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## (Re)Examining Teenagers in Award-winning Australian Books for Young Readers

Literature for young adults reveals attitudes to, and constructions of, adolescence. As Jeffrey Kaplan has written, young adult literature “has much to say about how young people are conceptualized in both fiction and non-fiction and naturally, as well, in the real world.” This article will consider such conceptualisations over almost eighty years of literature for young adults in Australia and, because this is a lengthy period of time to survey, a selection of books will be made. The intention of this essay is therefore to use representative samples drawn from winning books awarded by the Children’s Book Council of Australia chosen from each decade from 1972, the first that might be regarded as a “young adult” book, to 2022 to consider changes in the representations of families and family relationships, narrative style and settings in order to elucidate concomitant changes and comparisons in depictions of adolescence in Australia.

The oldest, beginning in 1946, and regarded by many as the most prestigious awards for literature for children and young adults in Australia, are those awarded each year by the Children’s Book Council of Australia, an organisation that has contributed more than any other “to the development of children’s literature in Australia” (Smith, Hamilton 7). Over the years categories have changed acknowledging changes in readership, in conceptions of childhood and recognising a newer, defined category of ‘teenage.’ However, prior to the introduction of the Older Readers category in 1982, there were several

award-winning books that might well have fitted this category that is designed for readers up to the age of 18. Older Readers books in most cases also depict characters who are in their teens. What Junko Yokota has to say about book awards is relevant here. Children:

are often required to read award-winning literature in school, adults often view award winners as credentials determining worth, publishers see them as moneymakers, and authors and illustrators bask in the recognition. (467)

Further, as Schwebel and van Tuyl comment regarding the Newbery Medal-winning books, the books with the “shiny medal” are the ones that “parents, grandparents and other adults recognise immediately and gift to children again and again” (1). Award-winning books have wide-ranging influence and are significant in both reflecting current views of young adults as well as critiquing them and influencing them. More broadly too, Karen Coats argues that “young adult literature exerts a powerful influence over its readers at a particularly malleable time in their identity formation” (315). Schwebel and van Tuyl also point out scholarship in the area of children’s literature has grown enormously in the last fifty years or so (6) and within that scholarship, the study of award-winning books is important as it elucidates continuing elements in the selection of books regarded as the best.

The first book to be considered is Hesba Brinsmead’s 1971 novel, *Longtime Passing*, which won the CBCA Book of the Year award in 1972. This was prior to there being a designated Older Readers award but the book can be seen as a YA novel, more suited to readers in secondary education than those in primary school. Brinsmead’s parents had been missionaries but, when they returned to Australia, her father ran a sawmill near where a number of Hesba’s uncles lived and her mother grew flowers to sell commercially. Most of her education was received at home from her mother (Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership). Brinsmead has said that her upbringing in the country:

made me what I am... I really believe... that a person is their background... the environment and the individual are inextricable combined... I was an isolated child... and this was a stimulation to the imagination. (Interview with Lunney)

Her book is largely autobiographical. The narrative point of view is that of the youngest child Teddy, although much of it is a kind of hearsay, as Teddy

is not born until part way through the book. (The intrusion of the comment “before I was born” emphasises this rear vision view). Brinsmead has said that, when she writes for adolescents, she just regards them as “people” and talks to them as “people—not... inferior beings. I’m simply trying to talk to them about what’s relevant to them” (Interview with Lunney). *Longtime Passing* valorises pioneering families and life on the land. It is really a paean of praise for the sort of upbringing the author herself had and a nostalgic look at the past. It is in stark contrast to *It’s Like This, Cat*, the earlier American book (1964) that Horning and van Tuyl (Horning, van Tuyl 149) argue began the genre of Young Adult literature. The construction of the adolescent protagonist in this is vastly different from the characters in *Longtime Passing*. He is fourteen years old and ranges freely across New York. In a further contrast to Brinsmead’s book, Emily Neville’s novel is written in the present tense with a first-person narrator, the 14-year-old Dave, giving a sense of immediacy and relevance to a teenager reader. Using the first person and including extensive vernacular is very different to the more formal style of Brinsmead’s writing and constructs a very different kind of protagonist. Although Brinsmead includes occasional bits of slang such as “She’ll be Jake” (Brinsmead 69) (everything will be alright) that were intended to denote rural life, these were dated even at the time of writing.

