Belonging: a place for, and in, children's poetry A hybrid thesis including creative works, articles and exegetical discussion

Sally Murphy
Edith Cowan University

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Belonging: a place for, and in, children’s poetry

A hybrid thesis including creative works, articles

and exegetical discussion

This thesis is presented for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Sally Murphy

Edith Cowan University

School of Arts and Humanities

2017
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

(ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

(iii) contain any defamatory material.

(iv) I also grant permission for the Library at Edith Cowan University to make duplicate copies of my thesis as required.

Sally Murphy

Date
USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
Abstract

This hybrid thesis is comprised of three creative works – two collections of poetry for children and a verse novel – as well as three journal articles examining aspects of children’s poetry, and exegetical discussion of the creative works and of key concepts influencing both the creative and discursive elements of the thesis.

The first creative work, *All About Me*, is a collection of poetry for early childhood readers and their carers. It consists of 20 poems, and as a finished manuscript mirrors the length of a picture book format collection. The poems explore and highlight aspects of the concept of belonging as it applies to very young children, including self-awareness and awareness of the world and people around them.

The second creative work, *You and Me*, is a collection of poetry for middle primary school aged readers (approximately 8 to 10 years of age). It consists of 68 poems, and as a finished manuscript is the length of a 72-page trade paperback publication. The poems explore and highlight aspects of the concept of belonging as it applies to primary school aged children, including their self-identity, and their part in the groups to which they belong, as well as their place in the wider world.

The third creative work, *Worse Things*, is a multi-voice verse novel suitable for readers in the upper primary and early secondary years, aged approximately 10 to 14 years old. In this novel, three protagonists struggle to determine where they belong at school, on the sporting field, and within their very different family situations. Blake, a young footballer, is injured and unable to play his beloved sport. Jolene, a star hockey player, has lost interest in her sport as she struggles to meet
the demands of her ambitious mother and misses her absentee father. Amed, a newly arrived immigrant, is unable to play soccer, the sport he loves, because of a language barrier.

The three creative works are interspersed with three journal articles. With poetry being widely seen as an important part of the children’s literature landscape, yet not well represented through publishing output, these articles, which are aimed at educators and children’s literature researchers, consider where poetry belongs.

The first article, *The Purple Cow*, focusses on why poetry is important for children, and the role that pleasure plays in engaging children with the benefits poetry has to offer. The second article, *Belonging: Australian Identity in Children’s Poetry* explores why the theme of belonging is prevalent in children’s poetry and examines differing representations of belonging in recent Australian poetry, focussing on the portrayal of family in Lorraine Marwood and Steven Herrick’s collections and verse novels, as well as a verse novel by Sally Morgan. The third and final article, *Prose Versus Verse*, offers an insight into the creative choice to write in the verse novel form, and examines the value of verse novels both as a classroom tool and for private reading, with a comparison of verse and prose novels from Steven Herrick and Sheryl Clark.

The exegetical discussion of my creative works, contained in the final chapter, brings the theme of belonging to the fore, exploring the creative decision-making employed in composing this thesis. By examining the poems through a lens provided by Allison Halliday, I discuss my own construction of the concept of
childhood, as seen in the poems, exploring how both the subjects explored, and the poetic forms and devices used, demonstrate my belief that childhood is a time of increasing awareness of self, and of awareness of being both part of things and apart from things. While children may enjoy simple, playful topics, they also have the sophistication to explore and understand global issues and to deal with demanding topics. The exegesis goes on to explore my growing awareness that it is not possible, nor even desirable, to attempt to explore every aspect or version of belonging, given that, like every other writer, I am constrained by my own experiences and knowledge. Finally, the exegesis looks at where children’s poetry belongs in contemporary Australia.

As a whole, the thesis demonstrates that poetry belongs in the hands of Australian children, providing a way to entertain and educate, as well as offering them an opportunity to explore the important theme of belonging. For, if children are able to find their own versions of belonging reflected in pleasurable ways, and given insight into many other versions of belonging, then they will engage not just with poetry, but with the world around them.
Acknowledgements

When I started on the doctoral journey, my biggest fear was whether or not I belonged in the academic world. As I now present this thesis, I can comfortably say that this world has warmly opened its arms to me, and I feel part of the family.

Since entering the doctoral writing programme at Edith Cowan University’s South West campus in 2014, I have had immeasurable support from my principal supervisor, Vahri McKenzie, who has mentored, guided and advised me from very tentative beginnings to this final project. She has always acted with professionalism but, importantly to me, has also been a true friend, with her wisdom and understanding meaning more to me than words can express. Support, too, from my second supervisor, Dr Donna Mazza has been invaluable and much appreciated, and to Donna I owe the fact that I even dared to consider entering the programme. Advice along the way from Dr Richard Rossiter, Dr Robyn Mundy and Dr David Rhodes is also thankfully acknowledged.

To the university itself, which provided financial support in the form an Australian Postgraduate Award and ECU Excellence Award, which allowed me the time to research and write for over three years, I owe a debt of gratitude. The provision of office space, library resources and more are also appreciated.

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To my much-neglected friends, close to home and further afield. My apologies for the times I have not attended events, not responded to emails, or been seemingly distant. And my special thanks to those who either listened to me rabbiting on at seemingly irrelevant points in conversations about the utter importance of children’s poetry. Some of my biggest break throughs have come in
the midst of trying to explain to someone exactly what is I’ve been trying to do these past years.

To my peers, fellow children’s writers, who have provided encouragement and, again, listened patiently when I spoke about children’s poetry as if it is the only type of literature that matters. And to darling Anne Bell, an esteemed children’s poet herself, who regularly emailed to make sure I was still working on my thesis, and who spruiked this project whenever she could, as well as offering to fly over and do my dishes so I could get on with this work.

To my family: my parents, parents-in-law, siblings, nephews and nieces who have, like my friends, been neglected while I focussed on this work but who, nonetheless, have expressed pride and interest in what I’m doing. And especially to my best-friend-sister Monica, who wondered why I would put myself through the agony of more study, but who encouraged me nonetheless. I wish you could be here to see it finished.

Lastly, but of course never ever least, to my greatest achievements: my three little grandchildren, my six wonderful children and my beloved husband, Julian, who have supported me and been proud of me, kept me motivated, ignored my tears, hugged me when needed, and been accepting of living in the midst of thesis chaos. Thank you.
List of Publications

The following poems, which were written for and form part of this thesis, were either published or accepted for publication during the course of candidature:


‘Steps’ (2015). The School Magazine: Blast Off, 100(9), 33


‘Caught’ – Accepted by The School Magazine in August 2016

‘Morning’ – Accepted by The School Magazine in November 2016

‘Lunchtime’ - Accepted by The School Magazine in November 2016

‘Waiting’ – Accepted by The School Magazine in February 2017

‘Let’s Go’! – Accepted by Highlights High Five (USA) in February 2017

The following papers, which form chapters of this thesis, were presented and/or published during the course of candidature:

‘The Purple Cow: Creating Poetry for Pleasure and Beyond’
Presented at the Asian Festival of Children’s Content (AFCC) in Singapore in May 2015


Presented as keynote address at the joint state conference of the Australian Literacy Educators Association (ALEA) and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne, Victoria, in September 2016.

‘Belonging: Australian Identity in Children’s Poetry’


‘Narratives in Verse: What Verse Novels Can Offer Young Readers’

Presented in shortened form at the national ALEA/AATE (Australian Association for the Teaching of English) Conference in Adelaide in July 2016.
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Introduction

My life seems to have always been filled with poetry. Memories of reciting nursery rhymes with my mother and siblings, of being thrilled by readings of poems from *A Child’s Garden of Verses* (Stevenson, 1963), the works of A. A. Milne, and various illustrated anthologies feature prominently in my early recollections. At school, I was thrilled when teachers read poetry, and even more so when we learnt poems to recite. As I began writing, much of my creative output was poetry. Unsurprisingly, poetry remains a big part of my adult life. My first publication credit was a poem, and, though I have gone on to have numerous prose and nonfiction publications, it is my three verse novels for younger readers (Murphy, 2009a, 2010, 2014a) which have enjoyed most critical and commercial success. When determining a focus for this thesis, then, children’s poetry was my first and only consideration.

But, while this part was easy, my reasons for commencing doctoral studies were about more than my love of poetry: I had a desire to enrich my writing skills and to try to make sense of where I belong in the Australian children’s literature world. Though I grew up knowing I wanted to be a writer, I had little formal training in creative writing and publishing and so, in the more than twenty years since my first poem was accepted for publication, I have battled with the competing emotions of pleasure in my successes and fear of being found out as a fraud. I was unaware that this fear is a common one for successful people and even has a name – imposter syndrome: the feeling that I somehow ‘lucked out’ to have experienced the level of success I have (Hutchins, 2015, p. 3), coupled with anxiety that
someone would find out that I really wasn’t as good as they thought, or that my successes to date had been flukes.

This sense of being an imposter was perhaps strongest when I started to be described by others as a poet, following the publication of my first verse novel, *Pearl Verses the World* (2009), which, along with my second, *Toppling* (2010) was nominated for and won a number of literary awards. This fear of being found out impacted the writing of subsequent verse novels, as I struggled to replicate the successful formula of the first two. Being referred to as a poet increased my concern because my poetry seemed so much less ‘poetic’ than that by those I termed ‘real’ poets – largely those I had studied at school or university, or the poets writing for adults whom I read in literary journals. I was perhaps forgetting that my own poetic heroes were in fact those I was still enjoying in books and magazines for children.

When I discovered that I was eligible for doctoral studies, I was attracted in part by the privilege of time to write that three years’ financial stipend would give, but more so by the thought that I might acquire the knowledge and skill I was lacking. In short, the doctorate might cure my imposter syndrome because I would have proven to others – and to myself – that I knew what I was doing as a writer and poet. I would figure out if and where I belonged in the literary world.

This idea of where I might belong was echoed in my desire to find out where children’s poetry belonged. Poetry for children is underrepresented in Australian publishing, classrooms, and libraries when compared with prose fiction and nonfiction. This lack of representation is surprising given the value placed on
poetry in curriculum documents and by literacy experts, as well as the keenness of creators to produce poetry for children. This apparent mismatch stems in part from a need to better understand the way perceptions of ‘the child’ shape the poetry written for and offered to children. This need to determine where children’s poetry belongs is echoed in the recurrence of the theme of ‘belonging’ in contemporary children’s poetry. This thesis, then, seeks to identify where children’s poetry belongs in the publishing and educational landscape in Australia, and explores belonging as a key theme of children’s poetry, through creative works, exegetical exploration and analysis of contemporary Australian children’s poetry.

With my publication credits including many single poems, verse novels, prose novels, picture books, reading books and other educational materials, and with new works being published regularly, I decided my doctoral studies should aim at producing multiple works. The form of a hybrid thesis with publication – made up of multiple publishable pieces, submitted to appropriate publishers or publications during candidacy – was chosen. This would enable me to produce a range of creative pieces, thus honing my skills in different poetic forms, as well as focussing on issues surrounding children’s poetry in the form of journal articles and conference papers, and allow me to publish work along the way. Using a single focus theme linking both the creative and exegetical components, would allow the interplay between all elements to produce what Milech and Schilo term ‘reciprocal knowings’ (2013, p. 246). In this way, the competing needs of professional writing practice and research enquiry were made easier because rather than two separate pieces of work, I was producing one unified whole. My decision to produce this thesis in the form of chapters alternating the critical and creative works helped me
to see this project from the outset as a single artefact, as well as to allow a bidirectional focus: with, as Smith and Dean (2009) advocate, a reciprocal relationship whereby my creative practice informed my academic research and, conversely, the research informed my creative practice. The iterative cycle (Smith & Dean 2009, pp. 19-21) would allow me to learn from my research, create, learn from my creative process, and again, research and create, with each process informing the other.

The creative component of this thesis, then, includes three separate creative works linked by the common theme, ‘belonging’. Whilst this term may have differing meanings for different people, the works explore aspects of being part of something – from the family circle, to local communities, teams and schools and beyond to humanity and a collective consciousness.

The first work, *All About Me*, is a collection of children’s poetry for early childhood readers (aged approximately three to six years old). The collection includes 20 poems, so that the work is suitable for a picture book-length publication. While it is envisaged that the poems would be illustrated if published in this form, the poems are not reliant on illustrations for understanding. Poems in this collection explore various aspects of belonging which may pertain to very young children, including their sense of self, their position within families and their growing awareness of other people in the family and the wider community. The poems vary in length, from a few lines to poems which may cover a double page spread in published form. With an awareness of the prevalence of rhymed texts for
this age group, the poems in this collection make use of rhyme and regular rhythm, though I experiment with less traditional schemes.

The second work, *Me and You*, is a collection of children’s poetry for readers in the early and middle primary years, aged approximately eight to ten years old. This collection includes 68 poems, so that the work is suitable for a 72-page trade paperback publication. Poems in this collection explore aspects of belonging which may pertain to children in this age group including their place in families, school and community groups, as well as their place in the wider world. Topics such as disability, cultural diversity and bullying are explored, as well as issues of humans belonging within the natural world. Again, the poems vary in length, and include free verse forms.

The third work, *Worse Things*, is a verse novel suitable for readers in the upper primary and early secondary years, aged approximately ten to fourteen years old. While my previous verse novels (Murphy, 2009a, 2010, 2014a) have all relied on a single narrator and used extended poems, for this project I have crafted a verse novel which makes use of multiple voices through a series of short poems, a device common in verse novels. The novel explores aspects of belonging to family, peer groups and sporting groups, through a story about a thirteen-year-old boy whose aim to be a sporting star is curtailed by injury. A second character, a girl of similar age, is pushed by her mother to excel in sport, but resists. The third character is a boy who longs to play his chosen sport but struggles to connect because of a language and cultural barrier.
To complement the creative works and to enrich and demonstrate my own understanding of children’s poetry, during the term of candidacy I researched and wrote three articles each aimed at peer reviewed academic journals. These articles explore the importance of children’s poetry and issues surrounding its creation, for educators and practitioners.

