

# DIVERSITY IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: PART TWO

## Choice and formats: Important considerations in our teens' recreational reading

by

Liz Derouet

Choice is an important aspect of recreational reading for all readers, regardless of age. The thing I love most about reading is that we all like, and dislike, different titles, authors, genres and formats. Choice is an important component in the recreational reading of our young people, and a key aspect of their success. The availability and access to various formats of books for recreational reading is also an important aspect I discovered during my research project. This second article in a series of three discusses the importance of choice and diverse formats in the recreational reading of teenage boys. Of course, much of my findings will relate to other age groups, and to girls, however my action research project at my recent school, Toowoomba Grammar School, with the International School Boys' Coalition, (IBSC), involved Year 8 boys. This research was conducted in terms 3 and 4, 2018.

When I invited fourteen Year 8 boys to be part of the research project, I devised a list of themes and genres I thought offered a wide choice of reading material, to encourage them to read widely. Within the first week, there was a backlash from many as I had not included free choice as one of the options. Free choice was immediately added, and the boys did not look back. They began reading with gusto. The inclusion of unconditional free choice was an important one for several reasons. Firstly, as Smith and Wilhelm (2002) report, when choice is offered in a classroom context, boys will construe this context in a way in which they feel they are being offered no choice. I wanted the boys to have free choice to read what they wanted, but I also

wanted them to read diversely. I needed to create an environment in which they felt safe to choose new reading material and adding free choice allowed this to occur.

The inclusion of free choice was also an important one as it allowed the boys to read what they were comfortable reading first, enabling them to form the habit of reading, before embarking on new material. Timothy, a boarder from Western Queensland, chose **My Droving Days** (Moore, P. & Moore, S., 2012) as his first read. This book was closely related to his own experiences and loves, but his next choice of book, a dystopian novel, was not. After reading Mark Smith's **The Road to Winter** (2016) Timothy commented that the book *probably had changed my view about the genre because I've never read one and it's pretty good and I will read another one day.*

Free choice allowed the boys to change their reading choices, to fit in with the other areas so they could read the books they had listed as possible reads. For instance, Joe changed several themes so he could diversify his reading:

*I wanted to change **Wolf Brother** from 'animal companion' to 'historical' and change **War Horse** to 'animal companion', so I can open up war so I can put in **Tomorrow When the War Began**. Then I can do the other book I have for free choice.*

This was important for Joe as it allowed him to move titles between themes, of which many did not cater to his preferred recreational reading.

Aech found the provision of free choice as an opportunity to have a break from reading diversely. When asked, in the final interview, if he thought there was enough choice during the project he said: *Yeah, I do. And especially with the free choice that got added in. That was kind of like a break if you wanted to just go back to what you normally read.* As the research focussed on recreational reading, this was an important factor as I did not want the boys to grow to hate reading because of restrictions. I wanted them to be motivated to choose reading material.

Choice begins with motivation. Intrinsic motivation, not external, and autonomous motivation, not controlled. I needed my boys to want to read, to be intrinsically motivated. Sure, they had a goal to achieve, a challenge with their own reading, but to achieve this, they needed to be motivated to choose a book in the first instance. The provision of free choice enabled the boys to view reading as personally relevant, and as De Naeghel, Van Keer, Vansteenkiste and Rosseel state: *If children consider reading as personally relevant or identify themselves with the value of reading, their tendency to engage in reading activities has been internalised.* (2012, p.1007)

Autonomous motivation leads to more positive outcomes, and recognising interests and allowing choices gives this license. Many of my boys, especially the reluctant readers, wanted to read material related to their interests, an importance aspect in encouraging boys to read. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) report that many of these interests are brought to school, not devel-



Double-page spread from **The Mediterranean** by Armin Greder, reproduced here with kind permission of Allen & Unwin.

oped at school, and found, in a large study they conducted, *the desire for choice and the ability to pursue one's interests as an exercise of freedom and possibility* (p.109) was widespread. Fred, a bright student and an able but reluctant reader, read **Nips XI** (Starke, 2000) as it was cricket related, with a strong multicultural theme. I doubt he would have picked the book up if it was not for the cricket image on the front cover!

