



Reviewer's Guide

Fiction Focus ***New Titles for Teenagers***



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☺ Please use the courier system or the Code REPLY PAID 83287

INTRODUCTION

Background

Fiction Focus, a reviewing journal of new titles for teenagers, has been in publication since 1987. It is produced by Curriculum Materials Information Services (CMIS), Department of Education and Training (WA) and is distributed free of charge to all public secondary schools in Western Australia. It is also available on subscription. In 2008 there were 280 subscribers throughout Australia and overseas. Currently, **Fiction Focus** is published three times a year.

Jenny Pausacker assessing reviewing journals wrote:

***Fiction Focus** is instantly remarkable for the length of its reviews. ...they varied according to how much the reviewer had to say but a typical review was approximately 350 words, which allows for a significant difference in the style of reviewing. Written by a wide range of teachers, teacher-librarians and librarians, the reviews are nowhere near as polished as in the other three specialist journals but the absence of word limit permits the reviewers to expand on their opinions to the point where readers can make an informed guess about their own reactions. **Fiction Focus** had the highest percentage of reviews that included both praise and criticism (127 - as compared to 116 reviews that only praised, 15 reviews that only criticised and 13 plot summaries), a statistic that seems directly attributable to the greater length of these reviews.*

Pausacker Jenny. 'Who reviews the reviewers?' In Nieuwenhuizen, Agnes. **The Written World**, 1994. P. 314

Fiction Focus Policy

Our objectives are:

- To provide a selection and buying guide for secondary school staff and other institutions serving teenagers.
- To provide critical reviews of current fiction & selected non-fiction narratives published specifically for adolescents.
- To review selected adult fiction & non-fiction narratives, which have potential young adult appeal.
- To review selected literature-related professional reading for teachers.
- To keep teachers abreast of literature-related websites.
- To highlight fiction that supports current curriculum focus areas.

Considerations

- Titles considered for review are limited to those which will be available for purchase by schools.
- A wide range of reading abilities and levels of maturity will be covered.
- Titles that deal with controversial issues or are of doubtful literary merit, but have popular appeal, will be evaluated for the integrity of overall treatment and quality. In

adult titles there will be no discussion of sexual incidence or violence unless it is considered excessive or out of place.

- Standard evaluation criteria consonant with the policies of the Department of Education and Training WA will be followed.
- Reviews of professional interest to teachers will be included as appropriate.
- Reviews of fiction in audio, video and online formats will be included as appropriate.

Internet

Information about *Fiction Focus* is located at:

www.det.wa.edu.au/education/cmisis/eval/curriculum/publications/FictionFocus/index.htm

- For fiction-related Internet sites, including Australian authors, books for teenagers and practical ideas on how to integrate the Internet into literature programs browse the *Focus on Fiction* section on the **CMIS Evaluation Website** at: www.eddept.wa.edu.au/cmisis/eval
- Reviews from *Fiction Focus* are also found in the **CMIS RESOURCE BANK**, an online database:
<http://amlib.eddept.wa.edu.au>
Use this database to search for fiction (and non-fiction) by author, title or subject. Or do a **CMIS Topic** Search to generate reading lists (topics include Girls' Reads, Boys' Reads, Books Not to Be Missed, Reluctant Readers, war and conflict, fantasy ...). Click on *Topic List* key for a full list.

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING A FICTION FOCUS REVIEW

Purpose:

- Your objective is to write a critical review, which contains sufficient information to enable teachers, librarians and others involved in selecting fiction (& narrative non-fiction) for adolescents, to make informed decisions about the suitability of a book for their particular purpose.

Length:

- Reviews of around **300 words** are sufficient, depending on the complexity of the item being reviewed (please aim for an absolute maximum of 400 words unless reviewing an exceptional item). It may be necessary for us to cut back excessively long reviews.

Style:

- Reviewers are encouraged to find their own voice, but it is important to be consistent in the use of the present tense when recounting details from the story. Example: '**My Girragundji** features Boori as a young boy narrating his story... Boori shares a bedroom that has louvre windows with his three younger brothers.' NOT **My Girragundji** featured Boori as a young boy narrating his story. Boori shared a bedroom that has louvre windows with his three younger brothers.'