Brinsmead’s novel is a traditional third-person narrative set in the 1920s soon after the end of World War 1. For readers in the 1970s, this was “ancient history.” The concerns of the book were far removed from those of the teenage reader to whom it was directed. In 1971 the Australian Government announced the withdrawal of troops from Vietnam (Staff Reporter). The Vietnam War had been a major concern for young people in Australia, leading to widespread demonstrations. A further concern for young people was indicated in the Melbourne newspaper *The Age* in December 1971. The front-page headline read “Help on the way for 190,000 school leavers” as the Prime Minister promised job creation and a curb on unemployment (Barnes 1). The nostalgia for a simpler life, albeit one interrupted by the Depression displayed in Brinsmead’s book, is thus in contrast to the realities of Australian youth in the 1970s, the majority of whom lived an urban, not rural, life.

The CBCA Judges’ Report for 1972 described Brinsmead’s book as a “warm-hearted novel for teenage girls” (CBCA *Judges’ Report* 1972 1). The roles within the book, mirroring those generally in place in the 1920s, were strongly gendered too with the girls helping their mother in the seemingly endless list of household chores (Brinsmead 87) and Mark, the only boy, expected to help his father as he got older.

In 1982 we come to a novel by Colin Thiele, *The Valley Between*. Set in the horse and buggy age, this too suggests nostalgia for a vanished past and ambivalence about the coming of motor cars and the changes they bring. This, like *Longtime Passing*, focuses on a rural family, this time a farming family. Thiele was one of Australia's most respected writers for young people who wrote over 100 books ranging from picture books to others like this one, aimed at a teenage audience. His work has been described as a "unique brand of storytelling impacting on generations of children and adults alike" (Anon. "Colin Thiele 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Exhibition"). Like Brinsmead, he frequently drew on his own childhood and adolescence: "Understandably, a good deal of my later writing grew out of it" (Thiele 1997: 15). The CBCA Judges' Report for 1982 makes reference to that: "Thiele's boyhood in a close-knit community has once again provided him with the material for a delightful story" (CBCA *Judges' Report* 1982: 8). Thiele's novel, while nostalgic, can thus be described as an early OwnVoice novel as he was writing about the German community he grew up in. OwnVoices is a term coined in 2015 (Booth, Narayan 198) and such novels reflect the real experience of young people coming from those, often marginalised, communities.

The life of teenage boys Thiele describes is vastly different from that of teenagers in 1982, even those living in rural areas and on farms. In his autobiography *With Dew on my Boots*, Thiele considers the mechanisation that began to take over farming during his childhood and how it changed even the attitude to the land itself:

With the hand-held hoes and scythes of our forefathers, the earth was close and friendly, something to revere. With the advent of agricultural science and huge machines it became a 'resource' to analyse, modify and exploit. (Thiele 1997: 3)

Something of this sentiment is present in *The Valley Between*. The book is a series of interlinked chapters recounting incidents in the life of Benno, the protagonist. Like many young people at the time, Benno leaves school at 13 and joins his father working on the farm, expected to do a man's work. He is, however, given some agency as a character. In one dramatic incident he saves a train from derailing, using his ingenuity to devise a signal to stop the train. In doing so, he rises above adult expectations of the sort of behaviour expected from him as a thirteen-year-old (Thiele 1981: 141).

The judges described Benno as "taking his first tentative steps towards manhood and responsibility" (CBCA *Judges' Report* 1982: 8). Thiele's use of a teenage protagonist moves *The Valley Between* closer to contemporary novels

focalised through a teenage character. However, even in 1981 Sheila Egoff wrote that “a broadened landscape of harsh reality has superseded the more simple joys of child and family life” (qtd. in Heuschele 26). Thiele’s book does not really describe Benno as confronting “harsh reality” in the sense Egoff means and as contemporary teenagers do.