The first article, Chapter Two of this thesis, explores why children’s poetry is important, focusing on the means by which finding pleasure in poetry builds both literacy skills and a sense of self within the wider world. This article uses examples of my own published poetry, exploring my intent as a poet, the devices I use and questions how my poetic work has been influenced by my own experiences with poetry as a child and as a teacher. An early draft of this paper was presented at the Asian Festival of Children’s Content (AFCC) in Singapore in March 2015, and a polished version was subsequently published by the AFCC in its book *Bridges, Dragons and Books: Reflections on Asian Children’s Literature* (Garces-Bascal, 2016). This paper was then presented as a keynote address at the joint state conference of the Australian Literacy Educators Association (ALEA) and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne, Victoria, in September 2016.

The second article, Chapter Four of this thesis, examines differing representations of belonging in recent Australian poetry, focusing on the portrayal of family in Lorraine Marwood’s and Steven Herrick’s collections and verse novels, as well as a verse novel by Sally Morgan, and investigates why this theme is prevalent in children’s poetry, and how it can thus be explored with children. A shortened version of this paper was presented at the ACLAR (Australasian
The third article, Chapter Six of this thesis, offers an insight into the creative choice to write in the verse novel form, with reference to a range of published verse novels. It goes on to examine the value of verse novels both as a classroom tool and for private reading, with a comparison of verse and prose novels from the same authors, (Steven Herrick’s *Do-Wrong Ron* and *Bleakboy and Hunter Stand out in the Rain* and Sheryl Clark’s *Sixth Grade Style Queen (Not)* and *One Perfect Pirouette*). A shortened version of this paper was presented at the national ALEA/AATE (Australian Association for the Teaching of English) Conference in Adelaide in July 2016.

This blend of creative and analytical pieces adheres to ECU’s Research Training Procedure 5: Requirements of a Thesis with Publication (ECU, 2016) which states that:

A Thesis with Publication is a combination of publishable work based on original research and a substantive written, integrating component. The research process and material presented must be equivalent to a traditional thesis; the main difference is in the format of the final submission and the impact of the research (ECU, 2016, p. 1).

Choosing this format enabled me to develop the individual pieces with a view to separate publication either during or following the period of candidature. During the term of the project, one of the articles was published in a scholarly book, and versions of the remaining two were presented at scholarly conferences. Individual
poems from the collections were accepted for publication in journals and in an anthology. Publication notes accompany each piece and a list of publications appears on page x.

The articles and creative pieces are brought together through the exegetical component of this thesis, including a chapter exploring key terms (Chapter One), and an exegesis examining the creative works with a conclusion to the compiled pieces (Chapter Eight). Emphasis is on demonstrating the cohesiveness of the thesis and on appraising the individual pieces in the light of my research aims. Discussion focusses on my findings regarding the creative process, and how I have explored the theme of belonging, as well as where children’s poetry belongs, with the aim of sharing my new knowledge with other creators and with academics.
Chapter One

Scope, Field, and Key Terms

Academics and educators widely agree that poetry plays an important role in children’s lives and is a valuable classroom tool and literary form. Professor of Teacher Education and the Arts, Robyn Ewing, asserts that children’s literature as a whole is important, because creativity and imagination make us human, and are the basis for all we do (2012, pp. 4-5). Because literature is an expression of the human imagination, Ewing claims, reading literature should be of prime importance in classrooms. She stresses the need for a range of quality literature, elaborating on the characteristics of quality texts, including rich use of language, intellectual challenge and the offering of hope (p. 4). Associate Professor John Stephens agrees that literature plays an important part in children’s lives, adding that it is also created purposefully, to develop in the child reader values including “contemporary morality and ethics, a sense of what is valuable in the culture’s past… and aspirations about the present and the future” (1992, p. 3). Professor Jacqueline Rose agrees that writers aim to instil values, adding that reading is ‘magic’ and allows children to experience “the vagaries of living, to strengthen and fortify the ego, and to integrate the personality” (1994, p. 135). Further discussion of this role of literature (and, more specifically, poetry) can be found in chapter two of this thesis. For now, however, it is important to note that reading literature, and poetry, is about much more than language acquisition.

Much of the discussion regarding the importance of children’s poetry comes from educators and is echoed in educational policy. The Australian Curriculum
(Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], n.d.) includes reference to children’s poetry at all year levels within the English Scope and Sequence, recognising both the importance of poetry and the appeal of different forms to different age groups. Australian academic, educator and children’s author Gordon Winch (1991), explains that poetry and poetic language form an integral part of early speech and play experiences, developing naturally in the formative years (p. 130). He asserts that children are naturally attracted to poetry, and that it provides them with the opportunity to sample vicariously emotions and experiences they may not otherwise know (p. 132). Poetry is shared with children at home, in early learning centres, at library rhyme times and in early school years, as a way of connecting with and educating children, giving them access to possibly unfamiliar subjects, experiences and language.

Dr Karen Coats (2010) also recognises poetry’s importance and more specifically the significance of rhyme and humour. The use of poetic language and devices, she says, helps young children to develop linguistic mastery and at the same time gives them a pleasurable experience of aspects of the external world which they perhaps don’t understand (p. 125). She asserts that, while literature in general shapes identity by providing discourses and images with which children can connect, poetry specifically plays a crucial role by helping them to regulate embodied experience, developing in them characteristics including “mental flexibility, a high tolerance for ambiguity, [and] a capacity for moral decision making” (p. 126). As children learn to enjoy and decode poetry they also, according to Coats, will move through the stages of developing a sense of humour (p. 127-128). Sir Andrew Motion, former Poet Laureate in the United Kingdom, believes
that the aural nature of poetry allows it to establish deep connections with and for children: “Poetry’s meaning has as much to do with sound as it does with sense ... It’s acoustic. It’s emotional noise. That is why it’s often able to move us before we completely understand it” (cited in Morrison, 2014). Recent scientific research supports Motion’s claims, demonstrating that reading poetry produces a brain reaction similar to listening to music, and that poetry activates pleasurable responses even before the meaning of the words are grasped (Zeman, Milton, Smith & Rylance, 2013; Vaughan-Evans et al, 2016).

Despite this perceived importance, the quantity of poetry for children being published in Australia is limited (Halliday, 1999, p. 37; Finnis, 2005, pp. 143-144; Carthew, 2011, p. 30). Children’s author, poet and educator Mark Carthew deplores the gap between the “passionate advocacy” which poetry engenders and the low levels of publication the genre enjoys (2011, p. 29). He points to the rising profile of poetry through competitions, the activities of writers’ centres and academic and online discussion, which is in contrast to the decline in the number of publications, with a reduction in published poetry of about 100 titles in the period from 1993 to 2000 (Carthew, 2011, p. 32). Carthew suggests that this may be the result of a number of factors, including publishers cutting back their less profitable lists, as well as the failure of educators to utilise poetry in the classroom. He advocates better funding for poetry and poetry publishing, as well as more programs to encourage “poetry written both for and by children” (p. 40). Examining more recent publication figures from 2008, Fox (2012) sees a rise in the number of poetic works being published in non-traditional forms including ebooks, online and small, independent and self-published print runs, indicating that poetry is surviving
“tenaciously” (p. 5) rather than thriving. Although this is a positive sign, her figures do not identify whether this rise is seen in children’s poetry specifically.

With the publication of poetry in Australia perhaps not matching its perceived value, there appears to be a gap or disparity between the importance of poetry and its availability to children. Whilst an in-depth exploration of ways to redress this imbalance is outside of the scope of this project, it is hoped that the project itself, including the individual creative works and journal articles, may contribute in some way to raising the profile of children’s poetry in Australia.

Whilst educators and critics appear united in their assertion that literature and poetry must be offered to children, finding a single definition of children’s poetry is difficult, in part because some writers attempt some kind of simplistic definition of the term, whilst others, assuming that the reader already knows what poetry is, attempt to determine what it is that makes a poem suitable for children, implying that if it is suitable for children it must therefore be children’s poetry.

Academic Peter Hollindale claims that a major difficulty with children’s literature is that the literature that is created for children is almost exclusively created by adults. He claims that this dilemma is unique to children’s literature, with the creator needing to construct a concept of childhood from their own experiences, both of childhood and of children, as well as their beliefs of how childhood should be (1997, p.12). As Professor Perry Nodelman points out, adults judge children’s literature on guesses about what children might like or need (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 15), and the dilemma is that this forces them both to
make generalisations about children, and to ignore their own responses and preferences. This dilemma is similar to that posed for writers of any genre who attempt to write for other ethnic groups or genders, and issues of the risks around appropriation will be explored elsewhere in this thesis. Hollindale’s definition focuses on the author, whom he sees as:

a person with imaginative interests in constructing childhood (usually but not necessarily through creating child characters) and who on purpose or accidentally uses a narrative voice and language that are audible to children (p.29).

Although Hollindale is referring to all children’s literature rather than only to children’s poetry, it follows that as a children’s poet, to be ‘audible’ to children, I must have a construct of childhood driving my work regardless of whether I am overtly conscious of that construct. Examining the variety of poetry offered by creators and selected by publishers suggests that individual constructs of childhood are diverse, and that there may be a lack of clarity regarding just what (or who) a ‘child’ is.

Academics, scholars, educators and parents alike have argued for centuries about exactly what a child is, with notions of children and childhood constantly shifting. Psychologist Irving Sigel, in a volume devoted to examining images and concepts of the child, concludes a chapter examining the varying approaches of the disciplines of religion, history, anthropology and psychology, by finding one commonality – that is, regardless of the discipline, “there is no consistent image of childhood” (1996, p. 62). Within each of these disciplines, there is a multitude of approaches and theories, both within and across time periods. Australian academic
Beverly Pennell suggests a need to acknowledge that childhood is a social construct, which ignores the diversity of children, and their capacities. She argues that the notion of children as “dependent and naïve” is outdated and that the search for a single version of childhood is “undesirable” (2003, p. 13).

Like Pennell, Australian academic Allison Halliday sees childhood as a construct, a compromise, she says “between the reality of the life of children today and the memories of adults” (1996, p. 20). In the case of poetry, for example, it is adults who decide what is presented to children as being ‘children’s poetry’. She likens the way that children’s poetry is often marginalised or ignored to the way that childhood itself is perceived. In order to illustrate the parallels between childhood and poetry, she analyses one anthology of poetry for children, the *Puffin Book of Twentieth-Century Children’s Verse* (1991), edited by Brian Patten, himself an English poet. She explains that this anthology was chosen because of the reputation of the publisher, Penguin (and its Puffin imprint) and because of its claim “to represent the poetry of the twentieth century” (Halliday, 1996, p. 21), suggesting a wide selection of poems. In her examination of the anthology, Halliday draws parallels between what is selected for inclusion, and adult constructions of childhood. By examining what is included in the anthology, she says, we begin to see how adults view childhood.

According to Halliday, there are five “indicators as to the notion of childhood” (p. 26) held by Patten and demonstrated in his selection of poems and arrangement of the anthology. The first factor she identifies is the need for illustrations to support understanding, suggesting that children need visual support to understand meaning. She identifies a tension here, however, with only some poems being
illustrated, and the illustration often interpreting or representing a small part of the poem (Halliday, 1996, p. 27).

The second factor identified by Halliday as linking poetry and perceptions of childhood is the high number of linguistically challenging poems, which she asserts suggests that “childhood is a time of considerable verbal and cultural sophistication” and that children have an interest in word play and the role of language (pp. 27 -28). She especially identifies poems in the anthology which focus on the role of rhyme and the meanings of words.

The third factor identified by Halliday is the use of predominantly short poems (less than two pages in length), suggesting that the attention span of children is limited, although she acknowledges that this could also be a decision made in order to fit the maximum number of different poems into the anthology (p. 28.) Significantly, Halliday notes that the three longer poems in the anthology are all from the earlier part of the twentieth century, suggesting that this may be because it was assumed at that time that children could concentrate for longer. She does not discuss whether this choice of longer poems may be a decision made by Patten choosing longer poems from that time period rather than other available, shorter ones.

The fourth characteristic of the anthology identified by Halliday is the high proportion of humorous poems, suggesting that childhood is “a time when humour ‘naturally’ occurs” (p. 28). Remarking on the selection of poems, she notes the absence of scatological humour in the anthology, which may be either a marketing decision or an editorial judgement made about the appropriateness of such humour. That aside, the humour in those poems that were included is language-
based or relies on absurd situations. Halliday suggests that the need to confine such absurdity within children’s poetry also parallels the desire to confine such humour to childhood (p. 29). Halliday’s assertion ignores that enjoyment of absurdity does not end with childhood, with a long-standing tradition of absurdist literature as well as absurd cartoons and graphics being a large part of contemporary pop-culture.

Finally, Halliday sees the thematic focus of the chosen poems as reflecting the anthologist’s view of childhood. In this instance, the two main thematic focusses are nature and childhood itself. Halliday asserts that the number of poems relating to nature suggest that there is an assumption that “nature offers up a mirror to childhood” (p. 29), with the issues confronting the natural world also being the issues which confront children themselves – that is, that nature, while interesting in itself, is also a metaphor “for the life and times of children and of adults” (p. 29). This idea then is continued in the number of poems directly relating to childhood itself, of the “emotions, activities and interests of children”. While she agrees that these topics are likely to be relevant to children, she points out that it is still problematic to assume to know “exactly what does interest children” (p. 29), and whether the depictions of children in the chosen poems is authentic. Other themes explored in the anthology are ones which, Halliday says, are common in other collections for children: “love, death, sensual pleasures, power and memory” (p. 29). There is an assumption in editors including these themes, Halliday argues, that these are subjects which “children will find interesting or that childhood requires” (p. 29). It is worth noting, however, that these themes are also common in so-called ‘adult’ poetry. Perhaps Patten sees them as appropriate for children because they are appropriate for people of any age.
Halliday’s observations about what this anthology of poetry for children says about adults’ views of childhood do have some limitations – most notably the fact that her paper focusses on a single anthology and does not compare this with other contemporary anthologies for either adults or children. There is also little consideration of whether this collection is aimed at children, or at those who educate children. If the poetry is included because it has classroom appeal, this may speak more to educational mores than it does to notions of childhood per se. In spite of this, her work is unique in examining a contemporary anthology so closely as a means of exploring versions of childhood, and thus Halliday’s findings and assertions provide a useful lens with which to examine my own version of childhood as evidenced by my creative works, and by which of these works have been successfully published. This examination forms part of my exegetical discussion in Chapter Eight of this thesis.

