

Write4Children

Vol. 3 Issue 1, pp. 68 – 75, November 2011

<http://www.winchester.ac.uk/academicdepartments/EnglishCreativeWritingandAmericanStudies/publications/write4children/Documents/w4cnovember2011.pdf>

68

Out of the drought: Australia's junior verse novels

Kate Deller-Evans
Flinders University

Abstract

After the first flush of verse novels for young adults (YA) in the 1990s has died down, verse novels in Australia for junior readers have sprouted. In 2010 Lorraine Marwood won the inaugural Children's Fiction category of the Prime Minister's Literary Awards for *Star Jumps*.

Key Words

Verse novels, awards, Karen Hesse, Lorraine Marwood.

Australia is a land of climatic extremes, where droughts and bushfires may be ravaging one part of the country at the same time floods are devastating elsewhere. Such cycles of drought can be difficult enough for the urban dwellers who live in the cities that hug the coast, but particularly so in the rural communities, where making a living can become touch and go. The first winner of the Australian Prime Minister's Literary Award for Children's Fiction was poet Lorraine Marwood, with a story set in the 2000s drought. *Star Jumps* (2009) is her second junior verse novel. Just as her novel features the first flush of wildflowers out of the drought, so verse novels for junior readers appear to be sprouting.

In the US, a book about the terrible dustbowl era of the Depression was the first verse novel for children or YA readers to win a significant prize, in this case, the 1998 Newbery Medal. Karen Hesse says of her historical novel *Out of the Dust* that she endeavoured to write from grant funding on 'agricultural practices on the Great Plains' (1998 n.p.). Instead, her theme was of forgiveness: '[t]he whole book. Every relationship. Not only the relationships between people but the relationship between the people and the land itself' (1998 n.p.). It was a highly-awarded book, and it was a different sort of book and one not written in the way the author imagined she would: with Hesse telling the story 'in a way that is as spare and emaciated as the bare bones of the poems themselves' (1998 n.p.). *Out of the Dust* reads like diary entries with sections following the progress of seasons (beginning Winter 1934 and ending Autumn 1935) told by protagonist Billie Jo. In it, 'Hope Smothered' could almost be considered its title piece:

While I washed up dinner dishes in the pan,
the wind came from the west
bringing—
dust.

I'd just stripped all the gummed tape from the windows.
 Now I've got dust all over the clean dishes.
 I can hardly make myself
 get started cleaning again.
 Mrs. Love is taking applications
 for boys to do CCC work.
 Any boy between eighteen and twenty-eight can join.
 I'm too young
 and the wrong sex
 but what I wouldn't give
 to be working for the CCC
 somewhere far from here,
 out of the dust.

May 1935 (1998:181).

Where Hesse's protagonist feels blighted by the times, in the contemporary Australian context Marwood's three younger children characters in *Star Jumps* display a range of responses to the drought that threatens their dairy farm:

Connor comes back then
 And sees what we are doing.
 "Useless," he says.
 "How can we help? This is bigger than us. Bigger."
 He slumps in a chair.
 Keely looks as if she is about to burst into tears.
 "But we can help, Connor, we can.
 What about tidying up the machinery shed
 Or digging the vegie patch for Mum?
 It will make a difference. I'm not giving up.
 Ruby's not giving up
 And I bet Mum and Dad aren't either.
 What's wrong with you, Connor?
 Don't you want to live here any more?"

Connor looks Keely in the eye.
 "No," he says. "Soon as I get to Year 10,
 I'm moving on,
 Getting a job building,
 Or something with money.
 No more calves to feed,
 Or dying cows to put down,

Or watching Dad looking
 At the sky all the time.”
 Connor hiccups on the last words
 And he races out.
 We are silent.
 Then Keely types in some extra points:
 dig vegie patch
 tidy machinery shed.
 “Tomorrow,” I say, “tomorrow, first thing,
 I’m starting on hay bales.”
 Keely isn’t listening now,
 She’s answering her emails.
 So I say goodnight to everyone
 And go to my room.