In an interesting article, **Engaging Disturbing Books**, Gay Ivey and Peter Johnston (2018) offer some insights into teens choosing what adults would see as inappropriate, or issue laden books. This is a thought provoking article in which the authors report on research conducted in a school with students, parents and teachers.

The parents and teachers were encouraged to read the books their teens were freely choosing to read, leading to discussions about these books with their teens. Ivey and Johnston report that the *parents were sure that when their children read the books that matter to them, they developed as readers in significant ways* (p.146). The same article offers another aspect of choice, in that it allows readers to choose not to read particular books. The ability to choose must work both ways for our teens. We must also encourage our teens to put down a book if he/she is not enjoying it or finding it difficult. Many of my students stopped reading a book if they are not liking it, and this is a good thing.

This topic leads to English set texts. I did not factor in set texts when I planned my research project, but the boys were required to read John Marsden's **Tomorrow When the War Began** (1993) during the time. All boys included the book in their reading for

the challenge. When asked if they would have chosen this title if it had not been an English text, seven boys said no, while eleven said they would have chosen the war theme. After reading, all boys said they would choose to read from the theme of war again. When asked if he would choose to read from this theme again, Bob answered: *After reading that book I would. I didn't really like it before. I changed my mind because of how teenagers in that situation can do it too, not just older people.*

During the challenge Bob read books he had at home but had not yet read. The introduction of the set text made him read a book he would not have chosen and introduced him to a world where teens, like himself, are represented in a much more positive, resilient manner.

Reading **Tomorrow When the War Began** introduced the boys to a widely popular book for teens, a book some of them had not heard of. Ace went on to read the series and when asked if he would have read it if it were not a set text he said 'no', that he *didn't even know about it*. I have changed my mind now about the value of set texts for English. The following year students again read **Tomorrow When the War Began** and it was more popular than previous years with the second book in the series the second highest loaned book in the library for the year.

Choice and motivation to read can only be supported by making a wide range of genres and formats available. New books need to be promoted widely and often, which will be the basis of my third article.

Choice in formats was an important inclusion in my research and I discovered much about the boys' reading habits. The boys were asked to choose from various formats,

## Welcome to the 2018 Reading Challenge The Challenge

Your challenge is to read a minimum of four books, from various themes. These are listed below.

A list of suggested titles for each theme will be placed on Google Classroom.

### THEMES

1. Displaced People
2. Environmental Issues
3. Dystopian
4. War
5. Race Relations
6. LGBT+/Transgender
7. Historical—Australia
8. Historical—International
9. Multicultural
10. A genre you do not like
11. Holocaust
12. An unreliable narrator
13. Cyberbullying and bullying
14. People with special needs
15. Animal companion
16. FREE CHOICE (can be selected once only during the challenge)

You may choose another theme; however, you must first discuss the theme with Mrs Derouet.

### FORMATS AND TITLES

- 1 picture book for older readers (check title with Mrs Derouet before reading)
- 1 graphic novel/manga
- At least 2 prose/verse novels
- When you have read 2 prose/verse novels, you may read a second picture book or graphic novel.
- There is no limit to the number of books you read, but you must read a minimum of four books.

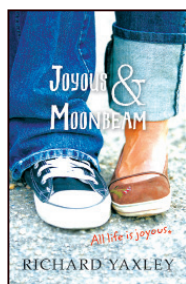
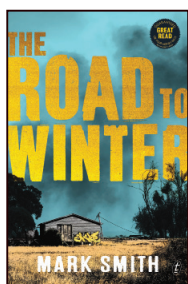
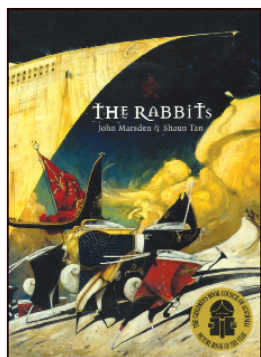
including picture books for older readers, manga, graphic novel, prose and verse novels. Picture books for older readers were popular, providing an engaging and enriching read, delving into issues many teens face and experience. Due to their short format they also appear an achievable read. All readers, however, found these sophisticated picture books influenced them in some way and made them think. Books such as **The Rabbits** by John Marsden and Shaun Tan (1998), **The Mediterranean** by Armin Greder (2018), and **Ziba Came on a Boat** by Liz Lofthouse and Robert Ingpen (2007), offered enriching experiences of historical and current affairs. Ace found **The Rabbits** interesting, saying *it just*