With the difficulty of defining just what a ‘child’ is, particularly as implied reader, it follows then that a single definition of ‘children’s poetry’ is equally difficult. One problem with defining children’s poetry is the difficulty of defining the single word ‘poetry’. The many different forms, and the seemingly limitless range of themes, as well as the vast variations in length, and the optional use of rhyme and structured rhythm mean that there is no simple definition of what is or isn’t a poem. Literacy consultant and academic Nikki Gamble suggests that rather than seeking an elusive single definition, focus should instead be on the qualities of poetry, including “compression, allusiveness and patterning” (2013, p. 229). Compression of language makes for “concentrated, multilayered meanings [and] the ambiguities
that allow for more than one interpretation”, while the patterns of words, rhythm, rhyme and poetic devices, as well as visual patterning through line breaks and arrangement on the page, amplify the reader’s experience (pp. 229-230).

Poetry that is deemed as being ‘for children’ seems to include these elements, but determining what makes it suitable for children rather than adults is more elusive. Brian Patten, editor of the previously discussed The Puffin Book of Twentieth-Century Children’s Verse (Patten, 1991) claims that “poems written for children retain their freshness” (p. 19), while those for adults tend to age badly. While this latter claim seems to disregard the longevity of many ‘adult’ poets whose work remains in print centuries after it was written, the best children’s poems, Patten says, “have a sense of wonder, mystery and mischief”. For Sloan (2001), a poem must “express a keen, an incisive insight, one that is fresh and memorable, astonishing the reader with its rightness” (p. 50). Further, this insight “must be wrapped economically in words so apt that no others can be considered to take their places” (p. 50). She asserts that children prefer rhyme and rhythm and to see their own feelings and experiences explored in poems (p. 50). She further claims they also need to understand both the content and the words in order to connect with the poem (p. 51).

Peter Hunt (2010) takes issue with the idea that many anthologists and experts believe children should be given poetry written for adult audiences, or perhaps be given poetry written specifically for them only as a bridge to more ‘grown up’ poetry (p. 18). He posits two basic ideas: that children’s poetry is poetry which does not appeal to adults, and that children’s poetry “should not be seen as a
bridge or ladder to anything”, unless it is to an awareness of language (p. 22). This seems at odds with the contentions of Stephens (1992) and Rose (1994), mentioned above, that children’s literature is crafted to socialise readers into adult values, with Hunt seeming more keen to share poetry for pleasure than for any educative purpose. Nodelman agrees, claiming that readers of many poems are delighted not by the poem’s meaning, but by the way “it says what it means” (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 253). The words of a poem “resonate beyond themselves” (p. 254), a quality which encourages readers to consider a range of meanings, and stay with the reader in a way that the specific words of an informational text may not. With differing viewpoints it seems that there is disagreement even among leading scholars of children’s literature about the purpose of children’s poetry.

It is useful to consider who it is that poets themselves think they’re writing for when they write children’s poetry. Australian children’s poet Rosemary Milne claims that her objective in There’s a Goat in My Coat (2010) is “to use rhymes and rhythms that will delight” young readers (n.p.). She also stresses that although the chief aim is for pleasure, reading the poems will help children to master sounds and words, and hence develop reading and language skills. The Children’s Poetry Archive, a not-for-profit website based in the UK, has several interviews with children’s poets on its pages. Adrian Mitchell, when asked if he writes his poems for someone specific, says that he does: often for one of his grandchildren. He says this is important, because “you don’t write for children in general because it doesn’t work, there aren’t any children in general” (‘Children’s Poetry Archive’, n.d.). He urges poets to write, or rewrite, with someone specific in mind, seeing it as gift to that child. Rather than writing for a specific child, Allan Ahlberg says that
he writes for himself: “I like the possibility of an idea and I pursue it and try to finish it. And generally then other people will decide whether this is a piece of work which entertains babies or twelve-year-olds” (‘Children’s Poetry Archive’, n.d.).

During his writing life, twentieth-century poet Ted Hughes regularly wrote about and discussed his poetry for children and who it was he saw himself as writing for. He described writing poetry for children as “a curious occupation” (cited in Paul, 2005, p. 257), with the most curious thing being “that we think children need a special kind of poetry” (p. 258). He argues that there is a problem with writing such poetry in that each children’s poet has his own idea of what that special kind of poetry is, as do publishers, teachers and parents (p. 258). According to poet and academic Michael Lockwood, Hughes’ own perception of what makes a good children’s poem seems to have shifted over the course of his career with his early children’s poems, including his first collection, *Meet My Folks* (1961), using regular rhyme and rhythm patterns, and seeming especially written for children (Lockwood, 2009, p. 298). His later work, however, including *Seasons Songs* (1976), uses a voice and style closer to that of his ‘adult’ poetry (Lockwood, 2009, p.300). Towards the end of his life, Hughes explains that when writing for children he depends:

> on my feeling of what it was like to be the age of my imagined reader ... I find a common wavelength – of subject matter, style, attitude, tone – between the self I was then and the self I am now. Then I write what amuses and satisfies both. So it has to obey these criteria set by my imagined younger self.
And it has to meet the quality controls that I apply to my other verse (cited in Lockwood, 2009, p. 297).

At this point in his career, Hughes also claimed that children could respond to complicated language in poetry: “If they can recognise and be excited by some vital piece of experience within a poem, very young children can swallow the most sophisticated verbal technique” (cited in Lockwood, 2009, p. 297).

From a personal perspective, my own poetry often draws both on my remembered experience of being a child and of my own experiences with poetry, as a child and since. This will be discussed further in The Purple Cow, Chapter Two of this thesis. I consider the poetry written for this project to be for children though, like Hughes, I aim for “a style of communication for which children are the specific audience, but which adults can overhear...and listen, in a way secretly – as children” (cited in Lockwood, 2009, p. 297). Although I agree with Peter Hunt that poetry for children should appeal primarily to children, it is important that the adult, too, is able to find pleasurable connection with the poetry, because much poetry shared with children is read aloud by an adult. This pleasure, for me, is far more important than any definition: if readers, whatever their age, have a pleasurable connection with my work, then my poetry is successful.

The theme of belonging was selected for this project because the need to belong is a basic human requirement. In psychological theories including Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, belonging sits with physiological needs such as nutrition and safety as ‘deficiency’ needs – that is, without these needs being fulfilled a child cannot develop. Only once these basic needs are met can a person strive to fulfil
other needs such as self-fulfilment (Willems & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2012, p. 282).

Maslow’s theory has been examined and used by psychologists and educators to understand child development since it was first proposed in 1943, and continues to be widely used to explain human motivation (Willems & Gonzalez-DeHass, 2012, p. 294). When people feel like they belong, they can then seek aesthetic or intellectual fulfilment. Conversely, a feeling of not belonging stifles other areas of development.

Educational agencies in Australia would seem to agree. The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF, 2009) is titled *Belonging, Being and Becoming* and defines belonging as “knowing where and with whom you belong” (p. 6), something seen as integral to human existence, with children belonging to families, cultural groups, their neighbourhood and the wider community. Belonging “shapes who children are and who they can become” (p. 6). Speaking about belonging in the Early Years Framework, Peers and Fleer conclude that belonging can be defined as “the kind of ‘in-between-ness’ that enables both the integrity of the child’s existing and that of any whole to which the child belongs (game, family, community, etc.) without destroying the one or the Other” (2014, p. 924). Topics related to identity and belonging recur across the curriculum.

The theme of belonging is also prevalent in Australian children’s literature. In Maurice Saxby’s three volume exploration of the history of Australian children’s literature (1993, 1998, 2002), the themes of belonging and Australian identity are recurrent. Saxby identifies his work as being useful for those who “see Australian books as an important means of developing a national as well as a personal
identity” (1993, p.1). According to Saxby, young people are a mix of contradictions: world-wise but anxious; knowledgeable but insecure about what they don’t understand; independent but needing reassurance (p. 9). He identifies that Australian books are increasingly helping to provide a sense of “belongingness” (p. 20). He praises authors such as Libby Gleeson for using a register with which children “will feel comfortable, and by which they can confirm their own sense of belonging” (p. 22). As readers see themselves reflected in characters, Saxby says, they will also come to recognise “what it means to be Australian” (p. 22), whether they are first generation Australians or have a long family history in the country.

Whilst Saxby’s volumes cover the period from 1841 to 1990, the issues of belonging and identity have continued to feature prominently in children’s books and poetry, including in the work of poets chosen for closer discussion in this project. In Steven Herrick’s work, the recurrence of the classroom setting sees child characters question their sense of belonging within their peer group as well as in their family circle. Lorraine Marwood’s work often focusses on the family, again exploring the idea of belonging to a family circle, while her poetry collections explore a range of topics in which children might see their lives reflected, as well as how their own lives connect with those of others. In my own work to date, including my three published verse novels (2009a, 2010, 2014a), I have explored aspects of belonging to a friendship group, school class and family. My focus in this project on the importance of children’s poetry also echoes this theme, in that I am examining where poetry belongs in the classroom, in the publishing industry and in the literary world.
Chapter Two

The Purple Cow: Creating Poetry for Pleasure and Beyond

Publication Note

An early draft of this paper was presented at the Asian Festival of Children’s Content (AFCC) in Singapore in 2015, and the revised manuscript was subsequently published in the book Bridges, Dragons & Books, edited by Associate Professor Rhoda Myra Garces-Bascal (2016). This paper was also presented as a keynote address at the joint state conference of the Australian Literacy Educators Association (ALEA) and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne, Victoria, in September 2016.

In presenting literature to children there is an apparent balancing act required between the competing needs of education and entertainment. This battle seems especially strong in the genre of children’s poetry, where an awareness of poetry’s ability to educate and of the need to develop literacy skills battles with the desire to allow children to gain pleasure from poetry, whether this occurs within the classroom or outside of it. As a poet writing for children with a background as a school teacher, I find that my desire to entertain and to engage with children overshadows my desire to educate, but that the educational value of poetry still influences my work. Perhaps, however, there is no need to regard these as competing notions: perhaps the educational value arises from the pleasure which poetry can evoke, so that children are most likely to learn from poetry they enjoy.
The pleasurable and sensory response which poetry evokes plays a key role in learning about language and about how the world works.

**Early Experiences of Poetry**

One of the earliest poems I remember knowing by heart was Gelett Burgess’ ‘The Purple Cow’:

> I never saw a purple cow,
> I never hope to see one;
> But I can tell you, anyhow,
> I’d rather see than be one.

(Burgess, 1895)

I memorised this poem before I could read, because I loved it. My memory of the poem is accompanied by a sensory recollection of the book in which I encountered it – Volume 1 of the *Childcraft* series, which had pride of place on the family bookshelf and contained many more of the poems I loved in my early years. Why do I remember it? Because it was fun. It made me laugh. It was absurd – though I didn’t know that word yet. Even at the age of three I knew that purple cows didn’t exist and that this was just a piece of silliness. This poem has stayed with me all my life and still evokes a physical sensation of pleasure when I recite it or hear it. It stayed with me not because of what it taught me, although in retrospect it did teach me things including memorisation skills, word recognition, rhyme and rhythm, and skills of observation and reasoning. Rather, it stayed with me because of the physical connection I had with it: the sensation of hearing and later reciting the words, the mental imagery of a bright purple cow, the joy of sharing the poem.
with my mother and siblings. The educational benefits were side effects of this poem and the many others I was exposed to in my early years.

The poems I loved as a child and the sensations they evoked have stayed with me and at times have found echo in my own work. When I write, I sometimes feel the same frisson of excitement, of rightness, that I felt from those readings. But although my early experiences with poetry were very positive ones, as I moved through school and university I learnt that studying poetry was not all about pleasure. I learnt about poetic techniques, different poetic structures, and layers of meaning. I learnt that sometimes the meaning of a poem was buried with an obscurity I found overwhelming; and I felt a pressure to be able to understand poems and to get the answers ‘right’. I was unaware of the probability that my peers were having similar experiences. Professor Karen Coats (2013) reports that her university students are often very anxious about their inability to understand and interpret poetry “like the experts” (p. 128), going on to say that “critical discourse about poetry often has an aura of elitism about it,” which can make poetry seem out of reach to readers. In my high school and university years this sense of failure was not something I was prepared to admit to my peers, increasing my feeling of being alone in my lack of comprehension.

When I trained to become a teacher, I learned that poetry can be used for a range of educational purposes and outcomes. Poetry helps to develop literacy skills, aids language acquisition, and builds reading skills (Elster, 2010, p. 48). Because it is often short, it can be easily used within the classroom and can be attractive to reluctant readers. Poetry is available on almost any topic and can also allow
connections to be made between seemingly unrelated topics (Perfect, 1999, p. 730). At the same time, poetry can expose children to subjects and aspects of the external world which they perhaps don’t yet understand (Coats, 2010, p. 125). In Australia, the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA]) prescribes children’s poetry at all year levels within the English Scope and Sequence, recognising both the importance of poetry and the appeal of different forms to different age groups. Foundation students, for example, are expected to “replicate the rhythms and sound patterns in stories, rhymes, songs and poems” (ACARA, ACELT1579); whilst by Year 7, they are expected to learn how language is used to “create layers of meaning in poetry, for example haiku, tankas, couplets, free verse and verse novels” (ACARA, ACELT1623).

As a high school English teacher, I taught poetry because it was in the curriculum, but I struggled to engage my students: in part because of what I perceived as their reluctance to read poetry, and in part because of my own inability to find ways to present poetry in a way which overcame that reluctance. I also found that many poetry units focussed on teaching children to attempt forms such as the cinquain, haiku and acrostic, in exercises which focused more on fastidiously adhering to form than on appreciating the power or beauty of poetry. A student’s reference to a haiku as “one of those 5-7-5 things” alerted me to the emphasis on counting syllables and lines rather than on the content or effect of the poem, both in reading existing poems and in students’ own composition efforts. I wanted to make a difference to young readers by presenting them with poetry, and
other forms of literature, in ways they could enjoy, but I struggled to know how to do this in the classroom.