I watch the moon make shadows.
 No other lights around,
 Just the moon dancing

(2010: 81-83).

Youngest sibling Ruby is the first-person protagonist and observant narrator for older sister Keely who has instigated ‘star jump (in the US called straddle hops) Saturdays’. These are the special days that denote the coming of spring. Just as the sap rises in the weeds, so the children emerge from indoors to create their own outdoor world. This is when the two girls and their middle brother Connor create a network of tunnels and private mazes in the thickly filled paddock (what fields are called in Australia) of marshmallows. This is common name for the plant, *Malva palviflora* of the Hibiscus family, though the weeds closely resemble hollyhocks. In *Star Jumps*, rather than the earlier form of verse novels where each page is formed by separate pieces or entitled poems, the verse is set out in chapters that have continuous verse and section markers within them. In *Star Jumps* these are graphically represented by drawings of what should be the marshmallow weed, though the cover illustration and section markers look more like Queen Anne’s lace, (wild carrot), at the least something botanically umbelliferous rather than the marshmallow. This fast-growing weed is found across much of Australia. In my own childhood on the Yorke Peninsula’s Copper Triangle my twin brothers, two years my junior, would join with me to play exactly as described in *Star Jumps*, where we created private landscapes flattened out with games of hidey and chasey that have become the tissue of memory.

The rapid appearance of marshmallows in the paddocks often coincides with the calving season. Though the siblings in *Star Jumps* can run riot and play, as farm children they are not free to merely relax on a weekend, but are called upon to help move the cows and provide human barriers as the new calves are shifted around. Dairy farming seems an unrelenting job. Chapter 3 sees the entire family on hand to help with a midnight crisis in the calving shed:

The light bobs
 as Dad gives orders,
 tells Mum to fetch the rope
 and I know
 it's a difficult birth,
 maybe breech,
 maybe the calf is too big,
 the cow trying too long.
 Can't live on a farm
 where birth happens so much,
 without death hitching along too.
 (2010:38)

Ruby, considered too young to yet be helpful, nevertheless genuinely contributes to the effort, and is rewarded by a rare treat from her father:

I catch a quick smile from Dad
 in the tractor beam,
 like a moonbeam.
 (2010:45)

Early in the novel it is clear the Dad is not happy and it quickly proceeds to him contracting stock agents to purchase the farm's cattle. Despite water enough for weeds to grow, the enduring drought has not yet broken and the entire herd cannot be supported. If they are lucky, they will be able to keep at least the remaining breeding stock. The children were sad when they realised the cow they helped at midnight will nevertheless die, but they learn that's not the worst of it; that their family's very livelihood is at stake. Where Keely is angry, and Connor wants to leave, Ruby acts to fight by creating miniature hay bails. Though these would be eaten in a few gulps by the cows, they symbolise a youthful dogged spirit that will not give up. In order to create the enemy, Ruby personifies Drought 'with cracked lips and long legs / like a bleached wand of couch grass' (2010:100) and more menacingly, 'with a spear / out to drink my blood' (2010:101), yet she sets out on her own to gather the grass. Dangers can lurk on the farm, like the redback spiders that hide in the shed, or the poisonous snakes in the undergrowth, though they might need warmer weather to emerge. As Ruby recalls:

I try not to think of last summer's
 long brown snake
 hunting those mice, under bags.
 Snake as long and thin as an extension cord,
 as old as me, maybe.
 (2010:91)

Early in the tunnel-building of the marshmallows in Chapter 2, Connor has screamed out there's a snake, and though Ruby had seen the black cat, Stinky, flash by, and called out they were safe, such thoughts of dangers cannot be far away.

