

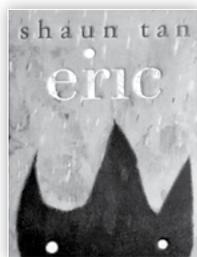
Reviews

Reviews Editor: Rebecca Ross

Reviewers: Samantha Chapman, Rebecca Ross, Catherine Walsh, Alex Wharton

Please see the end of this section for a summary of texts considered by reviewers as suitable related texts for the English 7–10 and Stage 6 syllabuses.

PICTURE BOOK



Eric

Shaun Tan

Allen & Unwin, 2020

ISBN 9781760877972

If you are familiar with Shaun Tan's collection of illustrated short stories, *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, you will recognise the trident-headed titular character of this charming narrative. The stand-alone hard cover picture book repackages the original second story in Tan's 2008 collection with a more spacious format and some additional illustrations in the first and last openings, making this a delightful gift edition.

The story itself is a quirky, understated allegory: a 'foreign exchange student', Eric, takes up residence in the narrator's kitchen pantry, a move the host family finds somewhat inscrutable but tries to explain away as a 'cultural thing.' Like many of Tan's other stories, *Eric* teases out ideas of alienation, cultural difference and otherness while also highlighting the simple beauty of the gifts that outsiders may bring us when we are open to receive and value them, as the final pages reveal.

The detailed graphite/pencil illustrations invite the reader into the visual nuances of the story, and these in themselves would make for a terrific visual stimulus for unpacking narratives by deciphering, deconstructing and reconstructing stories for younger students, but serve equally well as an introductory activity in the *Narratives that Shape Our World* module for Year 11 Advanced English. Tan's imagery places importance on the seemingly insignificant detritus of modern life – a button, teacup or a leaf become dollhouse-like accessories that dwarf Eric's tiny form – and even without the written text, the visual thinking routines that could be applied to this book would certainly help to engage students of all abilities in the classroom in the meaning making process as both composers and responders.

Tan won the prestigious Kate Greenaway Medal earlier this year and has contributed some stunning artwork promoting the annual conference of our national body and international federation, the AATE and IFTE. Keep an eye out for our review of the companion to *Tales from Outer Suburbia*, *Tales from the Inner City* (2018), in our next issue. **RR**

PROSE FICTION



Her Perilous Mansion

Sean Williams

Allen & Unwin, 2020

9781760877361

South Australian writer Sean Williams' name might be familiar to *mETaphor* readers (see our review of *Impossible Music* in Issue 3 last year), having authored over

40 novels and published 120 short stories. He is also a practising teacher of creative writing at Flinders University. His latest work, the 336 page novel *Her Perilous Mansion* (2020), would be an excellent set text for a fantasy genre study or as an additional wide reading text for middle year students (Years 5-7). The writing is very accessible, with a Stage 3 or 4 audience finding humour and adventure in the world created. The unpredictability of the plot to show regular twists adds a dimension to the non-linear nature of the fantasy conventions employed. In particular, the regular inclusion of puzzling details will assist student engagement in even the most reluctant of readers as they journey together with the characters.

There are laugh out loud moments as the novel's narrative follows two orphan heroes, Almanac and Etta. In their wrestling with feelings of being unloved, together they find a sense of family. The setting of the overbearing mansion is both rich and evocative in imagery and impact. Knowing that magic is made when the spells are written down, the

Reviews

two young protagonists are quick to find themselves in trouble. The danger highlighted in this unusual place of employment is emphasised through the ghosts and traps throughout the mansion, making it quite perilous indeed.

The novel holds its own as a standalone text and the resolution is satisfying for the reader. The subversion around stereotypes of horror and mystery produces characters, a plot, and setting that is light-hearted and humorous. The focus on the power of words and language enables further discussion and reflection on the text being one of value and significance. The publisher's website hosts a video of Williams discussing the novel, reading extracts, and emphasising the writing method according to five key elements, as well as a free set of teaching notes available for download. **AW**



Again Again

E. Lockhart

Allen and Unwin 2020

ISBN 9781760295943

Again Again is the new novel to come from bestselling author E. Lockhart, author of *We Were Liars*. The novel follows Adelaide's final summer at her East Coast boarding

school, Alabaster Preparatory Academy. Unusually, the novel begins by informing the reader that the story takes place in multiple worlds. While Adelaide appears to be a normal seventeen-year-old girl, her story is told through diverse parallel storytelling; snapshots of Adelaide's self-consciousness are simultaneously filled with hope and fears of disappointment as key moments in the narrative are told through alternate courses of action. This is amazing storytelling by Lockhart, as it allows the reader to run with Adelaide's imagination as she explores the different ways key moments in her life could shape her, depending on how she reacts and responds to various situations and those around her. We are transported into the inner workings of a seventeen-year-old's mind as we begin to feel her pain and fears through these alternative universes of possibility.

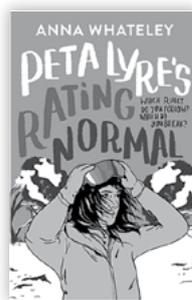
The narrative goes beyond portraying Adelaide's summer on campus. Lockhart gradually reveals the troubled relationship Adelaide has with her fifteen-year-old brother, Toby, a recovering addict, and we learn of the difficulties Adelaide has accepting the

changes to her own life since saving Toby from an overdose. The narrative concentrates on Adelaide falling in love, but through her inability to be honest with own self-projection, deeper issues affecting the modern teenage girl are explored – those of identity struggles, feeling loved and accepting a new life in response to the changing family model.