**The Poet’s Role**

Away from teaching, I had been writing for children in both the trade and educational markets for several years. My first published poem for children appeared in the School Magazine’s *Countdown* in 2002:

**Summer Salad**

Cool
Crisp
Crunchy

**Carrot**

Luscious
Leafy
Lacy

**Lettuce**

Delicious
Delectable
Delightful
Dressing

Summer Salad

(Murphy, 2002)

Countdown is aimed at “children reading at an 8- to 9-year old level” (School Magazine, n.d.). The School Magazine, which operates under the auspices of the NSW Department of Education and Communities, produces four magazines, each tailored to differing school year groups. My poem used words including ‘luscious’, ‘delicious’ and ‘delectable’, all of which could be linguistically difficult for a child of the target age. Perhaps the fact that the words were chosen for their alliterative qualities (‘luscious’, for example, teamed with ‘lacy’ and ‘leafy’ to describe lettuce) as well as their ability to describe various salad vegetables, and that the poem is very short, may have influenced the decision to publish the poem for this age group. It is important to note that when submitting this – and all – poems to The School Magazine, I did not suggest an appropriate age group. This decision was made at an editorial level.

As a creator, I did not write this poem because I loved salad and wanted to share that love with the world, nor because I wanted to educate children about the health benefits of salad. Rather, I wrote this poem because I was experimenting with alliteration – and because, once I started writing about salad ingredients, my teaching background meant that I knew this was a poem that would suit an educational magazine.

But, while ‘Summer Salad’ may have educational benefits, a child reading this poem might still walk away hating salad. I expect that children, like adults, will
know when they are being preached to. This is why I didn’t write a poem that said:

“Eating healthy salad / Is very good for you / You should go and find / A lettuce leaf
to chew!” I believe as a creator that I can’t write poems as cynical exercises in force-feeding children either salad or poetry. Instead I use words that they can delight in – luscious, delectable, tangy – so that they can take pleasure in the poem itself. At the same time, as a teacher I know that children reading ‘Summer Salad’ might learn something about healthy eating and alliteration, as well as some new vocabulary. As a list poem, it could also be used to teach a simple writing technique. These educational benefits flow from the poem, rather than driving its creation.

Other poems that I’ve written have covered areas that I know, again from my teaching and parenting background, are in the curriculum. The topic ‘Mini-Beasts’ is a popular one in early childhood classrooms in Australia and so ‘Snail’ and ‘Ant’, from my book Assembly (Murphy, 2008), might be selected by teachers covering the topic.

Snail

I like to watch the slippery snail

As he weaves his silvery trail

He marks the way he came and then

He knows how to get home again.

Ant

Look at the ant
He makes no sound
Just hurries home
With food he’s found
Until he’s reached
His sandy mound
Then disappears
Below the ground.

(Murphy, 2008 p. 23)

*Assembly* is a poetry collection published by an educational publisher for classroom use. The poems were selected by me from my existing work, and as such were not necessarily all written for the educational market. Rather, they were chosen because I recognised they might have classroom application. For example, from ‘Ant’ and ‘Snail’ children might learn about the behaviours of the mini-beasts in question (gathering food, leaving trails and so on), common vowel sounds (*ou* as in sound/found/ground, *ai* as in snail/trail). But the intent of the poem is not squarely on education. Rather, I hoped as I wrote that readers might be left smiling, or wondering. Why does a snail leave a trail? What happens below the ground? Pleasure is key here and learning is secondary.

Another more recent poem revisited the snail, finding another way of looking.

**Destination**

After a tedious journey
across glistening paths

over soggy lawns

and up the tender stalk

of a fresh-planted chrysanthemum

the snail is glad

he brought his caravan

so he can nap

between meals.

(Murphy, 2015a)

Here there is no rhyme and the focus is more squarely on wonder, making something often regarded as undesirable (a snail shell) into something warm and inviting. The metaphor of the caravan is a surprise, and children may be left thinking about this as a new way of looking. Readers are given an opportunity to shift their perspective, to consider the snail from another, surprising, viewpoint. At the same time, with this poem being published in a magazine aimed at ten year olds, there is a good chance for vocabulary enrichment with linguistically challenging words like ‘tedious’ and ‘chrysanthemum’.

Many of my poems present no particular linguistic challenge. ‘Yo-Yo’ (Murphy, 2014b) is easy to read:
Yo-yo

All my friends can yo-yo
but I can only yo.

Their go up down, down and up
but mine just will not go.

They walk the dog and UFO
They round the world and all.
All I can do is sadly watch
As my yo yo falls.

I want to yo and yo and yo
Up and down all day
But when I yo it stops in space
And won’t come back to play.

The subject – difficulty mastering a game or toy – is something I presume most children will have experienced. The humour of the verb ‘yo’ and the use of rhyme and rhythm are all aimed at making this a poem which readers might smile or even laugh at. A reader may look deeper and decide that this is a poem about belonging or about feeling different – the phrase ‘All my friends’ and the repeated use of ‘they’ suggest a sense of wanting to be one of ‘them’. A teacher may decide to use the poem for a lesson on verb usage, or even to explore scansion, noting that the chosen rhythm pattern is not perfectly adhered to, chiefly using iambic trimeter, yet with shifts to trochaic rhythm, as in the first line. The reader left to his or her
own devices, however, is unlikely to have any difficulty in understanding what is happening in this poem: the narrator (who may well be the poet) is frustrated at a lack of yoyo skills. When I wrote the poem, my main intention was to explore the humour of a toy which won’t work, while also echoing my own frustration with such toys both in childhood and since.

When I look back at the majority of my published poetry, I see that although I rarely set out to teach things through my poetry, I am providing learning opportunities in just the same way as I learnt from poems myself as a child. At the same time, poems which are fun to read or give pleasure in some way are the ones which are successful, both in getting published and in being enjoyed by young readers. My published poems often use humour or focus on topics with which children may feel some connection, such as leisure activities.

My verse novels, whilst also offering humour in places, tend to suggest different emotions. The situations the characters find themselves are rarely ones which the majority of readers will have found themselves in. Amber Rose, from *Roses are Blue*, for example, has a mother who she worries is very different:

My mum spends her days sitting in a wheelchair;
her head tilts to one side
as if her neck can’t hold it up.
My mum’s legs are very, very still
but her hand sometimes twitches and twitters.
When my mum tries to talk she makes funny noises
and nobody can understand
most of what she says.
My mum can’t feed herself properly
or clean herself
or even take herself to the toilet –
even though she is trying to learn to do those things again,
just like my baby brother, Jack.
My mum is really, really different.
But the most different thing about my mum
is how different she is
from herself,
from the mum she used to be
before her accident last year.

(Murphy, 2014a, p. 10)

While in writing poems such as ‘Yoyo’ there was an assumption most children
would relate to the experience, in *Roses are Blue* I had to assume the opposite. So,
the challenge was to find something with which readers could connect – and, in this
instance, that was the concept of ‘difference’. In the pages preceding this one,
Amber has led the reader through a parade of different mothers – from physical
attributes such as height, to the way they dress, or the jobs they do –
demonstrating that she knows that “all mums are different” (p. 7). Readers have an
opportunity to connect with something they will know about – parents – and may
well recognise their own parents in the list. There is no obscurity in the poem – the
message is that everyone, or at least every mother, is different in some way. The
surprise comes when Amber shows just what it is that makes her own mother
different. When reading the book to school groups, I often invite them to guess, after hearing about the other mothers, what it is that will be different about Amber’s mum. Answers, perhaps predictably, focus either on things from the children’s experience – including the characteristics of the mums in the previous pages – or on trying to guess something so far from their experience that it is impossible. The most common suggestion here is that Mum is an alien. When I reveal the answer by reading the above poem, there is general surprise. However, the intention for me in revealing the disability only after my viewpoint character has explored other differences is in trying to make the unfamiliar familiar. While Amber’s mother is very different and therefore Amber’s experience may be outside that of young readers, the familiarity of the other mothers, and of concerns about being different or even embarrassed, offers an entry point to the experience.

As with my lighter poetry, a reader of Roses are Blue should be able to understand what they are reading. The use of poetry to tell the story should not make it less accessible, or obscure. In fact, my hope is that it actually makes it more accessible. The poetic techniques of repetition, listing, alliteration and even line length are all used to take the child inside Amber’s experience. As with any poem, the reader’s interpretation is their own. They may feel sad on behalf of Amber, they may be interested by just how different Mum is, and they may even laugh at the descriptions of some of the other mothers. As a poet, I see my role as making the work accessible to readers in order to allow them to make their own connections. This may seem at odds with the claims of theorists such as John Stephens (1992) and Jacqueline Rose (1994) that literature for children is deliberately created to instil adult values, but given that my intention is to allow children to connect with
experiences they may not otherwise have, as well as to make sense of ones they do, perhaps my subconscious purpose is, after all, somewhat about life lessons.

The Importance of Pleasure

Regardless of their thematic content or how much educational value they have, an element I identify in all of my poems is a desire to make children feel something – whether to laugh, to cry, or to stop and wonder at something small like a cloud or a snail slithering across the grass. My desire to offer children pleasurable experiences of poetry is an attempt, albeit often subconscious, to give them opportunities to feel the pleasure I felt as a child, rather than the dismay I felt both as a teen and as a teacher when confronted with poetry lessons. Michael Rosen, a prolific English children’s poet, asserts that “Poems are written because they suggest ideas and feelings and pictures and sensations” (The Scotsman, 2007). He complains about the way poetry is presented in classrooms, with poems being used as comprehension exercises, leaving children feeling unworthy of reading and, thus, enjoying poetry. This was my feeling as a high school and university student, and it is a feeling I do not want to evoke in children with my own work. Other children’s poets express similar goals. Steven Herrick, arguably Australia’s most successful contemporary children’s poet, claims his goal is to write poetry that makes “people laugh, or think, or maybe just smile ever so slightly” (2015). He wants never to write poems that leave the reader confused about the poem. Another Australian poet, Rosemary Milne, whose poetry is aimed at very young children, expresses a similar
aim: “I try to use rhymes and rhythms that will delight them, like ice-cream” (2010, n.p.) This pleasure comes before any educative purpose. Her poems, she says, “are for fun and pleasure but ... will also be helping them practise new sounds and words”. American poet Jack Prelutsky says that his years of working with children have shown him that children prefer poems which “evoke laughter and delight, poems that cause a palpable ripple of surprise ... poems that reawaken pleasure in the sounds and meanings of language” (Prelutsky, 1983, p. 18).

Studies such as those by Ray (1998) and by Harrison and Gordon (1983) reveal that many teachers recall their own experiences with poetry when they were in school (particularly secondary school) as negative, largely because of the push to closely analyse, but are nonetheless aware that poetry could be highly beneficial in the classroom if they could find ways to use it. Both studies conclude that the key is to find ways for teachers and students alike to have pleasurable experiences with poetry. Cumming (2007) agrees, stressing the importance of acknowledging teachers' feelings towards poetry, and of encouraging them to engage with poetry in positive and non-threatening was (p 97). Zeegers (2013) remembers her own experiences with poetry as a school student as really positive, which is why she is dismayed that contemporary students don’t have similar positive experiences. As a teacher, she has attempted to be the initiator of positive poetry experiences, by beginning with the enjoyable voicing of poems long before examining poetic technique.

Educators and academics also agree that poetry should evoke emotion. Morag Styles, possibly the world’s only Professor of Children’s Poetry, explains that
“poetry is an intense form of language” (2011), which can be both personal and universal.

It enlarges the sympathies, helps us understand ourselves better, gives us the pleasure of vicarious experience and offers us insight about being human. It provides us a way of working out our feelings, giving order to experience by reducing it to manageable proportions. (Styles, 2011)

American poet Dana Gioia claims that studying poetry, along with the other liberal arts including music and visual art, awakens people “to the full potential of our humanity both as individuals and citizens in society” (2007, p. 12). This awakening happens, he says, by offering “pleasure, beauty and wonder” (p. 16). Karen Coats agrees, stressing that the aesthetic pleasure of poetry helps children to learn to control fears, and to build their sense of identity (2010, p.16).

Coats also stresses that the physicality of poetry is vital. The rhythms, sounds and structures of poetry “resonate with bodily architecture and processes, preserve the body in language, while its metaphors ... help us understand who we are as subjects and objects in a world of signs” (2013, p. 134). It is poetic language, she says, which links our physical bodies with a world that is full of “representations and symbols” (p. 134). Before they can speak, babies interpret their world, and their feelings, with their senses. As they learn language they learn the tools to compartmentalise and to communicate these sensory experiences. This language acquisition begins with the songs and poetry which pass between the infant and the adults in their world. Thus, says Coats, poetry is “as important to us as food, as
breath, for it fundamentally brings the two planes of our existence – sensory experience and conceptual language – together as one” (p. 135).

But why is this pleasure important? Studies show that reading for pleasure is more significant than a host of other factors in determining children’s educational success. Sullivan and Brown’s studies found that children who read for pleasure at the ages of 10 and 16 achieve better test scores when compared with children of similar social backgrounds and cognitive abilities who do not read for pleasure. Reading for pleasure is firmly linked to “greater intellectual progress, both for vocabulary, spelling and mathematics” (Sullivan, 2015, p. 5). Reading for pleasure is more statistically significant than other factors, including the parents’ level of education.