In both Thiele’s and Brinsmead’s books, First Nations peoples are virtually invisible. Brinsmead’s characters are described as taking over Crown land, thus perpetuating the myth of *terra nullius* (although she describes an inaccessible part of the Blue Mountains as “belonging” to a “tribe of wild blacks” (Brinsmead 2). The families in the Barossa Valley in Thiele’s book are German immigrants, as was his own. The land they settled was never ceded. Both books were post the 1967 referendum “in which Aboriginal Australians were finally recognised as citizens, [and] provided more momentum to the land rights struggle by raising the profile of Indigenous issues with the Australian public” (Anon. “Aboriginal Tent Embassy”). Many young people joined demonstrations for First Nations’ land rights following the referendum. However, for young adult First Nations people, the absence from books of depictions of characters like them, their communities and experiences can have the effect, as one author put it, of suggesting that “they themselves did not have a Place” in Australia nor the same “possibilities” as their peers (Booth, Narayan 204). Further, the absence can reinforce for non-Indigenous readers the notion that First Nations people were of little consequence, perhaps a continuation of the idea that First Nations people were a “dying race” (Brantlinger 125).

The winner of the CBCA Book of the Year: Older Readers in 1992 was Eleanor Nilsson’s *The House Guest*. In contrast to the two previous books, the setting is urban and the main protagonist, Gunno, lives with his father as his mother has left (Nilsson 34), a loss that the author constructs as resulting in a deficit model of childhood. The year 1989, Margaret Heuschele argues, was when an urban setting became the principal location for young adult novels (Heuschele 207). In such a setting the teenager is no longer a child of nature, rather one who is influenced by the life and people of the city, likely to encounter bullying, peer pressure and gangs as well as engaging in sexual activities.

Gunno is, like Thiele’s Benno, only 13. But his is not a life of rural activity. He is part of a gang of young teenagers that breaks into houses. Heuschele notes that crime becomes quite a prevalent theme in young adult fiction in the 1990s, although most of it is committed by adult characters rather than by teenagers. This depiction of crime and criminals was “one of the most dramatic changes” in young adult novels (Heuschele 111). As a kind of marker of an essential goodness in Gunno, he uses the money they steal to buy books. He becomes

particularly attached to one house the gang has targeted and reads the books he finds in what seems to have been a boy's bedroom: "sometimes Gunno felt he was trying to catch up on Hugh's childhood, and through it his own, by reading his books" (Nilsson 37). Gunno had previously been a great reader but had not read much since his mother left (Nilsson 37), a loss he is trying to rectify. In an episode of magic realism, Gunno plays out aspects of a recurring dream he has had, goes back into the past, visits and becomes trapped in the cave where Hugh has died, and becomes the child as hero, rescuing Hugh, although to no avail, as the other boy dies anyway (Nilsson 118–142). As a result of this, Gunno also becomes the child as redeemer allowing Hugh's mother a kind of closure, as she believes in his return to the past and takes great comfort in the fact that Hugh was not alone when he died (Nilsson 151).

Gunno is given agency by the author and acts as conscience for the gang, telling them that what they are doing is wrong (Nilsson 73). Jess, the only girl in the group, tells him that the others had agreed and disbanded the gang (Nilsson 155). This becomes a signifier for a new stage of their lives when Gunno becomes aware of Jess as a possible girlfriend and tells her his real name is Gunnar, marking a break between his childish persona and that of the more mature adolescent (Nilsson 156).

*Forest* (2001) by Sonya Hartnett was the winner of the CBCA Book of the Year: Older Readers in 2002. However, for the purposes of considering constructions of teenagers, the book is not particularly helpful, dealing as it does with anthropomorphic cats. I will therefore consider an Honour Book for that year, *Mahalia*, by Joanne Horniman, (2001), described by one reviewer as a "refreshingly honest addition to the lean offerings depicting teen dads" (Anon. "Mahalia").