Age:

- For novels, audio books and DVDs, please nominate age suitability in general terms at the beginning of the review.
Example: Age 13+
- For picture books, which can be appreciated by all ages, there is no need to nominate an age apart from comments made within your review.

Content:

Integrate the following points, if relevant, into your review:

- *Synopsis or overview* - **briefly** tell the reader what the book is about, in general terms, but **do not** write a detailed retelling of the plot. Never disclose a novel's ending especially where it is crucial to the plot. In other words do not spoil the book for the reader by divulging the climax or resolution, but comment on how successfully the author involves the reader into the story and whether or not the conclusion is satisfying.
- *Genre or Form of Text* - science fiction, adventure, romance, fantasy, diary, journal, verse novel, mystery.
- *Analysis* - **this should form the bulk of your review**. Consider style, characters, structure, pace, language and readability. Include both praise and criticism where appropriate. It is important for readers to be able to gauge whether a book is suitable for inclusion into their collection, so negative reviews are published. However, make criticisms constructive.

- *Issues* - note especially those that are controversial.
- *Bias* - (racial, gender, religious) and or *point of view*.
- *Curriculum area/s* - indicate if the item significantly supports a specific Learning Area or theme.
- *Audience* - mention whether the book has particular appeal to a certain audience - boys, girls, reluctant readers, avid readers, mature readers, lovers of fantasy.

Quotations:

- Ensure quotations support your argument.
- Use quotes sparingly.
- Keep quotations as brief as possible.
- For editing purposes include page references for all quotes.
- Double-check quotes for accuracy.

Audio books and film – when reviewing audiovisual materials concentrate on the production quality of the item – consider sound clarity, pronunciation, sound effects, pace etc

SELECTION CRITERIA

Included for your reference is a copy of the *CMIS Selection Criteria for Fiction, audiobooks and videos/DVDs*. These are also available online at:

<http://www.eddept.wa.edu.au/cmisis/eval/library/selection/sel22.htm>

Selection Criteria for Fiction Books

Fiction includes picture books, beginning readers, early chapter books, graphic novels and novels.

Purpose:

- provide enjoyment and entertainment.
- stimulate the imagination.
- develop language.
- extend the student's experience.
- develop discriminatory and independent readers.
- support the curriculum.
- develop life-long readers.

Readability:

- text and print size appropriate to the intended reader.
- text is smooth to read, clear and concise.
- reading level of the item matches the user's experience and capability.

Language:

- appropriate to the plot, theme and characters.
- imaginative and interesting with natural dialogue and vivid descriptions.
- concepts developed by the language are appropriate for the age/maturity of the intended reader.
- style of writing is appropriate to the genre.
- provides the opportunity for students to practise/develop/extend literacy skills.

Content:

Plot:

- stimulates the reader's imagination.
- encourages awareness of issues.
- story is interesting and entertaining.
- sequence of events is logical and (within the genre) believable.
- factual elements are correct.

Theme:

- easily identified.
- resolution of conflict within acceptable moral codes and behavioural modes.
- avoids moralising and didacticism.

Characterisation:

- convincing and credible.
- uses natural and suitable dialogue.
- characters develop and grow.
- avoids stereotyping by gender, race, disability or culture.

Other considerations:

- comparative merit with other items by the same author, in the same genre or by other authors.

Curriculum Relevance:

- may be used to support all the curriculum. ie. links can be made to Learning Areas other than English

Page Layout:

- content well spaced and logically organised.
- background colour/borders/illustrations do not interfere with readability of the text.

Illustrations: include here cover, end papers, within text, textless.

- appropriately placed/positioned.
- clear, attractive and/or interesting.

Purpose of illustrations:

- enhance/extend elements of the story.
- enhance readability of the text.
- appropriate to the reading/interest/maturity level of the reader.

Bias:

- avoid stereotypes in text or illustrations.
- avoid biased opinions/value judgements.
- reflects gender equity principles of social justice (includes race, sex, physical and intellectual disability, cultural grouping).
- relevant to Australian conditions, as appropriate.

Sensitive Issues:

- elements of language may be unacceptable to some members of the school community.
- treatment of issues eg. sex, violence, drugs, AIDS, death, religion, the supernatural.