While Sullivan’s findings relate to reading of all forms, rather than just poetry, the findings of Zeman, Milton, Smith and Rylance (2013), whose studies at the University of Exeter examined brain activation in participants as they read both prose and poetry, suggest that reading poetry particularly stimulates brain activity. They found that reading poetry provides a physical sensation akin to listening to music and stimulates areas of the brain linked to memory and self-reflection. While concluding that further studies are needed, their initial work suggests that poetry provokes “a more inwardly directed pattern of brain activity than prose” (p.152). In young children, the combination of rhythm, movement and gesture connects children with each other and enhances literacy learning (Alcock & Cullen, 2008, p. 2-3).
Adults who read poetry do so largely for pleasure, through intellectual challenge or emotional stimulation. Literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes talks about this pleasure as something intangible, saying that a text gives pleasure best when it:

- manages to make itself heard indirectly; if, reading it, I am
- led to look up often, to listen to something else ... it can be
- an act that is slight, complex, tenuous, almost scatterbrained... (1975, p. 25)

Writing which allows the reader to look deeper or beyond the written word, “to reverse it” as Barthes says, “wonderfully develops the pleasure of the text” (1975, p. 26). Studies such as those by Zeman et al have demonstrated that this pleasure is a physical response which can be detected through brainwaves. This response occurs ahead of any understanding of the words, instinctively speaking to the mind (Vaughan-Evans et al, 2016, p. 6). It seems, however, that between the extremes of very early years of childhood and adulthood, the emphasis on pleasure and enjoyment is forgotten, particularly in the school setting, which is unfortunate, because playful learning aids vocabulary acquisition in a way which passive instruction does not (Harris, Golinkoff & Hirsch-Pasek, 2010, p. 58-59). Cumming says this can happen by ensuring that students are provided with accessible poetry experiences, and are encouraged to experiment, to play, to share (2007, p. 98). Ultimately, once children have been engaged, then work on poetry can be more widely extended and used to develop literary communities beyond the classroom.
It seems that, although poetry is prescribed in the curriculum, the reason for doing so and the benefits of poetry are not made clear. As such, the importance of pleasure to facilitate educational outcomes may be overlooked. With the focus on replicating sound patterns and discovering layers of meaning (ACARA, ACELT1579 & ACELT1623), there is no suggestion of reading poetry for enjoyment, nor in finding pleasure in responding to what has been read. Welsh poet and teacher Dennis Carter stresses that poetry should be experienced and responded to: “Reading a poem should arouse feeling and opinions in a child and lead to the need to express and share them” (1998, p. 4). Poetry lessons, he asserts, should include not just reading poems, but also recitation, drama, music and experimenting with words and imagery. Given that so much poetry reading happens in the classroom, it is important that the poetry presented provides opportunity for that pleasure, that brain activation, and the multitude of educational benefits such as language acquisition. If poetry experiences evoke pleasure then children will not only engage in the classroom but will seek out and enjoy poetry for personal reading, thereby multiplying the benefits.

In the end, although I come from a teaching background, I see my role more squarely as a creator. As such, my part in this process is to ensure that I write poetry which is accessible and pleasurable for potential child readers. If I write as a teacher, I run the risk of putting perceived educational benefits to the forefront and perhaps unwittingly making my poetry unsuccessful, both as an educational tool and as entertainment. When I write as a poet, even though I am likely influenced by my teaching experience, I am more likely to write for pleasure: both mine and that of my readers. The pleasurable feelings evoked by ‘The Purple Cow’ and the
other poems of my childhood are the feelings I am aiming to induce in my readers when I write poetry. It may not happen with every poem for every child, but when it does, that tingle of pleasure leads to the other benefits educators want them to get from poetry. And if one of my poems can one day be a ‘Purple Cow’ for a young reader, how magical that would be.
Chapter Three

Poetry Collection for Early Childhood: All About Me

Publication Note

At the time of writing (March 2017), this collection is under consideration with an Australian trade publisher.

The poem ‘Let’s Go’ in this collection has been accepted for publication by Highlights High-Five Magazine, in February 2017.

Other individual poems are under consideration with Australian, UK and US publishers of magazines for children.

The layout of this chapter matches the format in which this manuscript has been submitted, with a poem per page.
Chapter Four

Belonging: Australian Identity in Children’s Poetry

Publication Note

A shortened version of this chapter was presented at the ACLAR (Australasian Children’s Literature Association for Research) Conference in Wagga Wagga in July 2016, and was revised after feedback. At the time of writing (March 2017), this article was under review with an education journal.

The concept of ‘belonging’ is one which recurs in the curriculum documents of Australian education bodies, from the early years through to school leaving age. It is also a theme which recurs across much literature for children, explored in a range of genres, settings and target age groups. At a time when what it means to ‘belong’ in Australia is questioned by the media, by politicians (and their policies) and by the general public, the theme is important not just in an educational setting but in allowing young readers to explore their own sense of belonging and to see their varied experiences reflected in the works they read. With its range of forms and voices, as well as its ability to create intense, personal encounters, poetry in particular can offer a wonderful opportunity to explore the concept of belonging.

Developing a sense of belonging is seen as an important aspect of children’s development by educators and child development researchers. The Early Years
Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF, 2009) is titled Belonging, Being and Becoming and defines belonging as “knowing where and with whom you belong” (p. 6), something which is seen as integral to human existence, with children belonging to families, cultural groups, their neighbourhoods and the wider community. Belonging “shapes who children are and who they can become” (p. 6). Speaking about belonging in the early years’ framework, Peers and Fleer conclude that belonging can be defined as “the kind of ‘in-between-ness’ that enables both the integrity of the child’s existing and that of any whole to which the child belongs (game, family, community, etc.) without destroying the one or the Other…” (2014, p. 924).

In states including New South Wales and Victoria, ‘Belonging’ is a key theme of the secondary school English Curriculum. In introducing Belonging as an area of study for Stage 6 English in the Higher Schools Certificate (HSC) between 2009 and 2014, the NSW Board of Studies explains that perceptions both of belonging and, conversely, not belonging vary:

These perceptions are shaped within personal, cultural, historical and social contexts. A sense of belonging can emerge from the connections made with people, places, groups, communities and the larger world. Within this Area of Study, students may consider aspects of belonging in terms of experiences and notions of identity, relationships, acceptance and understanding (Board of Studies, NSW 2013, p. 10).

In an attempt to evaluate the success of this area of study, academic Melissa Jogie investigates how belonging has been addressed through prescribed literary texts,
and the pedagogical issues faced by teachers. Noting that exploring important issues through literature can be very valuable, she also contends that doing this effectively can be difficult, given the range of prescribed texts and the availability of new texts within schools. She notes that “teaching a diverse range of texts to students from diverse cultural backgrounds is a highly effective method for supporting reading development, by building reading proficiency, as these texts better engage contemporary students in reading, interpreting and discussing issues of cultural differences as presented in texts” (2014, p. 337). One issue, she says, is the prevalence of canonical texts such as Shakespeare that have been studied for generations and may not easily touch contemporary readers, though she stresses this doesn’t mean they should be removed completely, rather that they should not dominate reading lists, and that teachers can apply a range of teaching methods to make such texts accessible (p. 337).

For young readers, whether they are studying for their HSC or reading for pleasure, the diversity of texts available to them can help to develop a sense of belonging. Encounters with literature offering a mirror to their own life experiences can help children to validate those experiences, at the same time engaging them in the literature (Athanases, 1998, p. 292). This engagement can develop literacy skills as well as fostering that sense of belonging.

Whilst belonging remains a focus in educational polices and more widely, there are some difficulties with the term itself. Australian academic Georgina Tsolidis sees issues with the very concept of ‘belonging’ as it seems to be interpreted by many
Australians and by social policy. According to Tsolidis, belonging “is a coming together around shared understandings” (2010, p. 450). As a result, when the term “we” is used, it also implies a “they” who not only do not belong, but also serve to define what “we” are, meaning that “public pedagogies of belonging are also pedagogies of non-belonging” (p. 450). The way that Australian identity is explored through public events such as the elaborate opening and closing ceremonies of sporting events, as well as in government statements and policies, is problematic. For example, the National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools (2005, cited in Tsolidis, 2010), prescribes the core values that should be taught to all Australian children in schools, a policy which, Tsolidis claims, implies “a common way of thinking and behaving – a belonging that creates the authorial ‘we’ that is nowhere named and identified” (p. 454). These values include compassion, freedom, honesty, respect, responsibility, tolerance, doing your best and the ‘fair go’, shared values, which according to the policy, “are part of Australia’s common democratic way of life” (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005, p. 8). Tsolidis expresses concern that, in Australia, belonging means assimilating (p. 456).

This concern is echoed by critics of social and government policies including the laws around citizenship and rhetoric surrounding refugees and asylum seekers. Suvendrini Perera, a Professor of Cultural Studies at Curtin University, draws attention to Australia’s long history of discrimination and exclusion, beginning with colonisation:

...founded on the denied sovereignty of Aboriginal and Islander people, the categories of white, non-white and black, of native, alien and citizen were
from its inception constituted through interlocking inscriptions of alterity and sameness, by the hierarchies of colonial raciology and its performed differentiations and discriminations (Perera, 2006, pp. 654-655).

The citizenship test, introduced in Australia in 2006, continues this tradition of identifying the ‘other’, and of testing their willingness to belong, to be ‘Australian’. Perera claims that the test makes visible ‘a new category of uncitizen, of infra-citizen, at the threshold of citizenship’ (p.655) and together with other practises ‘subjects the aspiring citizen to a gaze that scrutinizes, disciplines and separates’ (p. 655). The test is given to immigrants who seek to become Australian citizens, and must be passed before citizenship is conferred, before the person is officially seen as belonging here. With its examination of the ‘body of knowledges, mythologies and symbols that make up the national story’ (p. 655), the test implies that by memorising and subscribing to these values one becomes Australian.

This issue of who does or doesn’t belong here has been debated throughout Australia’s history. Policies aimed at removing or reducing Aboriginal populations, the White Australia policy trying to limit the number of immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds (National Archives, n.d.), internment programs during the two World Wars, and contemporary concerns about ‘boat people’ and Muslim immigrants, show a nation concerned with who does or doesn’t have a right to be in Australia and to call themselves Australian. These attitudes shape the Australia of each particular time period, but their impact is also felt across generations, both for those affected by such policies but also those who have benefited from feeling part of the ‘us’. Literature provides an opportunity to explore this issue, and poetry
especially could provide not just a forum for exploration but an opportunity to shift the discourse.

Poetry has long been a means of exploring identity. Lyn McCredden (2013), a Professor at Deakin University and published poet, claims that, both historically and contemporarily, poetry has been “concerned with national forms of belonging and unbelonging” (p. 40). Poets such as Mary Gilmore, Les Murray and Judith Wright have explored notions of nationhood and patriotism, offering views of what it means to be Australian. But McCredden worries whether, in a time when mass media bombards us with images of what it means to be Australian, through pop culture, sport, government and the media, poetry can provide a platform to “re-imagine and re-write the nation in ways that offer vital alternatives, new possibilities in the face of such everyday reductions of belonging, everyday pieties of nationhood” (p. 42). One issue is that poetry is not always accessible to “common readers” and, as such, it tends to be read by other poets rather than by the general public, meaning that the “commoner’s” viewpoint is more likely swayed by the images more commonly seen – of sport, jingoistic car stickers, and clichéd ideals of “mateship, anti-authoritarianism, fairness etc. … as if such values can be traced to one nation” (p. 44).

For children who, as they traverse their school years, become increasingly aware of their own place – or lack of place – in Australian society, poetry may provide a means to locate themselves. The perceived inaccessibility of contemporary poetry intended for adults is not found in most poetry intended for
children, which tends to use more accessible language and explore topics to which they can relate. The intensity of poetic language and form provides a way in for children and, according to Morag Styles, a Professor of Children’s Poetry, it “enlarges the sympathies, helps us understand ourselves better, gives us the pleasure of vicarious experience and offers us insight about being human. It provides us a way of working out our feelings, giving order to experience by reducing it to manageable proportions” (2011, n.p.). Other academics and poets agree that it is the aesthetic pleasure of poetry that helps children to build their sense of identity as individuals and as members of society (Coats, 2010, p.16; Goia, 2007, pp. 16-17). This accessibility then provides Australian poets with the opportunity to, as McCredden desires, ‘re-imagine and re-write’ understandings of what it means to belong in Australia.

Steven Herrick, arguably the most prominent and prolific Australian children’s poet, has published multiple collections and verse novels for children, and also for young adults. Much of Herrick’s work explores the emotional world of the child, focussing on the sense of self and of belonging. The classroom setting recurs across his work for children, seeing child characters question their sense of belonging within their peer groups as well as in their family circles. Herrick’s most recent collection of children’s poetry, Untangling Spaghetti (2009), offers a selection of poems from his earlier collections (Herrick, 1997, 2001 & 2002) and, according to its blurb, celebrates “the everyday lives of children” (2009, back cover). While many of the poems are inspired by the experiences of Herrick’s own sons (2009, p. ix), the
poems encompass a variety of topics and situations, and use a range of voices, many of which reappear throughout the collection. The collection is broken into six thematic chapters, covering home life, poetry, sport, school, food, and the wider world, though many poems could fit into more than one of these themes with family and school dynamics especially being explored in every chapter.

An attempt to share his vision of everyday Australian childhood could have been limited by Herrick’s own experience or vision for what that childhood life should be like. However, the poems explore a range of experiences. So, while poems such as “mum and dad are in love” (p. 20) feature a happy nuclear family, others show single parent families or children often unhappy with their home life. One pair of poems is particularly poignant. In “happy birthday 1” (p. 28) the protagonist avows “My dad loves me”, as evidenced by the fact that:

he rang me for my birthday

late last night

when I was in bed

and he told Mum

to tell me

that he loves me.

The opening of the following poem “happy birthday 2” (p. 28) seems to mirror the first, with its avowal that “My mum loves me”. But it is the revelation which follows that makes the family situation clearer:
I wasn’t asleep last night

and the phone didn’t ring,

not once,

so Mum just said Dad rang me
to make me feel better

because

she loves me.

Another poem about fathers, “my dad” (p. 26), also explores the issue of absentee parents, with two boys trying to outdo each other with stories of their dads: “My dad has a beard down to his chest./So does mine, and he has an earring too!” Before finally admitting that both dads are absent:

Actually, my dad lives in another state, so I only see him at Christmas.

Mine lives away too. I never see him.

Hey, we should be friends. Let’s forget about our stupid dads.

