an added layer of cultural engagement by establishing a thematic link between the non-human and the performative. By showing a young female character amalgamating non-human biological matter with her own body, Kimberley explores the actions of the protagonist, the consequences of these actions, and her journey towards agency through a fusion of anima, human and self.

The final paper of the special issue is one the editors are particularly proud of. 'A series of fortunate readers: a collaborative review article of important Australasian YA writing' provides a space for the contributors to *TEXT* Special Issue 32 to celebrate their favourite Australasian YA texts. Each of the contributors was asked to provide a brief review of what they considered an important Australasian YA text. They were invited to speak to its scholarly worth, thematic concerns or their personal enjoyment of the text. The resulting review article, which was double blind peer reviewed, is a collaborative autoethnographic exploration of the intersectionality between scholarly engagement and enjoyment. While the range of YA stories examined by the contributors in this article demonstrates the exciting variety of stories within field, this review article also reveals the personal pleasure that each of the contributors takes in the genre that they study. While YA scholars may devote their research to examining and critiquing YA, we are fans of this work at our core.

Our purpose when proposing this issue was to provide a space for innovative examinations of Australasian YA fiction and its place in the wider YA genre. *TEXT* Special Issue 32 presents an exciting variety scholarly and practice-based works which examine both the theoretical and creative engagement with Australasian YA fiction. As editors, we were delighted to have worked with such interesting and engaged contributors to explore a field of writing that we are passionate about, and hope this collection contributes to a field ripe for exploration.

We also sincerely thank the referees who provided such generous and useful feedback to the authors and us, as editors, and especially, thank *TEXT* for not only providing this venue for work on this topic, but also encouraging early career researchers to engage in such important and formative scholarly work.

## Endnote

1. Following *TEXT*'s policy, the double-blind peer review process of contributing editors' work is handled by a third party, usually, and in this case, a senior editor of *TEXT*.

*Jessica Seymour is an early-career researcher at Southern Cross University and a recipient of the Australian Postgraduate Award. Her research interests include children's and YA literature, transmedia narrative strategies, fan studies and popular culture. Last year, she co-edited Fan Studies: Researching Popular Audiences, and*

*has contributed chapters to several essay collections, which ranged in topic from Divergent and Doctor Who, to ecocriticism in the works of JRR Tolkien.*

*Denise Beckton, BA Ed (ECU), Grad Dip PH (Curtin), Grad Cert CI (CQU), has a background in public health and education and is currently a tutor in Creative Industries at Central Queensland University (Noosa campus) where she is a research higher degree candidate, writing a novel and a related dissertation. Beckton has attained multiple awards in the fields of education and public health including the national ACHPER Award for excellence in Health and Physical Education, The WA Healthways Award and a category finalist notation for the WA Premier's Award (Education). Her latest publication centres on teaching pedagogy in the Creative Industries field.*