Specific Selection Criteria for Audio Books

- sound clarity.
- clear pronunciation and enunciation.
- reading is well paced.
- background music/sound effects appropriate and don't interfere with main reading.
- abridged or full-text version as appropriate.
- story reading or dramatised version.
- length appropriate for intended user.
- accompanying teachers' notes - appropriate, useful and relevant.

Specific Selection Criteria for Audiovisual Resources

- clarity of sound and images.
- visually appealing.
- voice production clear and suited for intended purpose and user.
- accuracy and currency of visual information.
- content appropriate for intended user.
- variety in presentation.
- production well paced.
- length appropriate for the intended user.
- accompanying teachers' notes - appropriate, useful and relevant.

SAMPLE REVIEWS from Fiction Focus

The following reviews provide examples of some of the important elements to include in reviews for **Fiction Focus**. Their length and complexity depends on the sophistication of the title reviewed and reflect the individual writing style of the reviewer.

REVIEW OF A NOVEL

STAPLES, Suzanne Fisher. Storm
London : Red Fox, 1999. 234 p.
ISBN 0 09 925292 9 pbk \$8.95
SCIS NO: 966992

Bibliographic details completed by editing team. Reviewer only needs to provide title & author

Age recommendation

Genre

Overview -without too much plot detail

Age 12+ A very readable novel in the thriller genre, **Storm** is the story of a fight against injustice.

Two friends, Buck Smith, a white farmer's son, and Tunes Smith, the black daughter of the farmer's manager have been inseparable from infancy. For all of their childhood they have played and fished together and it is on one such innocent, fishing for clams, that they come across a dead body in the water. At this point the story suddenly changes: it darkens, gathers momentum and draws the reader in, taking in such issues as racism, honesty, abuse of power and hypocrisy along its way. Buck learns that Tunes has been abused by the man they both think is the murderer and that many people (even his own parents) are not always what they seem to be. As some of these grisly truths come to light to both Buck and Tunes become embroiled in a murder trial.

Themes to explore

Storm is for most part a beautifully written novel, although a bit self-consciously deep-south in some of its telling. The descriptions of the natural environment are excellent, the action scenes spine-tingling, and the feeling of the powerlessness of young people against authority convincingly handled. The setting is distinctly American and the author doesn't soften the hard-hitting plot with soft edges. Nevertheless, many teenagers, especially more experienced readers, will enjoy this racy tale with its edge of intrigue and darkness.

Length: 233 words

Audience

Analysis of style, pace,

REVIEW OF A NOVEL

McDONALD, Meme and PRYOR, Boori. My Girragundji.

St Leonards, NSW : Allen & Unwin, 1998. 74 p. (A Little Ark Book)

ISBN 1 86448 818 2 pbk \$11.95

SCIS NO: 950484

Important background information

Age recommendation

Age 11+ Meme McDonald is passionate about Aboriginal culture and has developed a close relationship with Boori Pryor. Boori grew in an Aboriginal housing area in Townsville, Queensland with his mother who came from the Kunggandji Aboriginal community and his father who was from the Birri-gubba people. This book developed from the stories Boori told Meme and her daughter about his childhood.

My Girragundji features Boori as a young boy narrating his story. Boori shares a bedroom that has louvre windows with his three younger brothers. He lives in fear that the Hairyman, a bad old Quinkin spirit will grab him in the night. Furthermore, Boori is grappling with his crush on Sharon, a micaloo or white girl in his class at school, and with teasing from the micaloo bully boy, Stacey.

Synopsis - what the book is about.

One night during a tropical rain storm, Boori is lying awake fearing that the background noises could be the Hairyman about to pounce. When something lands on Boori's forehead he is terrified, but then sees it is a girragundji or green tree frog. Boori believes the girragundji has been sent by the old ancestors to protect his spirit. The girragundji becomes Boori's pet and inspires him with new confidence to succeed at football, to smile at Sharon, and to go to the outside toilet at night without fear of the Hairyman.

Many readers will identify with aspects of Boori's childhood such as his dilemma after a fight with Stacey when he declares:

Analysis

'The busted lip I can wear but when your Mum clips you over the ear for getting into fights and your dad gets stuck into you for losing, that hurts. How can you win?' **p. 22**

Include page no. for editing

However, readers will also gain some poignant insights into Aboriginal society such as Boori's reflection on drunken arguments that:

Analysis

'My mum reckons our people are the strongest in the world, but that the drink takes your strength away...'
p.14

My Girragundji is a beautifully presented story which is illustrated with black and white photographs by Meme McDonald. Some pages of the text are done in a different font or against a background of a photograph to enhance the imagery of the story.