Children of different genders and with a range of interests are represented in the poems, generally sympathetically. A poem about a bully, “braith the bully” (p. 101), seems to portray Braith as a bully who pushes, trips and throws things until everyone stays away from him. The following poem, however, entitled “braith (the
“bully?” (p. 102), gives Braith’s perspective, and shows his loneliness because “no one will play with me”. While this pairing is poignant and invites readers to reconsider first impressions, Herrick also makes use of humour, with the first poem claiming:

Braith had no-one to play with

so he played alone

until

he got into a fight with himself.

He lost. (p. 101)

In the second poem, we see Braith’s version of this ‘fight’:

And now

no-one will play with me

except this annoying fly

which keeps buzzing

and buzzing

and buzzing

OUCH!

I just hit myself in the ear
and missed the stupid fly! (p. 103)

This humour, coupled with the pairing of the poems, allows Herrick to explore issues of belonging and differing perspectives without explicit analysis of the situation, allowing readers to reach their own conclusions, or to discuss the contrasts with their peers or in a classroom situation.

Other poems invite children to consider the wider world. While young readers may not remember the death of Princess Diana, the poem which explores this, “the day the princess died” (pp. 158-160), gives enough detail of the event to be accessible, and could be easily related to the deaths of other celebrities. The first part of the poem focusses on the loss of the princess and the narrator’s reaction to the unfolding news, but in the second part, the poem questions why the princess’s death is mourned more than the death of her friend, Dodi, or of the car’s driver, before going deeper:

And I began thinking

that if everyone, all over the world,

talked this much

about every person who died

anywhere in the world

in an accident

or of some bad disease

or in a war
we’d get scientists and doctors
and politicians and journalists
and everyone to work even harder
to stop people from dying
and we wouldn’t be happy
until we’d stopped all
unnecessary deaths. (pp. 159-160).

While not overtly concerned with being Australian, *Untangling Spaghetti*, with its multiple voices and range of childhood experiences, offers readers the opportunity to explore diverse versions of childhood life in Australia. The use of poetry to do so allows child voices to dominate without being overshadowed by narrative, backstory or even dialogue tags. Herrick’s use of humour, simple language and the free verse form invites children of all backgrounds and abilities – the ‘common reader’ referred to by McCredden (2013) – to be able to read and understand the poems. Different voices and topics across the collection increase the likelihood of each child finding themselves reflected in the collection, as well as exposing children to experiences and attitudes different from their own. The intensity of poetry, along with its conciseness, allows time both for sharing multiple poems in the time it may take to share one piece of prose, as well as the ability to explore single poems in depth.
Concepts of belonging are also explored in longer form poetry such as the verse novel, and Herrick is well known for his use of this form. *Pookie Aleera is Not My Boyfriend* (2012) is set, like much of his work, in a school, and is told in the multiple voices of various class members as well as that of the school groundskeeper. The novel follows the class, and their new teacher Ms Arthur, through the school year, interweaving their separate stories. The concept of belonging recurs throughout the book, across plotlines, perhaps most poignantly in the storyline of Laura, a classmate who, it seems, does not belong. Her parents are divorced, and she misses her father, her classmates call her ‘Snotty’ because her nose runs constantly – “Hasn’t he ever heard of hayfever?” she complains (p. 64) – and she spends her lunchtimes alone on a secluded bench in the playground:

    every lunchtime

    as soon as the bell rings

    I race to my schoolbag for my sandwich

    and I run up here and sit down

    alone

    and I watch everyone else

    and I wish I could thank Mr Korsky

    for making this seat

    and for putting it here

    away from the rest of the school.
For much of the story Laura is an outsider, allowing her to observe other characters. She is the only one who seems aware of Mr Korsky’s loneliness, and reaches out to him anonymously, though he is clever enough to suspect it is her who leaves a thoughtful gift, and reciprocates. She watches “Mick and his gang”, a tight-knit friendship group, but is insightful enough to note that

they are alone

together

I’m alone

by

myself. (p. 118)

Mick, whose group Laura observes, is also figuring out where he belongs. He is seemingly popular and recognised as a leader - he is school captain, and captain of both his cricket and football teams, “and the other kids always ask me what I think/whenever something happens at school” (p. 78). He is, however, not always confident in his actions and is regularly in trouble:

And that is why when I get into trouble

and Mr Hume gives me one of his lectures

and reminds me of my duty

as school captain

and he shakes his head
as if he would have voted differently

if he had the choice.

That’s when it takes all my effort
to stand there and not say a word,
in his office,
waiting for the lecture to end
so I can go back to class
where
all my true friends are.

(p. 79)

As the book progresses it is Mick who grows aware of Laura’s loneliness and of the way that, despite being an outsider, she has done something nice for Mr Korsky. This leads him to look for ways to include Laura and to encourage his peers to be “nice to everybody” (p. 58), challenging them:

Let’s go out of our way
to do something ... special,
for someone else
and see what happens.
Just for a week.
Herrick’s use of the verse novel form allows multiple experiences and attitudes to be explored with an intimacy a prose novel may have not successfully achieved. With ten viewpoint characters, readers are given first person insight into each one’s hopes and fears. Only the reader sees Mr Korsky’s visit to his deceased friend:

I drove my ute
up to Walter Baxter’s place
on Monday afternoon
and I sat on the front verandah
looking out over the town
just like Walter and I used to do
when he was alive.

I poured a beer in two glasses
and drank from them both
until the sun drifted
behind the hills.

While similar themes might be explored in a prose novel, the “collage-like composition” (Mallan & McGillis, 2003, n.p.) of the verse novel form facilitates the
use of multiple voices, while the use of line breaks and poetic structure “produce spaces for reflection, multiple meanings and polysemy” (n.p.). While a prose novel, too, might offer multiple voices, the verse novel offers shorter vignettes, with a greater number of perspective changes than a prose novel might typically make. Each reader then, has the opportunity to draw their own conclusions and to see, through the multiple voices, more versions of what it means to belong.

A broader exploration of belonging through issues of nationhood and race is apparent in the works of two further Australian children’s poets, Lorraine Marwood and Sally Morgan. Marwood has published several collections of poetry, two verse novels and numerous poems in journals and anthologies. Much of her work explores aspects of belonging, in both the built and natural world, as well as within family, school and community circles. Her most recent collection, Celebrating Australia, offers an exploration of what it means to be Australian through focussing on “the many ways we celebrate in Australia” (Marwood, 2015, back cover). These celebrations range from the well-known, such as Australia Day, to the obscure, such as International Dot Day, as well as celebrations which occur at the personal or family level, including birthdays and barbecues.

Marwood’s collection explores the traditions of many cultural groups whose members reside in Australia, an aspect that is praised by reviewers, who label the book ‘culturally inclusive’ (Oehlman, 2015; “Books”, 2015). Poems which might help earn this inclusive tag include ‘Ramadan’ (p. 60), ‘Moon festival’ (p. 70), ‘Diwali – festival of Light’ (p. 70) and ‘Hannukah’ (p. 97), among others. Each poem explores
events on and surrounding those days, giving readers insight to events with which they may not be familiar. However, Marwood is careful not to show these events from the outside, with each poem voiced by someone who is part of the celebration. ‘Diwali’, for example, is voiced by a child involved in the celebration, using the pronoun ‘we’ to show they are part of it, and focusing on sensory details:

We dress up, clinking jewellery

some henna decoration,

help with fragrant cooking,

...

We’re ready to greet our family

and enjoy unique sweets and gifts.

(Marwood, 2015, p. 85).

This portrayal of events from within lessens the risk that readers may be encouraged to view these events as something that ‘they’ do, something that is somehow not part of Australians’ lives, but instead an oddity to be observed.

There is some difference, however, between these poems exploring celebrations from outside of Anglo-Christian traditions, and those within, in that for each of the former there is a single poem seemingly introducing or explaining the celebration (albeit from an insider’s perspective) whereas for the latter the poems are more specific and seem to presuppose an understanding of the celebration. For Easter, for example, there are three poems, on the topics of hot cross buns, Easter
bonnet parades and Easter egg hunts, while for Christmas there are four poems. Three of these are voiced in the first person, giving a child’s perspective of making Christmas wishes, viewing Christmas lights and participating in a Nativity play, but the fourth, “Christmas Eve” (p. 110), seems more removed, with an omniscient view:

Dusk falls like a velvet curtain,

each clear star is a clear wish

pasted every day of Advent.

“I want” becomes “I need”

becomes “I hope” becomes “I pray”

(Marwood, 2015, p. 110)

This voice could well be that of Marwood, or some other adult, being less childlike and personal in its perspective.

Aboriginal culture too is celebrated, through a poem marking NAIDOC week, “National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Observance Week (NAIDOC)” (p. 56). The poem touches on aspects of the week, celebrated through cultural activities: “dot painting, rock painting, /bark painting” and through recognising achievements of “elders, sportspeople, artists, /youth, apprentices” before explaining why the week is important:

Highlighting this week,

Our Indigenous culture
Right now,

Looking back,

Then reaching to the future.

(Marwood, 2015, p. 57)

It should be noted that, in a book exploring Australian celebrations, there are no poems marking any traditional celebrations of Indigenous Australians, an omission which is perhaps a sign of Marwood’s sensitivity in not appropriating Indigenous culture, rather than an oversight on her part. Perhaps, however, there is an issue with the publisher commissioning a book purporting to celebrate Australia from a single poet rather than anthologising the work of a range of poets from differing backgrounds and thus able to offer varied insights.

As a whole, Celebrating Australia offers a range of images of life in Australia and for Australians, allowing young readers to explore diverse experiences, while also allowing children from diverse backgrounds to see some of their experiences reflected. Marwood herself (in an interview with Saxby, 2015, np.p.) sees the collection as an entry point to discussion of each celebration as it nears, in order “to find common ground in what the celebration is to them. The class could then add to the poem with their own take on what form the celebration embraces in their family” (cited in Saxby, 2015, n.p.).

Marwood’s verse novels are each voiced by a single child character rather than using multiple voices, but the poetic form still provides an accessible story and opportunity to connect with characters struggling to belong. Star Jumps (2009) tells
the tale of Ruby, who loves her life on the family farm with parents and two
siblings. Her sense of self and of family is strong, but threatened by the effects of
drought and by the chance they might lose their farm. *Ratwhiskers and Me*
(Marwood, 2008) is a historical verse novel, set amidst the Victorian gold rush of
the 1850s. The viewpoint character, Lin, is fleeing terrible memories and trying to
figure out who she is now and who she was. Her family have been killed in a fire
which, it gradually emerges, was started by a greedy miner who didn’t like her
father’s role as Protector of the Chinese. Lin is hiding by disguising herself as a boy,
and is helped by a Chinese family. As she experiences violence and lawlessness,
and struggles to survive, Lin (who was once called Nina) also struggles with her
sense of self:

*I am not Lin but Sassy’s sister.*

*An orphan. Not a boy but a girl.*

*Alone.*

*This time I don’t even have Ratwhiskers Nearby.*

*All far away.*

*(p. 111)*

The storyline here, exploring the lawlessness, widespread racism and hardships of
this era of Australian history, offers young readers an opportunity to discuss these
issues and the way those events have shaped contemporary Australian society.
Although the events are dark and confronting, there is also hope, and the use of the
first person poetic form gives a personal insight into Lin’s ability to process those events. As Marwood says in her back-of-book notes, readers “can see the cruelty but also the friendship, the hope, and Lin’s growing awareness of identity” (p. 156).

Another, more recent, verse novel explores themes of belonging from an Indigenous Australian perspective. The author, Sally Morgan, is perhaps best known as a writer of prose, with her autobiography My Place (1987), one of the bestselling Australian autobiographies ever published, telling the story of her own discovery of her Aboriginal heritage, and focussing on the stories of her mother and grandmother (Jose, 2009, p. 1326). Her children’s verse novel, Sister Heart (2015), her first foray into this form, tells the story of Annie, a child stolen from her family and taken south to a “government place” (p. 57). Here, surrounded by “girls I don’t know/ who aren’t sisters/ cousins/ aunties” (p. 67), Annie struggles to adapt to life away from her family and from her place:

I run my fingers through the sand
dirt is dark
bush is thick
air is cold
No melting heat here
No days so hot
You can taste the dust
This place is not like home
I could get lost here

(p. 110).

Her loss of identity is echoed in her loss of speech:

Sometimes

I feel my voice

rattling inside me

like a trapped thing

trying to get out

My voice got lost

when bully boots policeman

took me from the station

Don’t know

when it will come back

(p. 154)

Like Marwood’s *Ratwhiskers and Me, Sister Heart* is historical fiction, and provides a first-person insight into the experiences of members of the Stolen Generation. Whilst young readers may have heard of the Stolen Generation,
Morgan’s poetry offers readers the chance to explore what it means for a child to be ‘stolen’ and institutionalised. The use of the verse novel form once again allows an intimate connection between reader and character, placing the reader firsthand into events which might otherwise seem distant. With the prevalence of Anglo-Saxon poets (including Herrick, Marwood and myself) in Australian children’s poetry, Morgan’s contribution is especially significant, offering an inside view not just of this difficult piece of Australian history, but of the experiences of not belonging which displacement can cause. Poetry, especially in the voice of someone struggling to communicate, is able to replicate the struggle for words to understand and communicate this displacement without the need for elements of prose such as dialogue tags, description and so on which might lessen the impact.

Both collections of poetry and verse novels, particularly those examined here, explore issues of Australian versions of belonging in accessible form. The problems of accessibility identified by McCredden in poetry for adults are not apparent in the work of these Australian children’s poets. Their use of poetic techniques creates intimacy and emotional impact, while the conciseness and generally short length makes them attractive for reading and discussion in the classroom. The works of Morgan, Marwood, and Herrick provide a range of opportunities to enhance young readers’ sense of their own belonging, and to explore what it means to belong in Australia, and more broadly. With issues of who does and doesn’t belong being a long and problematic part of post-colonial Australian history, and debate about which groups and cultures have the right to call themselves Australian, it is vital for young Australians of all backgrounds to see themselves reflected in the literature they read, and to be able to see and experience the diverse perspectives of other
Australians. Perhaps by shifting the discourse regarding belonging and being Australian amongst children and in classrooms, there may be opportunities for further shifts in the wider community.
Chapter Five

Poetry Collection for 8 to 10 Year Old Readers: You and Me

Publication Notes

The following poems from this collection were published during the course of candidature:


‘Steps’ (p. 95). Published in 2015 in the School Magazine: Blast Off, 100(9), 33


‘Marmalade and Marmaduke’ (p. 149). Published in 2015 in The School Magazine: Blast Off, 101(1), 7


The following poems have been accepted for forthcoming publication:

Morning (p. 96). – Accepted by The School Magazine in November 2016

Caught (p. 114). – Accepted by The School Magazine in August 2016

Lunchtime (p. 136). – Accepted by The School Magazine in November 2016

Waiting, (p. 151) – Accepted by The School Magazine in February 2017
Other poems are under consideration with Australian, UK and US publishers of magazines for children.

