CHANGING IN THE COMPOSITION of the family or friendship group are among the most challenging situations to confront children, so it is no surprise that many books for the upper-primary-aged reader address this theme.

For Elizabeth Honey’s engaging Henni Octon, writing her third novel about the Stella Street gang on her very own computer, the fly in the holiday ointment is Tara. Like Henni, Tara has recently turned thirteen, but is going-on-twenty in her preoccupation with fashion, figure and boys. Even before the advent of Tara, Henni is conscious of change: the holiday at remote and magical Cauldron Bay is not a replica of the blissful Fiddle-back experience. Zev has brought a new friend into the group, and of the neighbourhood adults only Sue and Tibor are available, so more responsibility for the younger children devolves upon Henni. When Tara arrives for a break from her messily divorcing parents and starts romancing a larrikin surfie, Henni is faced with difficult and disturbing decisions. Although Henni reluctantly picks up hints of an imaginative creativity in Tara that nicely complements her own, it takes a near disaster before the pair are able to stand in one another’s shoes and fully appreciate their contrasting qualities and experiences.

In Super Jack, Susanne Gervay handles similar subject matter in a very different fashion. Twelve-year-old Jack has overcome the bullying problems of I Am Jack and is on holiday with his family: zany mother, ‘sort-of-step-dad’ Rob, sister Samantha, best friend Anna and bulky, bargain-hunting Nanna. Their destination is the beaches and theme parks of...
the Gold Coast, and the only cloud on the horizon is Leo, Rob’s son, who will join the party at Port Macquarie.

Jack is the satisfied centre of his own universe: the story is told through his eyes in short, present-tense sentences, with weak jokes, noisy competition for the best places in the car and small-boy persecution of the unfortunate. Jack’s responses to situations are rapid, self-interested and visceral: ‘I knew Rob shouldn’t have moved in with us.’ He reports the overheated decisions being made about Nanna’s future, the tussles over parenting issues of the not-quite-bonded family and his seemingly playful, but serious, contests with Leo for Rob’s love and attention. Through his eyes, the anxiety of the parents over this attempt to bring their children together is palpable. Eventually, Jack becomes the family hero by saving Nanna’s life and, in this position of unassailable ascendency, allows himself to acknowledge some of his rival’s pain and need.

Setting these two books side by side, it is as if Gervay is telling us realistically how life is, Honey how it might be. In spite of the similarity in age of the protagonists, Super Jack invites a much younger, more superficial and instinctual readership. Henni’s mature, yet utterly accessible, reflections on change, growth, responsibility, living and loving make Cauldron Bay a book through which a young reader can grow.

For Jim Liddell (Mudlark) and Griffin Silk (The Naming of Tishkin Silk), the change in circumstances is a matter of tragic loss rather than unwelcome gain. Both are slightly fey, imaginative children, blessed with nurturing families but somewhat at odds with the knockabout world. Jim Liddell, in particular, lives in a world of his own, embroidering the real one with stories that others tend to call lies. He is the last person in class — on the very last weekend of primary school — to take home the class pet mudlark. At home, Jim’s mother is on oxygen after a stint in hospital, his talented brother is locked in his room with his trumpet, and it’s pizza every night for dinner, but it’s only when Mudlark escapes that Jim starts to pay attention to the people and places around him. To search for Mudlark, he must consciously cultivate courage, a quality that his mother has started to instil in him with her appreciation of his unique qualities and her assurances of love. The search also takes him through his neighbourhood and leads to a new understanding of his oddly solicitous neighbours and of the experiences that have formed them. Just as Mudlark became strong enough to make his bid for freedom, so Jim learns through his quest to trust himself in the world without the protection of his swaddling imagination, and to face a reality that includes death.

Mudlark is a poetic, insightful, deeply human novel, and a bit of a realist departure for Michael Stephens, whose previous work for children, including Titans and A Flock of Blats, has been in the fantasy adventure field.

In The Naming of Tishkin Silk, Griffin Silk has been home-schooled along with his five older sisters. His mother now being absent, he is sent to the local school, where his differences — long hair, unusual name and the grandmother who might be a witch — expose him to the attention of the school bullies. Griffin, too, must learn courage, and he does so from quick-witted Layla, who, entranced by the differences that inflame the bullies, befriends and champions him from the top of the monkey bars. It is with Layla that Griffin shares his sadness and guilt over the loss of his unnamed baby sister and the departure of his mother into the darkness of depression, and it is Layla who comes up with the idea of holding a traditional family naming-day ceremony for the baby that Griffin in his heart calls Tishkin. Written in sensuous prose that evokes a country summer, from the thick quiet of a closed house to the dusty smell of a faithful dog’s paws, The Naming of Tishkin Silk is a gentle, lyrical, skilfully unsentimental celebration of the imagination and of the intuitive communion of hearts.

Skilled artist Graeme Base’s first children’s novel is a classical tale dressed in bizarre garments. Its characters an unimaginable, but brilliantly drafted, amalgam of the animal and the mechanical, Truck Dogs is a Wild West-style battle between good and evil. The hero (think Shane) is an unpossessing outsider who overcomes all odds with craft and courage, and leaves town as quietly as he arrived. Each composite character is imbued with a stereotypical personality that has its traditional part to play in the drama and is condensed in an entertaining technical specifications panel offsetting the illustration. Thus Throttle, a member of the infamous RottWheeler gang, is a red greyhound/drag car with a broad yellow stripe and an ‘arrogant, vicious and immoral’ temperament. Sparky, the junior lead, is a ‘v. enthusiastic’ Jack Russell/ute cross with a bright red collar and a waggy tail. His fuel requirements are unleaded petrol and offsetting the illustration. Thus Throttle, a member of the infamous RottWheeler gang, is a red greyhound/drag car with a broad yellow stripe and an ‘arrogant, vicious and immoral’ temperament. Sparky, the junior lead, is a ‘v. enthusiastic’ Jack Russell/ute cross with a bright red collar and a waggy tail. His fuel requirements are unleaded petrol and standard dog food, plus the occasional bone, and maintenance suggestions include a twelve-month oil change and flea treatment, plus regular worming. Although he tries to pass it off as the work of his Labrador, 46-year-old Base has had a huge amount of fun with this. Be prepared for younger boys to be similarly captivated.