The book is an effective resource for assisting upper primary and lower secondary students to understand some of the concepts in Aboriginal studies. It is a worthy addition to school libraries.

Relevance to particular Curriculum Area

Length: 388 words

REVIEW OF A PICTURE BOOK

BROWNE, Anthony. *Voices in the park.*

London : Doubleday, 1998. 32 p.

ISBN 0385 40858 7 hbk \$24.95

SCIS NO: 957832

Picture Book: No Age required

Picture book. Anthony Browne's combination of puckish humour and sensitivity appear once again in this appealing picture book.

Brief Synopsis

A parent, a child and a dog from two very different social levels go for a walk in the park. Each parent and child gives a version of the walk involving fraternisation of children and dogs. The dogs have no problem; when the pedigree Labrador is released she is delighted to run around with the mongrel. The shy rich boy needed the unsophisticated, "d' you wanna come on the slide?" from the girl to release him from his mother's commanding presence so that he, too, could enjoy his newly found relationship.

Analysis of visual elements

As the simple story is told, the reader becomes aware of Anthony Browne's characteristic visual oddities such as yawning trees, an elephant hidden among the trees, a weeping Mona Lisa, a flying Mary Poppins and a spouting green whale. Their delightful strangeness demands that each picture be examined carefully to locate the surreal and then to consider the significance, if you wish.

Use of simian characters to represent humans again works well. Their clothing and their economy of thought and action sensitively reveal individual character and circumstance. The browbeaten boy and the lively girl are appealing, the haughty mother is overwhelming but the unemployed father is the most touching. The front page of his newspaper shows a picture of Munch's despairing 'The scream' but he tells us:

Relevant quotation

" I ... looked through the paper for a job. I know it's a waste of time really, but you've got to have a bit of hope, haven't you?"

Voices in the park can be enjoyed by all ages, on a simple or a complex level. It is ideal for presenting point of view, for character representation or for exemplifying modern art. Its diversity is its charm.

Length: 301 words

Audience

Curriculum relevance

REVIEW OF A PICTURE BOOK

LARSON, Gary. *There's a hair in my dirt! : a worm story.*

New York : HarperCollins, 1998. [60] p.

ISBN 0 06 019104 X hbk \$24.95

SCIS NO: 942694

Picture Book: No Age required



Picture Book . Anyone visiting a newsagent to select a greetings card will know Gary Larson's amusing images of anthropomorphic cows and chickens from his best-selling cartoon, *The Far Side*. His latest book features a family of worms.

Brief synopsis



When a young worm finds a hair in his dinner, he gets very upset and concludes that he is one of the lowliest creatures on Earth. To cheer him up his father tells him a story, a fairytale with a moral. It's very cleverly done, and not till the last few pages does the moral of the story finally become apparent to the youngster, and to the human reader.

Analysis



Beautifully presented, Larson uses the child's picture-book format to great effect, making this a book that is well worth buying in hardback. It has a place in English to look at the humour, puns and deliberate use of cliches; the fracturing of a fairytale format; and the interaction of pictures and text. It could also be great fun to use with older students as an introduction to biological science. In art, students could discuss the detail in the pictures and the cartoonist's way of drawing on stereotypes and familiar images to create humour. For example, a close look at the first double-page spread shows that it contains all the information for the reader to answer the question: why is there a hair in the little worm's dirt?

Curriculum relevance



Apart from any useful purpose, *There's a hair in my dirt!* Will delight students and adults alike, especially those who already enjoy Gary Larson's work.

Audience



Length: 255



REVIEW OF AN AUDIO BOOK

Holt, David and Mooney, Bill. Spiders in the hairdo : modern urban legends.

[audiocassette]

Fairview, NC : High Windy Audio, 1997. (55 min.)