The layout of this chapter matches the format in which this manuscript would be submitted to a trade publisher, with a poem per page except in the case of very short poems.
Chapter Six

Prose Versus Verse: What Do Novels in Verse Have to Offer?

Publication Note

A shortened version of this paper was presented at the national ALEA/AATE (Australian Association for the Teaching of English) Conference in Adelaide in July 2016 and subsequently revised. At the time of writing, March 2017, this article was under review with an academic journal.

In recent years, the verse novel has become a firm part of the children’s literature landscape in Australia, drawing critical acclaim and support from major publishers in small but growing numbers, seemingly against the trend to publish less poetry. Creators, who often come to the verse novel having previously written shorter poems, make use of the form to combine narrative elements with their poetic skills, a combination which produces an emotion-rich alternative to longer prose novels and an accessible form of poetry. The relatively short length of verse novels and their ability to provide an intense reading experience means they have much to offer young readers, providing an alternative to longer prose novels, as well as a satisfying complement. The pleasure of engaging with narrative poetry draws in readers of all abilities in a way which meets both personal and educational objectives.
While appearing to be a relatively new form of narrative, the verse novel has links back through literary history to the epic poetry of ancient times, with tales in verse dating back to before Homer’s *Iliad* and continuing to be shared across cultures well into the twentieth century. However, in the twentieth century the long-form prose novel rose to prominence, and it was not until the 1990s that the form now commonly known as the verse novel began to appear, with works by writers including Vikram Seth and Anthony Burgess (Sauerberg, 2004, p. 439-440). Since then there has been a proliferation of verse novels for young adults and for children, particularly in Australia and the United States (Hollindale, 2004). In Australia, verse novels for young adults appeared in the 1990s, with verse novels for younger readers following, most notably since 2005, with authors such as Sherryl Clark, Steven Herrick, Lorraine Marwood and me all having multiple titles published, and appearing in awards lists such as the Children’s Book of the Year (CBCA) awards (Deller-Evans, 2011, p. 73). More recently, Queensland author Kathryn Apel has contributed two verse novels and notable Indigenous author Sally Morgan has produced a verse novel which has garnered awards and acclaim.

A verse novel is, very simply, a narrative told using verse. Most verse novels, including my own (Murphy, 2009a, 2010, 2014a), use unrhymed free verse, but some do make use of rhyme, and many experiment with form, particularly in the form of metafiction. In *Love That Dog* (Creech, 2001), for example, key parts of Jack’s story are revealed through his efforts to write in the style of the poets he unwillingly studies in class, including William Carlos Williams and Robert Frost. As with prose fiction, verse novels vary greatly in length, from fewer than 70 pages for younger readers (Hopkins, 1995; Clark, 2004, 2007, 2010b) to well over 200 pages...

However, it should be noted that the use of white space and short line lengths mean that word count tends to be much lower than for a prose novel with a similar number of pages. Subject matter, too, is diverse, and genre ranges from realism, to historical fiction, fantasy and more.

What verse novels have in common is that, whilst they are poetry, they are also narrative, so that, as Sherryl Clark says, the verse novel “tells a story, so you need to start at the beginning and read through to the end” (n.d.). Not necessarily (though sometimes) broken into chapters, the novel is, instead, broken into sections which can sometimes be identified as separate poems. These sections are regularly less than a page, and rarely longer than three pages, and titles are often used to identify the speaker (in multi-voice novels) or otherwise contextualise the section (Alexander, 2005, p. 270). Verse novels also can be expected to make use of white space and line length in a similar way to single poems, and to make use of rhythm and other poetic techniques. As a form for young readers the verse novel gains critical acclaim and support from academics and they are seen by educators as a valuable classroom tool because of their appeal to struggling and reluctant readers, who enjoy the white space and the combination of “short passages with relatively simple language and thought-provoking meanings” (Napoli and Ritholz, 2009, p. 31) and the prevalence of “sensitive and controversial material” that allows readers room to examine and express their own experiences.

Beyond the classroom, the work of verse novelists such as Steven Herrick appeals to and is accessible for young readers. Herrick’s writing is modern,
according to Australian academic Allison Halliday (2003), but not overly threatening, being accessible in length, vocabulary and form. Another reason for the increasing popularity of the form is the rise of what Ong terms “secondary orality” (2002, p. 132) the blending of visual and aural imaginations encouraged by modern technology. As a result of this, Alexander explains, “the voices of the text have greater prominence” (2005, p. 270), which in turn increases the opportunity for intimacy between narrator and reader, an opportunity on which verse novels capitalise. The verse novelist can use poetic devices, line length and line breaks to add emphasis and make the narrative accessible to readers. Because they are chiefly written in the first person voice of the main character or characters, readers are invited to experience the events at an intimate level. Secondary orality has seen a loosening of styles and the lines between genres (p. 271), which is reflected in the wide range of verse novels being produced.

This range has resulted in some debate about whether verse novels are genuine poetry. Although acknowledging this debate, Vardell (2011) contends that seeing poetry offered in new forms and through new mediums, including verse novels and other new forms such as poetry books with graphic components, offers a “smorgasbord” in which “everyone can find something to savour” (p. 26). Halliday (1999) too argues that poetry should be presented to children and young adults, not just in the classroom, but as a part of everyday life. The chief suggestion she makes regarding how this can occur is through the verse novel, which she lauds for blending narrative and poetry and for exploring difficult issues (p. 37). Examples such as Karen Hesse’s *Out of the Dust* (1997) and Steven Herrick’s *a place like this* (1998), Halliday asserts, exemplify the self-reflexive nature of poetry and the role of
intertextuality (p. 31). With a growing number of verse novels being published, in Australia and overseas, young readers and teachers have access to a diverse selection in terms of topic, themes, length and authorship.

Creators of verse novels are varied in their professed reasons for doing so, though they are, predictably, effusive about their love of the form. Sherryl Clark wrote her first verse novel, *Farm Kid* (2004), after she realised that the poems she was writing about her own childhood life on a farm were starting to form a story. The novel, she says, was “never going to be a prose novel” because writing it as a series of poems allowed her to focus more on description, action and emotion, and to “allow the reader to enter the story more through the imagery” (n.d.). In a blog post, she identifies several characteristics of a good verse novel, including poetic techniques such as well-crafted language, attention to the use of line breaks and stanzas, lyricism and “venturesome creativity” (2013, n.p.). She also stresses that a verse novel should have an authentic voice and hold “the promise of more in re-readings” (n.p.). Clark’s novels are short, make use of font and design elements to aid visual engagement, and feature first person narrators with whom young readers can connect.

For Tamera Will Wissinger, author of *Gone Fishing* (2013), the reason for writing a verse novel is simple: “Poetry is the way the story came out” (2013). She adds that verse novelists may use the form when the subject matter is taxing, or even shocking, so that the “economy of a poetry text may make the story more palatable” (n.p.). In addition, an element of the story, such as its setting, may lend itself to the discipline and technique required of a verse novel. With many verse
novels focusing on poetry or other forms of writing as part of the storyline, the form itself brings attention to the creation and enjoyment of poetry. Regardless of the subject matter, however, stories in verse, particularly for younger readers, “offer an inviting way to engage children in the story and in the poetry itself” (n.p.).

The economy of the form is one reason that verse novels appeal to both readers and to teachers, offering a non-threatening volume of text at the same time as dealing with often weighty subjects.

Australian poet Lorraine Marwood is also attracted by the economy of the verse novel form. She had had many poems published in journals and in the form of two collections before she decided that she wanted to write something longer. As she experimented with what she terms ‘prose verse’ (2014), she “loved the intensity of feeling and atmosphere and setting” (n.p.) that the form could give. As she wrote her first verse novel, *Ratwhiskers and Me*, (2008) she became aware that the verse novel form was in itself an atmospheric device conducive, she says, “to the playing out of sensory detail, and the propelling of the bare bones of the story” (n.p.). The shortness of the form pares back word use and allows the reader to connect emotionally. Fellow Australian Steven Herrick also began writing verse novels because of a desire to write stories. He had been writing poetry and visiting schools as a poet for many years when, he says, he got “a little bored” (cited in Alberts, 2013, n.p.) with writing single, unconnected poems. He also realised that many of the young people he spoke to enjoyed his poems but wanted to read stories, and that he could combine his background as a poet with his skill at storytelling through the verse novel. Other attractions for Herrick are the “precise
and economic form of storytelling” (n.p.) which the verse novel offers, and the opportunity the form affords for telling a story using multiple viewpoint characters.

Like many other verse novelists, Irish author Sarah Crossan didn’t set out to write a verse novel. Rather, the voice of Kasienka — the main character in her verse novel *The Weight of Water* (2012) — “materialised” (cited in Jellicoe, n.d.), and Crossan started to write snippets of the story down. Eventually she rearranged what she had written and realised it was forming a verse novel. Crossan is a strong advocate for poetry, particularly poetry which is accessible for young readers: “We must write poems and read them. We must sing songs and share these songs with others. And above all, we mustn’t be afraid” (Crossan, 2014). Crossan’s success with the verse novel form with *The Weight of Water* and, more recently *One* (2016) has seen the verse novel gain growing interest in the United Kingdom (Hennesey, 2016), which has been slower to adopt the form than Australia and the United States.

For myself, I came to writing verse novels because of a love of reading them. I enjoyed the way they combined my loves of both poetry and story, as well as the emotional depth their writers seemed to be able to build in a compact, yet complex intertwining of narrative, emotion-rich theme, and character development, which was accessible to readers. This blend is what I hope to achieve in my own work, so that readers will feel the same pleasure on reading my work that I feel both in creating it, and in reading the works of verse novelists I admire. I regularly receive feedback from young readers which indicates such pleasure:
The books made my (sic) feel all different type of emotions. It made me feel warm and friendly and in the middle I felt quite sad and cold (Year 5 student, Personal Communication, 2015).

All of your remarkable verses manage to add emotion to this already incredible novel. Every single verse you wrote was inspiring for the fact that my emotions were really turned on. Whether they were excited or heartbroken (Year 6 student, Personal Communication, 2016).

My daughter Rose brought your book home today from school (library day) and read it completely this afternoon. She is 9 and in grade 4. She was quivering when she told me what she was reading (Parent, Personal Communication, 2014).

Feedback such as this allows me to feel that I am meeting that aim, provoking emotional responses from young readers which they enjoy.

It seems, then, that whilst my fellow verse novelists love the form, and poetry in general, the decision to choose verse over prose for a particular story is somewhat instinctive, rather than for a reason that can be clearly elucidated. Many writers of verse novels, including Herrick, Clark and Crossan, move between writing verse and prose novels, often dealing with similar themes and for similar age groups in the two forms. An examination of the works of novelists who do this illuminates some of the similarities and differences between the two forms, and perhaps gives clues as to why creators choose to write verse novels and the way that verse novels create the intimacy and emotional connection previously noted.
Herrick has written many verse novels for younger readers and for young adults, but in recent years has also published four prose novels – two for young adults (2010, 2011) and two for children, including *Rhyming Boy* (2008) and *Bleakboy and Hunter Stand Out in the Rain* (2014). Two of Herrick’s novels cover similar themes and, as such, provide an excellent opportunity to examine his use of the differing forms. The verse novel *Do-wrong Ron* (2003) tells the story of a boy who wants to do the right thing, but seems to constantly mess things up. With the help of his new friend, Isabelle, he manages to make life better for his elderly next-door neighbour. In the prose novel *Bleakboy and Hunter Stand out in the Rain* (2014) Jesse has problems at home and at school, including being bullied. Together with his friend Kate, and the unlikely ally in the bully, Hunter, Jesse participates in an anti-whaling protest, as well as raising funds for a child in Ethiopia.

While aimed at a similar readership, *Do-wrong Ron*, at 128 pages, is shorter than *Bleakboy and Hunter* (200 pages) with the verse form also meaning there are fewer words per page. As a result, the text of *Do-wrong Ron* is less dense, and there are fewer subplots. The main plot focusses on Ron’s desire to do something right, and the events of the novel revolve mainly around this, through his interactions with Isabelle and her grandmother, as well as other residents of his small country town, including the school principal, the school cleaner, and the owner of the town’s only shop. By contrast, *Bleakboy and Hunter* has several plot strands, including Jesse’s battle with the school bully, Hunter, his growing friendship with Kate, and his family’s financial struggles. At the same time, Hunter’s story is also explored, using chapters told in third person narration, showing his home life, his
struggle to deal with his parents’ divorce, his developing friendship with the elderly Les and his desire to help people.

The difference in length does not mean that Do-wrong Ron lacks depth. Herrick makes use of poetic techniques, language choice and narrative style to invite readers in to Ron’s world. Herrick, in an interview with Alberts (2013) says that the main reason he switched to prose “was the desire to become a better writer of dialogue”. Much of the dialogue in his verse novels, he explains, is in the form of interior monologues, in a kind of “simple stream-of-consciousness writing” (n.p.). Thus, he says, the dialogue is “much sparser, much more ‘meaningful’”, whereas in his prose novels, the dialogue allows characters to converse, even about “seemingly insignificant things”, which “adds to character development and drives the narrative” (n.p.).

In spite of Herrick’s claim that there is less dialogue in his verse novels, he makes strong use of it in Do-wrong Ron. When Ron and Isabelle discuss guinea pigs, for example, we also get to understand their own concerns and see their blossoming friendship:

Isabelle holds some celery

as Charlie nibbles. She says,

‘Most animals are smarter than humans.

