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## ***Introduction: Creative writing and surfing***

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**Griffith University****Nigel Krauth, Sally Breen, Tim Baker, Jake Sandtner****Introduction: Creative writing and surfing**

Writing generated by surfing is extensive. There are surf histories, surf memoirs and biographies, surf journalism and even surf encyclopedias. A developed research literature on surfing examines cultural and economic significance of surf and beach environments. But surprisingly little academic study has examined creative works based around surfing, even though a substantial list of publications (as many as 700, mainly fiction) dates back to the mid-19th Century when Herman Melville and R.M. Ballantyne first used surfing incidents in their novels. Internationally recognised writers who produced literary works based in surfing include Eugene Burdick, Frederick Kohner, Kem Nunn, Don Winslow, and Tim Winton. Recent Australian women writers known for their surf-based novels include Kathy Lette and Gabrielle Carey, Fiona Capp, Favel Parrett, and Madelaine Dickie. Beyond the work of these few named, there are hundreds more novels about surfing in adult, teenage, crime, romance and other popular genres. We believe this Special Issue of *TEXT* proposed the first call for academic refereed papers on the topic of creative writing and surfing.

A key aim for this project has been to attract scholarly attention to the literary surf genres – surf fiction, surf poetry and surf memoir. Until recently, creative writing about surfing did not have, it must be admitted, a great reputation. For many serious readers, surfing evokes ideas of adolescence, immaturity and indulgence, so they cannot take it seriously. The worldwide success of Frederick Kohner’s Gidget novels in the 1950s and 60s (and the films and TV series which followed) strongly established surf fiction as an *adolescent* phenomenon in popular culture, something adult fiction writers like Kem Nunn, Don Winslow and others have had to contend with. From the literary writer’s viewpoint, as reported by Tim Winton, there has been a fear of ‘the stigma of being labelled a “surfing writer”’ (Baker, in this issue, p. 11), but William Finnegan winning the Pulitzer Prize for his surfing memoir *Barbarian Days* in 2016 brought considerable respectability to surf writing. So, we hope things will change. While Matt Warshaw has complained that ‘there’s a lot of surf fiction out there, short and long, and damned if I can recall a single passage that gets anywhere close to a bullseye in terms of actual wave-riding’ (2020), we think Warshaw is making the wrong comparison. The act of surfing may indeed be difficult to capture in writing, but the value of the written surf genres lies in how they compare with other creative writing. And we think this collection of articles makes a positive start on clarifying that.

This special issue of *TEXT* invited creative writing academics from universities across three continents to consider the following:

- Surf fiction in general
- Surf poetry in general
- Surf memoir in general
- Surf writing in specific genres such as crime, romance, speculative, horror, etc
- Surf writing and place
- Surf filmscript as creative writing
- History of surf creative writing
- History of academic study of surf creative writing
- Cultural relevance and impact of surf creative writing
- New creative writing about surfing

We received responses in five of these areas.

Tim Baker's article, "'Dancing about architecture": the fraught practice and chequered history of writing about the physical act of wave riding', takes a wide survey of 'literary efforts to conjure the ethereal, multi-sensory experience' of participating in the physical act of surfing. Baker finds: 'Perhaps the point of surf writing is that the experience is so fleeting and elusive that attempting to convey it in literary form stretches any writer to their limits. It is an open-ended challenge in which we are almost destined to fail but compelled to try anyway, like paddling out in a tumultuous sea, or taking off on a close-out'. (p.2)

In 'The sea in our bodies: writing in/with/from the intertidal zone', Melissa Fagan also tracks the surfing / body / writing trajectory by pursuing *trans-corporeality* as an ethical and methodological basis for writing. By 'riding a wave of embodied creative-critical writing-thinking' she contemplates 'the interrelationships between surfing, writing and practice-led research' and in doing so demonstrates how surfing has influenced both her writing and thinking (p.1).

Hanabeth Luke's memoir piece, 'Footprints in the sands of time', provides insights into how surfing culture can influence family generations as they move between different continents, with a life of surfing guiding their way. 'From the earliest age, I only knew a life with surfing in it, and I realise now that the life of surfing in my family started long before I was born, long before even my parents were born...' (p. 1).

Patrick Moser, in 'Origins of the paddle-out ceremony', traces the history of a custom which may or may not have its roots deep in Hawaiian traditional cultures where so much of surfing lore comes from. Moser says: 'My goal in writing this essay is to try and reflect the cultural unity that created the paddle-out ceremony by combining written and oral histories that evoke key aspects of surf culture identity' (p. 1).

The association of surfing with Hawaiian and Pacific traditions is well-established, but Nik Zanella's discoveries in old Chinese art and writing – which he recounts in "'Treading waves" on the Qiantang River: an exploration of wave riding in Chinese history and literature' – shed a significant new light on the cultural history of surfing. When Zanella saw a bass-relief dated 1880 in a Buddhist monastery in Yunnan Province (southwest China),

decades before surfing spread from Polynesia to the West, he noted: ‘Their perfect sideways stance, the stoked grin on their faces; it was a “different beginning”, disconnected from the Polynesian version of the sport’ (p. 1). Seeing this sculpture sent him on a significant exploration of Chinese poetry and prose.

For contrast, in ‘Sea city’, Sally Breen and Aaron Chapman have collaborated on a multimodal work set squarely in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in a city strongly associated with surfing – the Gold Coast, Australia. The combination of writer (Breen) and photographer (Chapman) produces a powerful and subtle seascape for a surfside city. ‘This is what it feels like, to be in this city full of hot salty breath, full of long languid lines, frayed on the edges with palm trees and a gold embossed night...’ (p. 1). The historic importance of photography – especially in surf journalism, as a way to show what words can’t easily portray – is investigated in this experimental piece.

Jake Sandtner and Nigel Krauth turn attention to the historic development of the surf genre in “‘Competitors in the surf-riding contest’: battle as theme in the first three surf novels’. This article looks at the first three novels that featured surfing – written by Herman Melville, R.M. Ballantyne, and Alexander Twombly – to examine why the authors wrote about surfing in conjunction with themes of battle and contest.

Lynda Hawryluk undertakes a fascinating experiment in her paper ‘Surfing with shivers: the Gothic Far North Coast in poetry’. Hawryluk combines an academic investigation – into Gothic associations for the town of Ballina on the Far North Coast of New South Wales – with a suite of new creative nonfiction poetry which ‘demonstrates the Gothic elements present in Ballina’s history of shark attacks, interactions, and the way the town and its surfers have responded to its reputation as “shark city”’ (p. 1).

Donna Lee Brien then presents a comprehensive survey of ‘published narratives about surfing and sharks in Australia over the past century, mapping representations across various genres and forms of writing. These narratives include works of non-fiction (including for younger readers), memoir, travel writing, humour and other long-form creative nonfiction’ (p.1). Brien notes changing attitudes to both human-shark interactions and to sharks themselves in the literature.

Finally, in ‘Early surf fiction and the white worldview’, Nigel Krauth and Jake Sandtner look back to the first 90 years (from 1849 to 1940) in the development of surf fiction, and how the perspective taken on surfing was shaped by the colonial worldview current at the time, with its attendant super-narrative of white cultural and individual superiority, marginalisation of non-white traditions, and disrespect for others’ values and practices.

We trust you will enjoy this ground-breaking collection of scholarly articles and creative works about creative writing and surfing.

## Works cited

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