

Michael Hyde

The highlight of IFTE for me was the night I launched *Hunger and other stories* (2003 AATE \$16.50) as the first public event in the restored domed reading room of the State Library of Victoria in Melbourne. Well, not quite: I wanted to speak from the invigilator's elevated, gigantic desk at the centre of that great circular room, but the room was so well designed for silence that a speaker could not be heard from a distance of five metres so we had the drinks and food there and retired (the proper Victorian word for this establishment) to the 1990s auditorium to listen and speak in comfort.

A complex symbol for governments and education resides in the reading room in its design and the commitment to build it and restore it. Like the reading room in the British museum, it was designed according with the principles of Jeremy Bentham, who invented the panopticon. The librarian told me that the library contains a signed copy of one of Bentham's books and a letter congratulating the original librarian for his choice of design.

Unfortunately the other fine example of the panopticon built in the Australian colonies may be found at Port Arthur. In the Melbourne library, the invigilator's desk still has the swivel chair but not the large swivel-mounted mirror that assisted him to see all 360 degrees efficiently to maintain order and silence in the room. Prisons, schools and libraries still sit uncomfortably together – perhaps libraries have made the most progress since Victorian times.

Inscribed around the walls are quotations from writers past and present, including Helen Garner, who wrote there, Patrick White, and the contemporary writer for children Boori Monty Pryor. Another children's writer and librarian at the New York public library, E.B. White, the author of *Charlotte's Web*, wrote about the words from Milton inscribed in gold over the entrance to their reading room, 'A good book is the precious life blood of a master spirit', but I was disappointed to see that those glorious words did not get onto the walls in Melbourne.

However, the blood still beats and the spirit still sings in the works of Australian writers. Editors Michael Hyde and Val Kent have collected ten short stories and two long poems which do represent the state of the

writer's art here and now. The lead story, 'Hunger', by Ian Bone, is my choice for the best in the collection. A boy has just finished his shift in a fast food restaurant at the beach and is impatiently waiting for the bus to join his mates for a night out in the city when his eye is drawn to a beautiful young woman almost hidden in the gloomy corner of the bus shelter. He is 'sprung badly' when she returns his gaze and his embarrassment builds as the pile of her belongings turns out to contain a crying baby which needs to be fed. Breast-fed. He averts his eyes but sees flashes of the feeding. They talk and he finds that he knew the woman as a girl and knew of the useless surfer hero father from his work at the beach shop.

Like the other stories and poems, 'Hunger' has been chosen for its potential for classroom discussion and the encouragement given to students to write their own fiction. This first story sets up topics such as the representation of gender in power relations: the male gaze and the female response, the representation of real experiences in imaginative fiction and the construction of narrative to develop character and highlight subtextual commentary. Ian Bone gives his story a traditional ironic twist when the boy is subject to the threatening gaze from a smash-and-grab robber who challenges him with the usual bully's tactic of asking 'Whatchoo looking at then, dickhead?'. This also provides a good example of how writers use present tense dialogue to change the pace and dramatise past tense, third person narrative. However, the main test of stories for classroom use is whether you can read them aloud and have them capture and hold the attention of your class. My bet is that this one is a short-priced favourite to work in most classrooms.

The stories are also grouped to help comparative discussion about the ways writers explore and represent the meanings they want their readers to interpret. In contrast, the second story, 'When Devils Call' by Alexis Wright, can be read as a surreal composition, as a character study of a depressive or as an indictment of white power over dispossessed Aboriginal people. Or you could continue a gendered reading if you presented 'Hunger' that way. The surreal continues with Michael Hyde's story 'Mother Rabbit' in which the middle-aged male narrator sees his mother reincarnated as an angora

rabbit to whom he is able to talk of the things that he never told his mum.