Just as US dustbowl territory attracts the verse-novel form where its 'frugality of life, the hypnotically hard work of farming, the grimness of conditions... demanded an economy of words...[with] rawboned life translated into poetry... with spare understatement' (Hesse 1998) so a time of drought in Australia inspires an author to write a junior verse novel like *Star Jumps*. Where Australia may not have ghettos like the ones found in contemporary YA verse novels selling today in the US, by writers like Ellen Hopkins or Virginia Euwer Wolff, an analogy may be drawn with the portrayal of impoverished rural communities who are 'doing it tough'. Similar ideas can be seen in the earlier YA work of Australian verse novelists Catherine Bateson or Steven Herrick. This appears a theme that runs through a number of verse novels for both younger and older children; hardships on the land, whether today or in the past.

Verse novels have been considered a new 'genre' (Murphy 1989:64), 'hybrid' (Addison 2009), 'form' (Mallan & McGillis 2003) or 'sub-genre' (Van Sickle 2006) of writing for children and young adult (YA) readers. They feature pared-back prose fragments set out as if for poetry but they tell a story, or number of stories in first- or third-person narrative, either in single or multiple points of view. Awarding prizes for writing goes a long way back, as far as Ancient Greece (English 2005) although the first award in the world specifically intended for children's literature was established in 1921 - the Newbery Medal, which was first awarded at an American Library Association (ALA) conference (ALA online). Prize-giving has been identified as 'proliferating' (Aronson 2001:62), and it is also crucial to note that awards can be seen as a significant tool in the scholar's kit, as evidenced by Junko Yokota's underscoring the importance of the debates, selections, and implications when he notes:

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 (2011:467).

'In the field of children's literature, winning a big award can reap undreamt success, as it is one of the 'few fields of cultural consumption... in which prizes have a more direct and powerful effect on sales' (English 2005:97). It is said that winning a Newbery Prize for Children's Literature "guarantees 10,000 in hardcover sales in the first year" (English 2005:360). Much research in the field focuses on books that have received awards, for a researcher may find it convenient to use a methodology selecting texts on the basis of merit, as recognised by awards (for instance, to compare reading strategies) (Marshall 2008). In this paper, the first verse novels to be awarded (in the US) and the most recent in Australia are noted as a means of drawing attention.

While verse novels written for young adults are not new in Australia, there now appears a flush of junior verse novels on the scene. In the US, verse novels for children and YA began to garner awards at a national and regional level beginning in the early 1990s and this continues. While it has been postulated that verse-novel writing for teens in Australia arose spontaneously (Alexander 2005:269), there is evidence that Australian authors were influenced both by local adult verse-novel writing and children's and YA verse novels in the US. The first contemporary verse novelist published in the Australian (YA) market was Steven Herrick (Herrick n.d., online), and he has written that he was inspired by Australian poet (erstwhile children's author) Dorothy Porter's adult verse novel, *The Monkey's Mask*. Herrick also commented that he had read *Out of the Dust* and Robert Cormier's *Frenchtown Summer* (Pollnitz 2002:62).

By 2002 it was reported that around a forty per cent of verse novels published in the prior quarter century were YA (McCooley 2007:200); that is, in proportion to those written for adults. Australia recognised a verse novel for young adult readers as a contender for the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) awards as early as 1997 with Herrick's 1996 publication, *Love, Ghosts & Nose Nair: A verse novel for young adults*, which was short-listed in the Book of the Year. Only two years later his 1998 verse novel *A Place Like This* was shortlisted for Older Readers category. His work was again in the 2001 Shortlist for *The Simple Gift* (2000). His verse novel *Cold Skin*, features a murder mystery and it is in a way a cross-genre effort analogous to *The Monkey's Mask*.

Of note in Australia more recently has been the flowering of verse novels for readers younger than YA. Sherryl Clark's junior verse novels, for instance, have met with success with the 2005 title, *Farm Kid*, winning the NSW Premier's Patricia Wrightson Prize for Children's Literature, and her 2008 *Sixth Grade Style Queen (Not!)* awarded Honour book in the CBCA awards for Younger Readers. Western Australian children's writer and reviewer Sally Murphy has also recently turned to writing junior verse novels. Her 2009 junior verse novel, *Pearl Verses the World* won acclaim, including being shortlisted in 2009 in the Western Australian Premier's Book Awards for Children's Books, and *Toppling* (2010) won the 2010 Queensland Premier's Literary Awards, and is shortlisted for the 2011 CBCA Awards.