*Mahalia* is the name of the baby born to teenage parents, Emmy and Matt. Matt was brought up by his mother with his father virtually absent from his life: "His father hadn't wanted children, so she'd brought Matt up by herself, with no contact really, no support" (Horniman 19). Although Matt's mother had tried to fulfil what traditionally might be seen as a father's role—taking him to ovals, teaching him how to kick a soccer ball and making paper planes with him—Matt felt the absence and that his was a lonely house with "just the two of them... He determined when he was very young that he would see his own children grow up" (Horniman 19). Silva and Savitz argue that the common construct of teenagers as peer-oriented, unpredictable and needing to evolve into some kind of "enlightened state" is often at odds with both the reality and the way they are constructed in young adult literature (Silva, Savitz 323), arguing there are many books depicting adolescents taking on "adult roles, demonstrating emotional

discipline and acting with agency and independence” (Silva, Savitz 327). This description is applicable to Matt, who, when circumstances require it, takes on the adult role of carer for Mahalia. In a reversal of more usual portrayals, it is Emmy, the child’s mother and Matt’s former girlfriend, who is unable to cope with the responsibility and restrictions of motherhood and leaves Matt and Mahalia. Matt displays the emotional maturity to take on Mahalia’s care, although he sometimes finds this challenging and realises he will need support and help with raising her.

As a younger child, Matt has been a nurturing redeemer, a trope that has persisted from much earlier novels—George Eliot’s *Eppie*, for example, transforms Silas Marner from an embittered, lonely old man to a happier, more sociable one in *Silas Marner* (1861) and Ethel Turner’s *Little Mother Meg* (1902) has Nell Woolcott turn the neighbour from thoughts of suicide. In *Mahalia*, in a scene that emphasises the remote and isolated life he and his mother lead, pre-teen Matt finds his mother sitting “seemingly unreachable” at the kitchen table. He goes to the composting toilet in the garden and brings back the first “lovely silty remains” (Horniman 29). He encourages his mother to look and smell whereupon she gives a “real, happy smile” and begins to chatter happily (Horniman 29). As a teenage father who describes his love for Mahalia as pure (Horniman 192). Matt realises that nurturing is the one thing he does “really well” (Horniman 195), wired even to hear her cough in the night and wake and go to her (Horniman 127).

In 2012 Scot Gardner won the Older Readers Award for *The Dead I Know*, a book that constructs its protagonist as a deeply troubled, but basically good-hearted, adolescent. Gardner has written that he worked as:

a counsellor and youth worker with disadvantaged teens. I... met teens... who’d experienced more pain and loss in their short lives than a village might in a whole generation. They inspired me. (Rish)

The main character, Aaron, does not come from a nuclear family. Instead, he lives with Mam, his grandmother, a former university lecturer, in a caravan. He is an introverted, often almost silent, boy who suffers from nightmares and sleepwalks. He has frequently had to change schools as he is bullied, receiving “insults and contempt” (Gardner 24) because of his reticence.

He has had to become increasingly responsible for Mam, who is succumbing to dementia. Aaron tries to hide this from people around him and even denies it himself for some time until forced to confront reality and Mam goes into care. Early manifestations of Mam’s deteriorating mental acuity show through her

buying unnecessary amounts of toilet paper and many bottles of dishwashing liquid instead of food. Signifying his need to take on the adult responsibility for the two of them, Aaron says “Our roles had changed, and I *felt* it” (Gardner 81).

Aaron is himself in need of support and care and he finds this, rather ironically, from the undertaker with whom he starts to work on leaving school, a man who eventually becomes a foster father for him. In this family Aaron finds security, the ability to let go the role of protector of Mam, a realisation that many families have secrets and the freedom to reveal his own traumatic background.