As often happens in young adult literature these days there is a bias towards boys in the selection. Readers will find a range of masculinities explored. Male characters take physical risks in 'Hunger' and 'When Devils Call', get depressed and project their feelings in physical action – harmlessly chopping wood in 'Mother Rabbit' or personal violence of the most horrific kind in 'He Had a Gun', the Hoddle Street massacre rap poem by Lauren Williams:

'He had a **big gun** / 4 such a little man'

Lauren Williams performed her poem at the book launch superbly. As you can see in the above line, bold print and the forward slash help the reader to recreate the rhythm from the writing. This is a rich text for classroom use. You could begin with the relationship between the female writer and the male and female readers. And newspaper and/or criminology research on the Hoddle Street massacre would give you many other opportunities for students to respond and compose.

Dino, the Australian son of Italian parents in Archimede Fusillo's story 'Bloodlines', rejects his father's demands to participate in the coming-of-age bloodsport of the hunting season but he, too, takes up a gun to assert his identity in a different way.

Paul Daffey's character in 'Walk On' shies at the shadow of the bullies down at the creek but plays footy against boys that look like men. When his elderly coach enables him to reveal his humiliating experience, the old man's quiet response, 'all those blokes in the senior team, once played in the juniors, you know', leads him to 'finally start growing' in the only meaningful way to compensate for his temporary depression. Here again, student readers can compare their own experiences of sport, bullying and physical consciousness with the fictional account.

Readers who know Jenny Pausacker's Central Secondary College stories will lead others to enjoy the humorous representation of masculinities in 'The Size of the Sky'. Here also is a teaching opportunity to see how the writer uses the motif of the colour blue to link and reflect actions and emotions in the narrative as readers follow Marco home to find his girlfriend much more interested in the new boy next door who is discovered on the front porch, painting his toenails blue. Girls are useful to boys to do their English homework in both this story and Jaclyn Moriarty's humorous

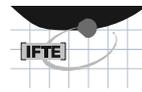
'Coffee Cake', where a brother has done a deal with his sister for the homework but complains when she dictates, 'Shouldn't you be putting this in my own words?' These two stories are also good examples of the writer's use of the unreliable narrator.

Poet Catherine Bateson appropriates the classic fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast* for her narrative poem 'Love and the Cloned Girl' and varies it with unreliable and deceptive narrators. The parts of the poem are headed 'She Tells Him a Bedtime Story', 'He Tells a Different Story', then follow eight other parts to end with 'She Writes the Story's End'. He says he stole her mother's DNA, cloned her and waited eighteen years before sending for her to come to his secure country mansion where she was promised 'Glamour and every appliance/ you never needed/ A magazine lifestyle,/ glitterati, papparazi/ Vogue, haute couture and other foreign words/ for emptiness'.

In contrast, Beth Yahp in 'The Pursuit of Happiness', takes the reader to Asia and the shambles of a squatter's slum alongside a wealthy woman's mansion where the privileged poor get some work. Like Pausacker, Yahp uses present tense to heighten the immediacy of the narrative and a motif 'Happy' to link characters and events over the nine parts. Young readers are respected by the number of gaps left in the text.

These latter four stories give prominence to more female characters and balance out the selection. What also matters is that all of the stories are written by writers who demonstrate a good understanding of their Australian adolescent readers.

Two contrasting stories are set in classrooms, *Surprise Me* by Cate Kennedy and *Things Fall Apart* by Brian Matthews: the former in a high school and the latter, surprisingly, in a university literature tutorial. As Matthew's title suggests, his story is allusive: a new old tutor who is 'a Joyce man' struggles with 'some Ancient Mariner fatalism' to cope with a tutorial class who are less than inspired by the Updike short story, *Separating*. Here the story is told from the point of view of a teacher afraid of 'the contempt of the unforgiving young'. I suspect that the increasingly Joycean style and the allusions which end with an appropriation of the ending of Joyce's *Dubliners* story, *The Dead*, make this a different story for students and experienced teachers of literature. It's a challenging choice and one for talented students who want to go after the allusions, although it can be read more simply as a character study. In any case, it will be a new experience for many students to read a classroom story from the point of view of the teacher.