Lorraine Marwood's first verse novel, *Ratwhiskers and Me* (2008) is historically-based, set in the minefields during Victoria's goldrush. Like Murphy and Clark her work is aimed at children rather than YA. In the 2010 Australian Prime Minister's Literary Awards Marwood's *Star Jumps* was awarded \$100,000, at the time the richest prize in Australia for an author of junior fiction. In a form that looks more novel-like with its segmentation into 'chapters' and extensive use of dialogue, it is another Australian verse novel employing a rural setting. Yet, by novel's end there is no redeeming rain. The newborn calf forgets its mother. Most of the dairy herd is sold off to go to another farm that uses irrigated water to protect it from the drought. And the marshmallow world has a short-life span. The thick woody weeds stand proud for the few days then will be trampled as the new calves are sent into that paddock. There may be no flooding rains descend to rescue the farm but,

like wildflowers, verse novels for junior readers are reinvigorating the form in Australia, and promise a renewal.

Works Cited

- Addison, CA 2009, 'The verse novel as genre: contradiction or hybrid?', *Alternation*, revised for *Style*, May 2009
- ALA n.d., [online] www.ala.org/
- Alexander, Joy 2005, 'The verse-novel: a new genre', *Children's Literature in Education*, Vol.36 No.3, September 2005, [online] <http://www.springerlink.com/content/rq72017xr3774171/fulltext.pdf>
- Aronson, Marc 2001, *Exploding the myths: the truth about teenagers and reading*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Scarecrow.
- English, JF 2005, *The economy of prestige: prizes, awards, and the circulation of cultural value*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- George, Marshall 2008, 'Comparing middle grade teachers' and middle grade students' reader responses to Newbery award winners: a true teacher's lounge story and the question it raised', *The Alan Review*, Fall, pp. 55-65.
- Hesse, Karen 1997 (2011), *Out of the Dust* Scholastic, New York.
- 1998, 'Excerpts from Karen Hesse's Newbery Medal Acceptance Speech, June 1998, Washington DC' in 'After words bonus features', *Out of the Dust* Scholastic, New York.
- Mallan, KM & McGillis, R 2003, 'Textual aporias: exploring the perplexities of form and absence in Australian verse novels', *The Looking Glass*, Vol. 7, No. 2, [online] <http://www.the-looking-glass.net/>
- Marwood, Lorraine 2009, *Star Jumps*, Walker Books, Newtown NSW.
- McCooey, David 2007, 'Australian poetry 1970-2005', *A Companion To Australian Literature Since 1900*, (eds) Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer. Rochester, N.Y., Camden House.
- Murphy, PD, 1989. 'The verse novel: a modern American poetic genre', *College English*, Vol. 51, No. 1, Jan. pp. 57-72, National Council of Teachers of English.
- Pollnitz, 2002 'Young adult verse novels in Australia', *mETAphor*, Issue 4, pp. 62 – 67.
- Van Sickle, Vikki 2006, 'Subcategories within the emerging genre of the verse novel', *The Looking Glass: New Perspectives on Children's Literature*, Vol. 10, No.3, online 2007 <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/ojs/index.php/tlg/article/view/74/88>
- Yokota, Junko 2011, 'Awards in literature for children and adolescents' in Shelby A. Wolf et al. [eds], *Handbook on research on children's and young adult literature*, Routledge, New York, pp. 467 - 478.

Kate Deller-Evans is completing her doctorate in creative writing at Flinders University of South Australia. Her creative product is a verse novel manuscript for YA entitled *Copper Coast*. She holds joint contracts as a lecturer on campus in the Centre for University Teaching and in the School of Computer Science, Engineering and Mathematics.