*Longtime Passing*, the first book discussed here, included elements of what we would now identify as domestic abuse. The father criticises the mother, complaining she has not dusted the mantelpiece and ignoring all the other things she does in the house, the garden and schooling the children (Brinsmead 87); while the mother blames herself for “putting him in a bad mood” (Brinsmead 61). However, there is little critique of it and this is basically a close-knit, nuclear family. By the time we reach 2012 and Gardner’s book, the violence is explicit, physical and hugely damaging to Aaron who clearly suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. He has been made to witness his father murder his mother and then commit suicide and that suppressed memory is the cause of Aaron’s ongoing depression and nightmares (Gardner 91). This raw realism that reflects Egoff’s characterisation of the “harsh reality” of many teenage novels, is a long way from many earlier more ‘cosy’ family stories.

Finally, the 2022 winner was *Tiger Daughter*, a complex exploration of many issues affecting young people today. This is an OwnVoice novel written by Rebecca Lim. The book was inspired, she says, “largely by [her] fury about the lack of diversity on high school booklists” (O’Brien 2) as well as wanting “to dispel myths about migrants and refugees” in Australia (O’Brien 2). Her sentiments echo those expressed to Booth and Narayan by authors who “framed their OwnVoice books as a message or a sign to teenage readers that their readers’ identity had a place in Australian society” (Booth, Narayan 204). In a note at the end of her book, Lim states that a large part of why she writes is “about building empathy in my readers” (Lim 211) as well as tackling “things that humanity is currently grappling with” including sexism, racism, violence against women including financial abuse and ideas of what is “normal” (Lim 212).

The key focus of the book is on Wen, the only child of Chinese immigrants to Australia and the pressures she faces growing up. She and her friend Henry Xiao work hard towards achieving entrance into a select high school. They find that, at their current school, even some teachers lack understanding of migrants—one of them tells Henry he needs to “live,” not “stay inside that comfortable shell you’ve built around yourself” (Lim 9). This, the author makes



clear through the voice of Wen, is a complete misunderstanding of her life and Henry's: "He doesn't understand that every day Henry and I are alive, there is no comfortable shell and we are always at risk" (Lim 10). Henry and Wen help each other to prepare for the exam with Henry helping Wen with maths and Wen helping him with English.

Wen lives in constant fear of her father's violence:

I'm constantly afraid of setting off all the little bombs I don't even know I've trodden on until they go off in my face. *Was it something I said? Was it the missing 48 percent on my maths quiz? Was it because I asked for more tuckshop money? What?* (Lim 18)

Her father also repeatedly belittles her, calling her "useless" and "no brain" (Lim 27), suggesting there is no way she could pass the exam. This is reminiscent of statements by author Jess Ho, also the child of Chinese immigrants, who has described her childhood as being "raised to have no personal ambition. Instead, I was culturally required to fulfil my obligations" and when she didn't become a doctor she became "the Disappointment Child" (Ho; Cadzow 7).

Wen witnesses her father's abuse of her mother: financial abuse, physical violence and coercive control. He insists, for example, on his wife serving eight dishes of food each night so that she becomes anxious and afraid if she miscounts (Lim 114), he insists on her dressing in a particular way although there is no money for clothes and he verbally and physically abuses her (Lim 145). This portrayal of violence in the family reflects that revealed in statistics of violence across socio-economic and diversity groups in Australia: (Anon. "Safer: A Resource to Help...").

Henry sinks into a deep depression after his mother commits suicide needing Wen's gentle, ongoing support and encouragement as she supplies homework to him. In addition, she and her mother deliver food. This is a cause of further friction with Wen's father, who labels the Xaio family "disgraced" because of the suicide and forbids Wen to have any contact with them (Lim 151). In a similar way to Matt in *Mahalia* examined earlier, Wen is here constructed as a child as nurturer, and ultimately as a kind of redeemer, both longstanding tropes in literature for young readers.

The violence—described by the CBCA judges as the "challenges and injustices of culturally-based domestic violence" ([cbca.org.au/book/tiger-daughter](http://cbca.org.au/book/tiger-daughter))—in the book means there is a loss of female agency. This is ultimately opposed by both Wen and her mother as the former continues to support Henry and challenges her father (whom she describes as a "walking, ranty lecture on two

legs” (Lim 135) by quoting back to him things he has said about goodness (Lim 151) and undertaking the exam despite him. Her mother eventually plucks up the courage to take on a part-time job.