Again Again offers many avenues of study. The multimodal storytelling is regularly written in poetic form to express Adelaide's fears, angers, and uncertainties. Lockhart reconstructs Adelaide's and Toby's relationship almost exclusively through text messages. Perhaps one of the most interesting things I took from the novel is the limited concrete detail or descriptive language used to define characters and setting. Adelaide's feelings and emotions are more effective at building characters and setting for the reader, and this helps the reader to get carried away with Adelaide's parallel universes.

Lockhart's use of realism is what I found most effective with her storytelling, as we would all be able to recall key moments in life where we replay different scenarios in our heads over again. Small moments in everyday life have the potential to largely shape us, and this is pivotal in *Again Again*. The novel regularly demonstrates how effective language forms and features can be used to transform storytelling and modelling Lockhart's style would allow ample opportunities for students to experiment with using language during creative writing.

While this book would be widely appealing for young adult readers, females would find Adelaide's world more relatable and identifiable. The novel, albeit not explicitly, deals with sex, addiction and recovery as key ideas within the text, and therefore would be best suited to a more mature Stage 5 audience. **SC**



Peta Lyre's Rating Normal

Anna Whateley

Allen & Unwin, 2020

ISBN 9781760525309

For Brisbane-based debut novelist Anna Whateley, it is her lived experience with ADHD, autism, and sensory processing disorder that gives this fresh novel its 'own voice' as Whateley's main character Peta shares these same experiences. With a PhD in Young Adult

Reviews

Fiction, Whateley knows what it takes for a YA text to be a hit, and *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal* is set on that trajectory.

The stream of consciousness style narrative follows the story of teen Peta who follows all the social rules and expectations upon her. Yet when she meets and falls in love with the new girl and goes on the school ski trip, things start to fall apart. The narrative voice is clear, with regular internal monologue moments reflecting the character's anxiety, mood, and emotions. The 248 page novel uses the setting of the school ski trip as a catalyst for change; this is enjoyable and recognisable for young adult readers.

It has the usual coming of age tropes (fitting in, the self-referential title element of 'normality', peer friendships, identity), but Whateley's voice is highly distinctive, accessible, and unique. The questions of 'Which rules do you follow?', 'Which rules do you break?' guide much of the narrative trajectory and create a journey as the protagonist uncovers answers to these questions. Peta's imagined psyche and the reality of her world are interchangeable as the plot develops and this will keep readers engaged.

Dedicated 'for all the wild things', Wheatley hopes this text will find itself in the classrooms and hands of young people like herself, with the inspiration attributed to the fact that she could not identify any female characters in YA with ADHD. This novel is a great embodiment of the adage 'writing from what you know'; Whateley reflects on this and on par-literature surrounding *Peta Lyre's Rating Normal* in the Allen & Unwin interview with the author on their website. This #LoveOzYA addition would be well placed in Year 10 and 11 classes; capturing diverse voices, the text also engages with elements of low SES representation and feminism. **AW**

REFERENCE



Reception

Ika Willis

Routledge, 2018

ISBN 9781138955103

It can be said that the new Stage 6 English syllabus draws on critical theories of reception studies, that is, the idea that texts generate various meanings according to the

concerns and contexts of readers as individuals and communities. Core to the new syllabus is the focus on how texts create meaning, and how readers respond to texts.

Ika Willis, Associate Professor in English at the University of Wollongong, is a classicist who specialises in cultural studies and reception. The field of reception studies posits that this meaning-making process revolves around sender, message, receiver (responder) and mode of communication (the means of production, transmission, distribution and circulation). Willis' book *Reception*, part of Routledge's *New Critical Idiom* series (2018), traces the history of reception studies, including recent studies which consider rewritings, and how meaning is created by minority groups. She surveys a history of reading, from readers as passive recipients whose morals are shaped by literature, to readers actively making meaning through feminist, black, post-colonial, and Marxist theory. She considers texts as objects, text-to-reader and text-to-text reception.

For most of our literary history, imitation has been encouraged; new texts were expected to be created from the literary system, not by direct observation of the world. Now, however, reception is creative – an active process of interpretation and intervention. Rewritings can be creation, interpretation, or writing back as critique or correction.

In a survey of reading Willis covers: the ideal reader; reading and neuroscience; subordinating to texts; identifying with others; being an assenting or resisting reader; distant reading and close reading; emotional reading; bodily responses to reading; socially framed reading; bibliomemoir; the text's directions in how to read; group strategies to create meaning; genre as a function of reading; frame analysis; technologies of reading; fan fiction; texts as co-productions between composers; traditional readings and an individual response. Texts are not stable; the experience of reading consists of a unique combination of multiple factors.

Year 12 teachers will find many of these ideas useful in approaching *Reading to Write* as well as English Extension 1 and Extension 2, as Willis reminds us that all students can bring themselves to the text. **CW**

Reviews

Syllabus links and suitability as related texts

The following summary has been designed to assist you in making informed selections for teaching and learning in the classroom.

STAGE	TEXT	AUTHOR	FORM	THEMATIC STRANDS / TEXTUAL CONCEPTS	RELATED TEXT / CCP
3,4	<i>Her Perilous Mansion</i>	Sean Williams	Prose Fiction	Appearance versus reality, character, code and convention, coming of age, family, fantasy, friendship, magic, style	Critical and Creative Thinking capability, Ethical Understanding, Personal and Social capability
4, 5, 6	<i>Eric</i>	Shaun Tan	Picture Book	Cultural difference Character Representation	Year 11 Advanced Module A: Narratives That Shape Our World, Personal and Social capability
5, 6	<i>Peta Lyre's Rating Normal</i>	Anna Whateley	Prose Fiction	Disability, narrative voice, social class, bildungsroman, own voices, LGBTQI, mental illness	Cultural, social and gender perspectives, representation, diversity
5, 6	Again Again	E. Lockhart	Prose Fiction	Identity Belonging Growing Up Love Acceptance	