# BOOKS TO READ

MAGPIES VOLUME THIRTY-FIVE

# BOOKS TO READ



really showed what we did I guess to the Aboriginals, it's a really good book, very interesting. This illustrates the impact of a good picture book, the combination of visual and verbal texts conveying meaning in a way prose does not.

Perhaps my favourite comment came from Gerald after reading **The Mediterranean**:

*Yeah, it has sort of changed my idea about picture books. I thought they were mostly for younger readers but this one is more in-depth and is a lot harder to understand if you don't really... you have to look at the pictures a lot to try and figure out what they mean.*

Another boy chose the format because it had been a long time since he had read a picture book. When asked if they were what he expected, he said No, *cause normally picture books are for younger readers, not like, more mature stuff in them which I wasn't expecting.*

The inclusion of picture books gave the boys permission to read a format they thought was intended for a younger audience, and possibly a chance to revisit a favourite format from earlier years.

The opinion that picture books are exclusively for younger readers is one I expected to hear. I did not expect the boys to think of the graphic novel format in this way, however one of my prolific readers thought exactly this. After reading **Astro Boy** (2015), Kobe commented *I thought these types of graphic novels and comics were more for kids and it's actually really good to read and quite fun and takes a bit of understanding to get all the pictures.* Aech was not a big fan of graphic novels but quite enjoyed reading **Magneto Testament** (2014), and Fred said graphic novels are *different and they portray the message in a different way with pictures and stuff.*

The inclusion of a range of formats was important in that they cater to various reading abilities while still delivering the same content and depth. Graphic novels and picture books for older readers require

a different type of reading to prose, a more visually complex reading that requires a cognitive approach. Reading different text types will help prepare our students for the 21st Century skills they will need. The collaboration of the visual and verbal texts enriches the reading experience, bringing an insightful understanding to the plot and characters.

Verse novels were a new format for most of my readers, although they have been a favourite of mine for some time now. I love the shortness of them—being a relatively slow reader, I can get through a verse novel quickly. I love the rich, poetic language of a verse novel, not a word is wasted. I enjoy sharing verse novels with my students because they have many attributes boys like. Firstly, a verse novelist begins the narrative immediately. Some books take a little time to get going and if this is the case most boys I know will not continue reading. Verse novels, because of their limited use of words, cannot afford this.

Verse novels are accessible for reluctant and struggling readers, as there is a lot of white space on the page. A prose novel can be daunting for some, however a verse novel, because of its poetic format, has fewer words and will appear more achievable. If boys think there is a high chance of failure, they may not start in the first place. Verse novels also take a shorter amount of time to read. A regular visitor to my library read Sarah Crossan's **Moonrise** (2017) over a number of lunch times. When I asked what he liked about the format, he said it was good to read because it didn't take him long to read, and it had an interesting storyline. My most prolific reader had not heard of verse novels and was introduced to them during this time.

The last format for discussion is the prose novel. One would think this would be a familiar format for a Year 8 student, but for two boys, it was not. They had not read a novel since their early primary school days. One boy read only novels during the challenge and said these were a new format, because prior to this he only read illus-

trated books, or picture books. Another boy had not found a book that could sustain his interest since reading the **Geronimo Stilton** (2004-2020) series in grades 2 or 3, stating he needed to *find books he can keep reading.* I was wrong to assume all my students had read novels, and their commitment to achieving this in Year 8 is testament to their perseverance, availability of and freedom to choose books they enjoy.

For our young people to have enriched, literary experiences, we need to be able to offer them an array of formats. They may try a format and not like it, but then they can make an informed decision.

Note: All boys' names have been changed.

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