## Conclusion

What we see in this brief history of young adult award-winning novels in Australia is that there are a number of continuing tropes of young people in the literature as well as a number of changes that depict the contemporary realities of at least some adolescents. Margaret Heuschele, quoting a number of critics (35–6), argues there is some debate about the ‘realism’ of books that place teenagers in extreme situations such as that of Aaron in Gardner’s book. Nonetheless, many young people are living with domestic violence, youth suicide is an ongoing issue (Anon. “Suicide & Self-Harm Monitoring...”) and young people face increasing concerns about matters such as climate change. Writing as early as 1997, Maurice Saxby quotes two university students arguing that their generation was “more likely to face problems of youth suicide, drug abuse, domestic violence, unemployment and social crime than any previous generation” (362). Silva and Savitz have pointed out that different settings in novels impact on teenagers and influence behaviour (325). The novels examined here move from a rural setting to an urban one, placing the protagonist in an environment in which most Australians live. The activities the characters undertake have also changed from the rural activities in Brinsmead’s and Thiele’s books to those associated with urban life and with adolescents remaining at school until at least sixteen. There are now explicit depictions of mental illness among young people. The narrative voice may have changed from a third-person omniscient narrator to a first-person narrator, giving more immediacy to the narration and allowing for a teenage voice to speak to readers. Nonetheless, there are also some constructions that continue.

Family relationships remain a constant in the books examined, even if the construction of the nuclear family has changed. The trope of the child as nurturer, often taking over the position from an adult and even acting as the carer of that adult, has continued in many books. A more recent expansion of this construction is that of the child as protector of an adult, usually their mother, from family violence. The young protagonist is often shown as developing responsibility and maturity and taking on the role of adult. Contemporary reality rather than nostalgic depictions has become the norm, thus fulfilling the expectations of teenagers, as Maurice Saxby wrote in 1997, to have their literature reflect the world they know (Saxby 353).

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| Abstract

MARGOT HILLEL

**(Re)Examining Teenagers in Award-winning Australian Books for Young Readers**

The Children's Book Council of Australia has been providing awards for young readers since 1946. Over the intervening years categories have been enlarged, acknowledging in part changes in readership and changes in conceptions of childhood and recognising a newer, defined category of 'teenage'. However, prior to the introduction of the Older Readers category in 1982, there were a number of award-winning books which might well have fitted into that category. This paper will examine books for Older Readers 1972–2022 as a way of comparing Australian attitudes to 'childhood' across those decades, recognising that the material young people read often both reflects societal attitudes and reinforces them. What sort of childhood/teenagehood is portrayed, valorised or criticised in these books and have these aspects changed?

**Keywords:** adolescence, Young Adult literature, Australia

| Abstrakt

MARGOT HILLEL

**(Ponowne) badanie nastolatków w nagradzanych australijskich książkach dla młodych czytelników**

Australijska Rada Dziecięcej Książki przyznaje wyróżnienia młodym czytelnikom od 1946 roku. W kolejnych latach, respektując częściowo zmiany w czytelnictwie i koncepcjach dzieciństwa oraz uznając nowszą, zdefiniowaną kategorię „nastoletnich”, zasady nagradzania uległy poszerzeniu. Jednak przed wprowadzeniem kategorii starszych czytelników w 1982 roku istniało wiele uhonorowanych książek, które równie dobrze mogły pasować do tej kategorii. Niniejszy artykuł, analizując książki dla starszych czytelników opublikowane w latach 1972–2022, porównuje postawy Australijczyków wobec „dzieciństwa”. Akcentuje, że często czytane przez

młodych ludzi materiały odzwierciedlają postawy społeczne, jak i je wzmacniają. Jakie dzieciństwo/młodzież jest przedstawiane, waloryzowane lub krytykowane w tych książkach i czy te aspekty uległy zmianie?

**Słowa kluczowe:** adolescencja, literatura młodzieżowa, Australia

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