Surprise Me is a comic romp with the Dawk (Mr Dawkin), a science teacher who should have been on the ball when he told his class that he wanted their assignments presented in a surprising and entertaining manner. You and I would have read the danger signals when one group asked ‘Can we do a simulation of a natural disaster?’ but we probably had the advantage of having survived previous classroom disasters and heard Joyce Grenfell’s voice saying with barely suppressed hysteria, ‘I think someone is being a little bit silly’. The repetition of ‘Surprise me’ from the Dawk from a class dedicated to ‘get by on this with as little work as possible’ increases the tension towards a hilarious climax. The point of view is thoroughly with the students in this very accessible story.

The collection will fulfil the editors’ hopes that it will encourage students to write. They have selected a wide range of genres which invite student readers and listeners to imagine both familiar and unfamiliar settings, situations and characters. As only one text is set outside Australia, I wonder if future collections might encourage writers to take readers to other lands and cultures. The editors’ aim was to select texts for older students but some of the stories can be used from Year 8 while most will succeed with Years 9 to 11. Take your pick.

Michael Hyde, the joint editor of *Hunger and other stories* and the writer of ‘Mother Rabbit’, is a former English teacher and a father of four children. His understanding of adolescents, especially boys was very well demonstrated in his two earlier young adult novels, *Max* (2000 Vulgar Press) and *Tyger Tyger* (2001 Vulgar Press). In *Max* he shows how boys externalise their fears as Max mourns the suicide of his mate by indulging in dangerous physical behaviour. He jumps off a railway bridge to escape a railway cop and climbs the school roof at night to abseil down and finish a graffiti in memory of his dead mate. Although he finds some peace in his canoe in the quiet reaches of the river, he seeks out the rapids which lead to an underground cave via a life-threatening tunnel, and is struck unconscious when he takes his canoe over a waterfall. Hyde clearly knows canoeing and the patience fathers need in these circumstances.

In *Tyger Tyger* the action comes from AFL football and a seventeen-year-old boy dealing with the demons surfacing from the mysterious circumstances of his father’s death when the son was only seven. It turns out that his dad went off a country road on his motorbike into a tree and was killed. Some unintelligible scraps of

this information stayed in the child’s head and have entered his adolescent dreams. Troubled by nightmares, his future as a promising footballer, already threatened by his low self esteem, seems about to expire. Here is rehabilitation through the action of the football games and training. These events are expertly described alongside a subplot of a mate’s development as a sports writer. The novel ends with a classic six-page account of a game as it appears in the newspaper.

In his new novel, *Hey Joe* (2003 Vulgar Press \$18.95), Michael Hyde takes his readers on a backpacking holiday to Vietnam. This satisfies another neglected area of fiction for adolescents who live in the country where a huge percentage of young people travel, as we say, to the land called ‘overseas’. The complication is that Jimi (named after Jimi Hendrix (I don’t have to explain that to young readers do I?)) has a father, Joe, who was a radical peace activist in Australia during the Vietnam war. The novel opens with a prologue of ‘notes for a novel’ written in 1968 by Joe and this manuscript is taken to Vietnam twenty years later by his son Jimi. At age 15, Jimi’s only reason to visit his estranged father would have been ‘to whack him one’, but here, aged 22, he is doing ‘this strange dance with my father’s shadow’. Likewise for the author Michael Hyde, who combines the father’s war/peace zone stories from his activities leading up to the great moratorium march in Melbourne with the son’s travels to the battle-ravaged rural and city sites in Vietnam in 1988. Hyde manages the problem of getting historical information into his story without interrupting the narrative drive. Nor does he balk at the ideological questions. He does not hide his own peace activist position and he gives an honest account of some of the dilemmas and disputes among peace activists. Jimi sees the results of agent orange and amputees walking the streets of Vietnam, but Joe’s journal is frank about the activists’ arguments about how to achieve peace through stopping the war or assisting the Vietnamese to victory. Hyde’s account resonates. Believe me – I was there. These structural and ideological issues provide some good teaching opportunities as students read the two first-person narratives from the father and son characters.

Further tension is raised through the father’s notes, which also contain letters from Vietnam from his friend, Brian, a conscript who was killed in the war. The tourist narrative of Jimi is interspersed with excerpts from the manuscript. Jimi discovers that Joe had made a trip to Phnom Penh to donate money to the Vietcong and was there at the start of the Tet offensive. After a

tourist romance interlude, Jimi goes in search of Joe's tracks which lead to the mountains and the village where Brian had been killed; this gives him the lead to find Joe living with Brian's girlfriend in a sea-side city.

