Wonderworlds

Karen Brooks

Melaina Faranda
THE CIRCLE: DREAMER
Random House, $14.95pb, 270pp, 1 74051 874 8

Rosanne Hawke
WOLFCCHILD
Lothian, $14.95pb, 143pp, 0 7344 0482 4

Damien Morgan
GIL’S QUEST
Koala Books, $12.95pb, 127pp, 0 86461 552 3

Emily Rodda
ROWAN OF THE BUKSHAH
Omnibus, $14.95pb, 215pp, 1 86291 495 8

Lucy Sussex
THE REVOGNASE
Lothian, $14.95pb, 158pp, 0 7344 0495 6

HERE WE HAVE FIVE seemingly disparate books linked by genre: fantasy. Yet even fantasy, an often devalued term used to categorise a range of speculative and other fictions, doesn’t quite describe these entertaining and evocative texts. Rather, the common thread running through these stories and uniting them in a continuous and universal yarn is that which weaves its way through many tales: the hero’s journey.

Whether drawing inspiration from epic and mythological pasts or contemporary issues around young people’s search for identity within and against mainstream forms, each story seeks to capture the reality of the timeless and often heroic search for the self using a fantastical backdrop.

Damien Morgan’s Gil’s Quest returns the reader to one of the most ancient and overlooked narratives, the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh. Using a first-person narrative, Morgan recounts the tale of the King of Gilgamesh, himself thought to be one-third god, two-thirds man, and his journey of self-discovery. Arrogant and spoiled, alternately loved and hated by the gods, the young King of Uruk, Gil, sets out to hunt Enki, the primitive and frightening Shag. After clashing in a long and gruesome battle, Gil and Enki realise that there can be no victor because, in some god-like twist, they are halves of the same whole — soul brothers. Sharing their lives and their new-found bond, both Gil and Enki momentarily forget their responsibilities. However, during a mindless battle, Enki loses his life and Gil is left a broken-hearted shell of his former self. Stripped of his royal trappings and wanting to understand his loss, Gil embarks on a quest of epic proportions. Along the way, he encounters the kindness of strangers, the deadly Scorpion Men, the wise Utna the Boat and the Serpent. Finally, he understands the value of sacrifice and loyalty and can claim his rightful place.

Morgan manages to recapture the tone and mood of the original in this lyrical and meaningful tale of triumph and grief. Some young readers may find the style difficult at first, but persistence has its own rewards. It is important to introduce young people to the joys and wisdom of the past. By linking Gil’s struggles to the journeys of more contemporary heroes (such as Luke Skywalker), fabulous lessons and endless pleasures can be derived — in and out of the classroom.

Another story that returns to the past in order to tell a compelling tale is Rosanne Hawke’s poetic and wonderfully ambient Wolfchild. Set in the lost land of Lyonnnesse in the years 1098 and 1099, Hawke draws the reader into the simple yet rich world of young Morwenna and the cycle that is her life. Throughout the seasons, we follow Morwenna’s attempts to tame the wolf and the strange, aggressive young boy Raw, who have appeared on the outskirts of her village. Strict laws forbid her from endangering the hamlet by inviting Raw to join her family. Further, there is a legend of a child raised by wolves, wild and dangerous. A dreamer and gentle soul, Morwenna knows that Raw is neither wolfchild, nor wicked stranger, but is confused as to how she can make her community believe this. The reader follows the struggles of Morwenna as she seeks to fulfil her familial and civic duties while also trying to uncover the mystery that is Raw’s past.

The reader is drawn into the mythic and real world of the ninth century. The burgeoning Christian faith, blended with mystic paganism, is beautifully drawn and captures the essence of the austere world of Morwenna and her family, which, even as the novel opens, is on the brink of irrevocable change. But is it the presence of Raw and the majestic wolf that will bring the metamorphosis, or something else?

Suitable for readers eight and up, this book serves as a wonderful introduction to history and fantasy and would be a fabulous adjunct to many syllabi that seek to plunge students into the past. The voice and tone of the novel ring true, and Morwenna, Raw and their disparate worlds are realistically and eloquently figured.

While not drawing on a recognisable past, Lucy Sussex’s The Revognase, the third novel to be set in the imagined world of Quentaris, is flamboyant and action-packed. A world created by series editors Michael Pryor and Paul Collins, Quentaris is a mix of medieval and high fantasy, and is itself a gateway to other worlds. Sussex tells the comical and adventurous story of the mysterious Revognase, an object from another land that has somehow fallen into the hands of young Junko Pardner, a cave diver. The Revognase has the ability to make people’s deepest desires and unspoken wishes come true, often with disastrous and hilarious results. Shifting from host to host, the Revognase is soon wanted by everyone in Quentaris, and a race for its possession ensues.

Sussex draws on familiar characters and scenarios in the Quentaris series, as well as inventing ones of her own to make this story irresistible. From the opening prophetic words to the final scene, the fate of the Revognase and its unwitting
owners is full of surprises and twists that will keep readers of all ages enthralled.

Another new series that promises to beguile and bewitch readers is *The Circle* set by Melaina Faranda. *The Circle: Dreamer* tells the story of Tara, a member of a coven of ten young witches who discovers the powers of dreams to transform, heal and teach. Tara’s day begins with three misfortunes, but it is the third that has the biggest impact on her life. Lost assignments and broken glass angels aside, it is the news that a fellow student, the quiet and artistic Troy Daniels, lies in hospital in a coma that sets Tara on a quest. Putting aside her personal problems, Tara enters the dreamworld of Gamova in order to find out why Troy Daniels won’t wake up, why his younger brother died, and why so much darkness pervades his home and peculiar family.

Moving between Tara’s dreams and her waking world, this captivating story takes the reader on a magical journey into the world of witchcraft and neo-paganism, but it also creates refreshing and realistic portraits of the day-to-day travails of teenagers. Laconic fathers, unreasonable teachers and the boisterousness of large families are all portrayed with depth and acuteness. Tara’s search for Troy also becomes a search for herself and requires a leap of faith above and beyond the everyday. Is Tara able and willing? You’ll have to read it to find out. Many young people will not only want to read this book but will anxiously await the next, which is anticipated in a neat epilogue.

Emily Rodda’s final instalment in the beloved Rowan series, *Rowan of the Bukshah*, is also about dreams. The witch Sheba tells Rowan that he must undertake a dangerous quest in the mountains in order to restore balance and life to his world, which has suddenly become viciously cold and threatening. When the Bukshah disappear, Rowan can no longer ignore Sheba’s words. With her medallion burning into his thin chest, he reluctantly sets out on the most dangerous trek of all. In doing so, he attempts to embrace his heritage.

With the words of Sheba ringing in his ears and the people of Rin departed for the coast, Rowan is accompanied by three others — in line with the rhyme. But the rhyme also warns of weeping, fighting, sacrifice, and life and death. Rowan follows the Bukshah’s trail into the icy summits and seeks to interpret Sheba’s words and his dreams before it is too late — for him, his companions and his people.

Evocatively and movingly, Rodda again lures her reader into Rowan’s world. Characters from the earlier books and some new ones — as well as some terrifying creatures — move the story along speedily. This is a more than fitting finale to an award-winning series. Still, I hope Rodda doesn’t end Rowan’s story here. Like the skilful silks that Shaaran guards and re-creates, there is always more to see and hear, as well as new readers wishing to share her visions.

All these books offer so much to readers young and not so young: magical and amazing journeys, humour, angst, tension, mystery and beauty — but most of all, they all deliver fabulous stories. And, regardless of genre, for what more can hungry readers ask?