ISBN 0 942303 13 X

1 audiocassette \$19.95

SCIS NO: 978604

Age recommendation

Age 10+ *Spiders in the hairdo* is a retelling of sixteen modern urban myths, some shorter than a minute with the longest just over eleven minutes. While none of these stories are, by definition, original and many are predictable, they are extremely well told. The readers' voices are well modulated and almost soothing, sometimes in stark contrast to the content. It is the understated telling which is the making of this collection; had they been told theatrically, the stories may not have been worth listening to.

Analysis of oral telling – important for audio book

Genre/issues

The reaction of my young children would suggest that this was an adult reaction, as they demanded repeated playing of the tape in the car. The content of the stories - issues of ghosts, strange deaths and cheating for example - make the tape admirably suited to upper primary and lower secondary students. For these students, listening may simply be for pleasure or used as the basis for lessons in oral storytelling. Similarly, the stories provide good models for creative writing, particularly the many short tales which are succinct and quite compelling. The forty-five second *Shot in the head*, where biscuit filling is mistaken for brains is a good example of this.

Audience

Curriculum relevance

The longest story, *The slasher*, is grippingly well told and the most interesting story on the tape. It could well be used to successfully model creating suspense in both written and oral work for a wide range of age groups. On the other hand two stories about cheating would form a useful basis for discussion about this topic and ethics in general. Does being able to get away with cheating justify the act? Or was it the teacher's fault?

Analysis

On balance there is enough in this compilation to make it worth considering for your collection or the library. The main detraction is that it is unremittingly American in both the content of the myths and the telling. I found this to be a problem but again the children were not bothered by it, and the enforced repeated listening revealed many initially hidden qualities from a teaching perspective.

This audiocassette is the winner of the Grammy for the Best Spoken Word Album in 1999.

Length: 359

Include Awards if you know them. Otherwise added by editor

REVIEW OF A VIDEORECORDING

BRONTE, Emily. Wuthering Heights. [videorecording]
Screenplay by Neil McKay, produced by Louise Berridge, directed by David Skynner.
London : Granada Media, 1998. (113 min.)
Videocassette \$59.00
SCIS NO: 967943

Age recommendation



Age 15+ As far as video productions of nineteenth-century classics go, this version of Emily Brontë's novel of love, passion and social change is quite good. It is made for television so the impact of some of the sweeping scenes of the bleak moorland country is lost, but the film manages to remain true to the spirit of the novel quite successfully.

Introductory analysis

***Evaluation focuses on elements in the movie rather than retelling the plot (English specialists are familiar with the plot)**

Curriculum relevance

Rare in film versions of Wuthering Heights is an attempt to reproduce the achronological narrative structure of the novel itself. In this respect Granada's version takes full marks as it opens at the end of the story, as Brontë intended, and closes with the final appearance of the ghost of Cathy and the death of Heathcliffe. For classes struggling to grasp Brontë's manipulation of narrative chronology, the film will serve as an excellent and reliable introduction that will help to clarify some of their confusion. Importantly the film has not lost the subtle clues provided in the novel which allow readers to date, with reasonable accuracy, the occurrence of the various events. This feature will no doubt appeal to the sleuths among you!

Comparison with novel

The only real weakness is that the variety of narrative voice is lost in this film version. The story simply unfolds before the viewer without any of the narrative interpolations that the various characters, such as Nellie Dean, make for us in the text. This weakens the impact of the film a little and tends to make the relationship between Hereton Earnshaw and the young Cathy, at the close of the novel, seem to be far less of a compromise than it really is. In this sense, Nellie Dean's narrative interpretation of Hareton's and Cathy's relationship has been uncritically adopted by the film and incorporated into the story. This feature is worth indicating to students as they might otherwise miss the subtle loss of the very important - and - conflicting narrative positions adopted in the text.

This offering from Granada will certainly make a valuable teaching aid to the text (Heathcliff's scene of digging Cathy's body from the grave and clasping it to himself makes quite an impact!) It is one of the most authentic versions of the novel so far and tries to capture the bleakness of the oppositions presented to us in the novel - civilisation and savagery; the force of the industrial revolution and the decaying gentility of agrarian society - and their echoes in the landscape.

Length: 405

Concluding analysis

REVIEW OF A CONTROVERSIAL NOVEL

This review provides those responsible for selection with a clear indication of the content and style of the novel.