There is an author's note at the beginning, outlining the main events of the war from Australia's perspective, from 1962 to 1975, and detailed acknowledgements at the end which reveal the extent of Hyde's research among his activist friends, Vietnam veterans and people in Vietnam where he visited with the assistance of a research grant from Art Victoria. He thanks his editor, Foong Ling Kong, who particularly helped with the melding of the two stories of Joe and Jimi – and Jimi Hendrix for his music and the song titles that became the chapter headings. As Hyde himself comments, he has more than one book in his head after the ten years of this research and I hope that he dips into it again to produce something as engaging as *Hey Joe*.

Inevitably there are some drug references, sexual references and some very muted occasional coarse language – a book about this topic would be utterly unbelievable otherwise – but your Year 9 or 10 students, especially the boys, will lap up this book with enthusiasm.

Melina Marchetta

After the long wait for Melina's second novel, her session at IFTE was unsurprisingly crowded out. We've all enjoyed using *Looking for Alibrandi* in our classrooms for years, so comparison is unavoidable. Let me assure you that *Saving Francesca* (2003 Viking \$24.95) is not only as good but better. Like many teacher-writers, Melina has learnt well from her students and her dialogue demonstrates the benefits of her experience. It is spot-on in its reflection of contemporary students and their attitudes. She has captured the boys particularly well and her book is dedicated to the boys at her current school '...and the girls there too'.

Francesca is in Year 11 and one of only thirty girls who are the first female students to attend the all-boys St Sebastian's College, with her younger brother Luca who is in Year 5. I had the reverse experience when my girls' school took in one class of boys but I can vouch for the epidemic of grossly stereotypical behaviour which the change brought out in both students and teachers during that first year. The girls are in Year 11 and create havoc with the boys' expectations. They are called 'bitch' or 'dog' and whistled at; boys clutch their crotches as they pass in the corridor and the girls soon

learn that they 'can't use words such as "oral task" or "penalised" or the number 69 without a guy in your class snickering loudly and grunting "Ring a bell, girls?"'

Francesca's normally outgoing and witty disposition is shown in her attitude to small group work with butcher's paper. 'It's a Catholic school thing, butcher's paper. Even butchers themselves have moved on to other alternatives.' However when she is forced by the one inflexible teacher to work with the odious Thomas Mackee in the Religion class, her spirit fails her. They have to decide on their ideal community. Thomas does the usual deal that she do all the work after he has contributed 'no fat chicks, no rules, no one over twenty-five', and they both end up for a week in detention with the equally odious Jimmy Hailler, who is busy terrorising the younger boy nearest him. During the detention times and on the bus home, Marchetta convincingly tells the story of how the boys and Francesca gradually get to know each other until Francesca feels that she has 'turned into a delinquent'.

There are many teaching opportunities in the ways in which the writer represents the dialogue to show the tone and yet the subtext of the humorous banter of the boys in their talk with and about the girls. In these times of school librarians and English teachers being forced to do four-letter-word counts to satisfy the fearful principals, I can report that Marchetta uses very few. The flavour of the conversations is enhanced with Francesca's commentary, for example here about Jimmy: 'He's the foulest-mouthed boy I've ever come across and constantly uses the C word. I tell him it offends me and he calls me a prude. I shrug. So be it. I'm a prude. But he says that he'll hold back when he's around me. He talks about smoking dope, probably a lot more than he actually smokes it, and just when you think you've come up with some theory about him, he'll make you change your mind...'

The complication to the plot is that Francesca's university lecturer mum is suffering from depression and will not leave her bed. Jimmy's mum is 'a dropkick' and he lives with his grandfather. Francesca finds that she and Jimmy 'make weird friends' and he answers:

'I've never been into the F word with people.'

'I'm privileged then? Why me?'

He thinks for a moment and then shrugs again.

'You're the realest person I've ever known.'

'Is that good or bad?'

'It's fucking awful. There's not much room for bullshit and you know how I thrive on it.'

And they laugh.