PARRY, Glyn. Sad Boys

Rydalmere, NSW : Hodder Children's, 1998. (H Signature)

ISBN 07336 08221

pbk \$14.95

SCIS NO: 937853

Age recommendation

Age 14+ Admit it, teacher-librarians, the scenario for **Sad boys** is fun.

Brief Synopsis/

It is based on the adventures of three girls and three guys, Year 11s let loose at Rotto for a few days. Sharron, Wendy and Donna arrive by plane and stay at the Lodge, while Rabbit, Jacko and Ozone arrive by ferry and camp illegally on the beach.

Sharron (whose parents have split and whose dad arrives on the island with the deputy principal - ughh!) and sensitive Rabbit attempt to do it, like, well, rabbits, while leader of the pack, Jacko, in control of the testosterone and his mates' money, goes at it hard with Donna. (Ozone and Wendy are cousins, thank goodness).

The sun, sand, cops, rain, bikinis and smatterings of local history might actually make you wistful for the particular Rottnest that belongs to sweet and sad sixteens on their hormonal hols.

Analysis

One reviewer of this novel warned about the swearing, which I hadn't particularly noticed, though re-reading bits confirmed it was there. There are lots of gross-out concepts and bottoms seem to play a prominent part:

'Todd got ripped off majorly when he bought the Torana.
Torana-Sore-Arse- Rex. A piss poor-attempt by Rabbit
To lighten things up. Mambo could do the T-shirt.' (p.21)

Quotation shows writing style & language

Page no. for editing

Parry's distinctive, at times baffling narrative voice might seem to talk through young people rather than directly to them, as though he wishes to share his enormous literary hangover with those who might just like a quiet drink. But in re-reading snippets, I was more struck by the lightness, even deftness of touch displayed in the many descriptions that ring true for the adolescent world. It's as much a case of an adult reader who would prefer not to confront reality that this is what it's like, just as many parents of teenagers avoid their children's bedrooms for fear of any reflection of themselves.

Analysis

For better or worse, Glyn Parry is a messenger for the Zeitgeist. You might not wish to embrace him (too many vomit stains and farting noises), but he isn't going to go away. He's loud and prolific and a vast assortment of those that matter would mosh with him any day.

Length: 361

A NEGATIVE REVIEW

GEBLER, CARLO. Frozen out : a tale of betrayal and survival.

London : Mammoth, 1998. 248 p.

ISBN 0 7497 2874 4 pbk \$14.95

SCIS NO: 946838

Negative introduction

Age 11+ This novel has the rather grand subtitle: *A tale of betrayal and survival*, but it doesn't quite live up to the expectations which this raises. The story is that of an eleven-year-old girl, Phoebe, who moves with her parents and two brothers from London to Ireland. It is a tale of leaving friends and familiar places behind, of finding and losing new friends, adjusting to new places and of growing up; but it doesn't quite work.

Synopsis

I feel it would have worked better with a third rather than a first person telling. The philosophical, social and emotional observations would have been more convincing coming from a voice that wasn't that of an eleven-year-old. Observations are very wise and a little remote, yet the style and story-line suggest it is pitched at a much younger reader.

Constructive criticism

There are some jarring moments - odd images such as 'her eyes shone like black olives' and the description of the new house in the present tense when the rest is in the past. The style is very straightforward, almost old fashioned and unlikely to appeal to older readers.

Quote to support argument

Despite the arrival in Ireland there is not a strong sense of place. Characters are not fully explored and as such are not particularly convincing. Both adults and children are almost one-dimensional and their reactions don't always ring true.

There are too many descriptions that added nothing to the story or to the character development. The political context is spasmodic, but gives some sense of the all-pervasiveness of the conflict. Perhaps in Ireland the events would be seen as more of a betrayal. Here it seems as if Emma, the friend, is seeking to protect herself, not betray or turn against her friend in her actions. These complexities are unsatisfactorily resolved.

Balanced criticism

Put it on the shelves?? It may resonate for readers who have had similar experiences. Some readers may enjoy a 'summer in the life of...' type of story with a few interesting twists in the themes, but I am not sure that they will.

Length: 340

Summing-up not completely negative

The sample reviews were taken from ***Fiction Focus*** 1999 and 1998. They were written by:

Kris Johnstone
Mary Koenig
Alison Lawrence
Jill Midolo
Hugh Rayner
Martin Turner
Leigh Williamson
Matthew Wood