They know what they want.

Food, water, a friend,

and somewhere to love.’
‘And they don’t have to do homework,’ I add.

‘Or visit relatives during school holidays.’

‘Or write thousand-word essays on stupid topics.’ (2003, p. 24)

Tags and attributions are limited, so that the dialogue is left to speak for itself. The final two lines capture the pressing concerns of each character – for Isabelle, her disappointment at being sent to stay with her grandmother for the holidays, and for Ron, the essay he has been set as punishment for taking his guinea pig to school. This dialogue both aids character development and pushes the narrative towards resolving both characters’ problems.

Elsewhere, the poetic form allows for dramatic monologues, such as when the principal, Mr Connors, speaks at the class party:

‘As principal,

I’d like to congratulate

all of class 4 – 6

on such a groovy idea!

You’ve got the hall

looking positively ... radical!

Yes, that’s the word.

Radical.

And hip.
And rocking!

So,

I declare the Best Friends Ball

open,

and I’d like to say...

A RAT!

LOOK OUT. IT’S A RAT!’ (2003, p. 16)

Again, there are no tags or attributions. Herrick uses line lengths and sentence fragments to create a sense of the principal pausing, struggling for words and, ultimately, his reaction to the appearance of Charlie the guinea pig, all of which aid in characterisation. Readers are not told that Charlie has escaped and gate-crashed the party, but the focus on Charlie hiding in Ron’s bag in the preceding poem allows them to guess what has happened, driving the plot forward through the monologue. The use of capitals implies that Mr Connors is shouting and perhaps gesticulating, without the need for excess description. Young readers, then, are given a concise view of the action without labouring through detailed description. The verse form here gives immediacy in a much more condensed form than a prose description of the same event might.

Other humorous monologues are written in the first-person voice of Charlie himself, with these Charlie-moments presented on double page spreads with one page written in guinea pig speak: “Wee wee wee” (p. 62). The opposite page provides a translation: “What is it with this town? /Everyone thinks I’m a rat...” (p.
The use of a different font whenever we hear Charlie’s voice, and the fact that only the reader is given the insight into what Charlie is actually saying, are tools more likely to work in a verse novel, which can make use of visual information in the form of layout and vignettes more easily than in prose. As O’Connor (2014) says in referring to another of Herrick’s verse novels, *By the River* (2004), it is the verse novel form which allows Herrick to give such glimpses of minor characters “in a way that would seem disjointed in a conventional story” (n.p.).

In contrast, dialogue in *Bleakboy and Hunter Stand Out in the Rain* (2014) involves more characters, including minor characters. When Kate reads her personal assessment task about whales to the class, chaos ensues:

‘SARAH!’ yells Skye.

‘Whale meat is high in protein and is lower in calories than beef and pork. It also has a much higher iron content and is rich in –’

‘Kate?’ Sarah’s voice is quiet.

Kate stops reading and looks at the teacher.

Skye starts sobbing, though I suspect she’s just pretending.

‘I thought the personal assessment task I designed,’ Sarah says, ‘was for us to appreciate the gift of nature. You appear to be talking about eating a –’

‘Beautiful animal!’ Skye interrupts. (p. 21)

Here the dialogue makes greater use of tags and attributions, to allow clarity about which character is speaking. The dialogue also drives the plot, with information
given here that was not previously available to the reader – particularly, in this case, about the assessment task – as well as allowing the development of two minor characters, Skye and Sarah. Jesse is present but does not participate in the dialogue, though he does provide commentary for the reader, interpreting what he sees and hears.

The pace of the action also varies between the verse novel and the prose one. While both stories occur over a fairly short period of time – *Do-wrong Ron* spans the end of term and the subsequent school holidays, whilst *Bleakboy and Hunter* is set over a few weeks at school – the condensed nature of the verse novel means that only key events are shown, each scene told in a short poem on a page or two of its own, so that the pace is brisk. When Ron and Isabelle seek help from Mr Maddison, the story jumps from them visiting him, to him getting back to them: “It only took Mr Maddison/three days to ring me” (p. 82), says Ron, not revealing what he has done in this time, because it is apparently not relevant to the story. Only essential backstory is provided, so that we know for example that Isabelle’s Grandpa has died, but no further details, other than its impact on Isabelle and on Nana Shirl:

I miss him.

I’m sure Nana Shirl does too.

All she does now

is sit in her lounge chair and doze. (p. 24)
By contrast, *Bleakboy and Hunter* is more linear, moving through a range of events within each day. The first eighty-four pages cover just one day of action and include scenes of both Jesse and Hunter’s home lives, as well as several scenes at school, and scenes in the local park. There is also a flashback scene of several pages where Hunter remembers the last time he saw his father. Following this, the third person narration gives us an insight into Hunter’s feelings:

He doesn’t want to think about his father anymore. He doesn’t want to hear about New Zealand and the skiing holidays his dad promised that would never arrive. He doesn’t want to visit geysers or bubbling hot mud baths. And he certainly doesn’t want to hear about anyone named Patsy. Hunter doesn’t want another mother (p. 84).

The multitude of scenes, the use of flashbacks and introspection, and the dual viewpoints mean that the pace of the prose novel is slower, requiring more extended reading to access and absorb key scenes. The emotional connection achieved in just a few lines in the verse novel, is built more slowly here.

The brevity of the verse novel form means that it can be read in a shorter time frame, but this does not mean that it is less intense or lacks emotional depth. In *Do-wrong Ron*, the emotions of the characters are very apparent, and poetic devices are used to highlight these. When Ron sits in Mr Connors’ office, in trouble again, he focusses on what he can see through the window:

A swing, lonely in the breeze,

blows back and forward,
back and forward

back and forward (p. 19)

The swing emulates the droning of the principal’s voice and the loneliness Ron feels. As the meeting ends: “A cold rain falls on the playground, /and on my holiday” (p. 19). The link between the weather and Ron’s mood is apparent and the reader is invited to feel gloomy alongside Ron.

Both *Do-wrong Ron* and *Bleakboy and Hunter Stand Out in the Rain* received critical acclaim, with the former an Honour book in the Children’s Book Council Awards 2004 and commended in the Speech Pathology Book of the Year Awards 2004, and *Bleakboy and Hunter* being shortlisted for the same two awards in 2015, an indication of Herrick’s strength across both prose and verse. *Do-wrong Ron* and Herrick’s other verse novels offer a short, emotionally charged alternative to longer prose novels for similar readerships, with the rich use of the poetic form making the narratives and their complex themes accessible to readers of all abilities. Because Herrick uses both forms for similar themes and target readerships, there is the additional possibility of educators and young readers making connections between the two stories and text types.

Like Herrick’s work, Sherryl Clark’s verse novels are considerably shorter than her prose novels. The verse novel *Sixth Grade Style Queen (Not!)* (2007) is only 65 pages long, whilst the prose novel *One Perfect Pirouette* (2010a), with a main character of similar age, is 243 pages long. There are other noticeable differences between the two books, though both deal with issues of family.
As with Herrick’s verse novels, Clark uses a series of single but related poems to tell the story of Dawn in *Sixth Grade Style Queen (Not!)*. However, Clark’s narrative is less linear than Herrick’s, opening with a series of poems which explore Dawn’s experiences and relationships both at school and at home. ‘Alien’ explores Dawn’s sense that she doesn’t fit in either at school or at home, finishing with the plaintive lines, ‘I wish the spaceship/would come back/to collect me’ (p. 9), whilst ‘Demographics’ (p. 12) explores the differences and similarities between Dawn and her classmates. When Dawn then considers ‘Our Family Demographics’ (p. 14), readers are provided an insight into Dawn’s home life, and the tension between her parents is highlighted when she shows her list to her mother who says, ‘you didn’t write down/1 wife/1 husband’ (p. 15). The quiet that follows between Dawn and her parents hints that something is wrong in their relationship. In the second half of the book, the story becomes more linear, with one event leading to the next, though the action happens over several weeks with poems only reporting key events.

*One Perfect Pirouette* also has a linear plot and, as with Herrick’s *Bleakboy and Hunter*, several subplots. The main plot follows Brynna’s quest to win a place at the National Ballet School, with setbacks including the cost of lessons and lack of suitable practice facilities. Subplots include her family’s relocation to the city in order for Brynna to train and audition, along with the sacrifices her family makes and the impact the change has on various family members. Brynna’s struggles to fit in at school, her friendship with a local boy who becomes a surprising practice partner, her mother’s missed dreams of basketball success and her father’s severe accident all form subplots and add points of conflict on her path to the audition.
There is little use of directly reported dialogue in *Sixth Grade Style Queen* *(Not!)*, with Clark instead making use of poetic techniques to impart the emotion of conversations. In the poem ‘Disaster’, reporting a fight between Dawn’s separated parents, we are told ‘Mum yells at him/about something stupid’ (p. 54). Dawn’s reaction is reported using short lines, simile and repetition:

my chest feels like

a hundred rocks

are piled on it

and I can’t breathe

I scream and scream

Mum slaps me

Dad tries to stop her

Mum pushes Dad

I scream and scream

words spurt from my

mouth

like red-hot acid vomit

and they stare at me

as if I’m poison (p. 54)
In contrast, scenes of conflict in *One Perfect Pirouette* include dialogue, attributions and description of what is happening. When Tam is involved in a fight and Brynna is late home, a family meeting is called. Brynna explains that this is run “as usual” (p. 56), letting the reader know that family meetings are not uncommon. The meeting lasts for several pages, with several issues discussed and descriptions of different characters’ reactions. When the tension increases, there is less description, and the dialogue is directly reported, lending immediacy and increasing the pace of the scene.

Mum looked at him. ‘And what happened to you?’

‘Told you. Kids from school bashed me up.’

‘Why?’

He snorted. ‘Do they need a reason?’

‘Yes. What did you do?’

Tam leapt up like a rocket launching. ‘Why are you trying to make this my fault?...’ (pp. 57-58).

The multiple plot strands in *One Perfect Pirouette* are brought together in the closing chapters, with Dad’s accident bringing the family back together, and resolving the tension with Tam. The outcome of Brynna’s audition is positive, and each family member has a way forward, though with Dad still in hospital there is no artificial ‘happily-ever-after’ outcome.

*Sixth Grade Style Queen (Not)* also ends with a sense of hope. Dawn’s parents have agreed to stop fighting and she has a new friend at school. The final poem,
however, seems chosen not because it draws all the strands together, but because it shows Dawn’s development as a character, as well as being symbolic of this new peace between her parents. Earlier in the novel, Dawn has professed to hating her “long/flat/brown/stupid” (p. 11) hair, but her request to have it cut starts a fight between her parents, and “I wish I had never/ asked” (p.11). In the final poem of the book, ‘Haircut’ (p. 65), Dawn goes on her own to the hair dresser “without telling Mum” and has her hair cut. The final stanza reads

    when she’s finished

    my head feels

    like sunlight. (p. 65)

This echoes the hope Dawn feels for her own future, with peace between her separated parents and a new friend and sense of belonging at school.

As with Herrick’s verse novels, the short length and the poetic intensity of *Sixth Grade Style Queen (Not!)* makes it accessible for readers of all abilities and an excellent way to connect with poetry. With some overlap of themes, including the issues of belonging, self-identity and family conflict, it could also be read as a complement to *One Perfect Pirouette*, either as part of an author focussed unit in the classroom or for private reading.

Writing verse novels offers creators the opportunity to explore emotionally charged topics in a compact yet powerful form. Whilst similar themes can be explored in prose, the verse novel develops an intimacy, which the use of poetic devices
highlights. The pace and length also lend an immediacy to the story which make it accessible to young readers, offering them more for less. What is not said in a verse novel is often as powerful as what is, the restraint accessing or developing emotional intelligence. As authors such as Clark and Herrick demonstrate, the verse novel proves a strong alternative to prose-form narratives, offering variety and the opportunity to experience poetry both for personal reading and in classroom situations. As a fellow verse novelist, and researcher, my hope is that verse novels continue to provide pleasure and connection to young readers for personal reading and in the classroom.
Chapter Seven

Verse Novel: Worse Things

Publication Note

At the time of writing this novel was under consideration with an Australian trade publisher.
Chapter Eight: Exegetical Discussion of the Creative Works and Conclusion

The need to belong is basic to every human being, which made it an attractive theme on which to focus this thesis. Not only does this need recur in literature, and in other media and art forms, but on a personal level, one of my drives to undertake doctoral studies was a feeling that, as a writer for children, I was not sure of my own place within the writing community or the academic community in which I found myself. At the same time, the challenge confronting myself and other poets to get poetry published and into the hands of children meant that it seemed unclear to me just where children’s poetry belongs, or even whether there was a need for such poetry to be created and published. At the end of this project, having explored these issues both creatively and through conference papers and articles, it seems I have reached a deeper understanding of the importance of children’s poetry and how belonging can be explored through such poetry, as well as how the poetry I craft for children reflects my own understandings of childhood.

Whilst this thesis has consisted of a number of individual pieces – the three creative works, three journal articles, the introduction and this conclusion – the theme has united them, and has influenced and informed my work. This unity has also allowed the journal articles together with this discussion to situate the creative work as practice-led research. As Professor of Communications Leila Green (2006) stresses, it is the process by which the creator reflects on their new knowledge and communicates this to others that makes the hybrid project “legitimate research” (p. 177). This thesis is then a piece of new knowledge for both myself and for
prospective readers, including fellow researchers. Donna Lee Brien, a recent
doctoral graduate at the time of writing, claims that developing a deeper
understanding of her own working practices enables her to assist other people to
develop their own creative abilities (Brien, 2006, p. 58). Importantly to me, the
research process has also developed and honed my creative writing skills, leaving
me at the conclusion a better, more confident writer. But, as Brien and her
colleague Jen Webb point out, a Doctoral project is not about learning the skills
necessary to be a writer – it is a fair assumption that any doctoral candidate in the
creative arts must already possess the skills necessary to practise their art. In my
own case, my publishing career has spanned over 20 years, implying I already
possessed the skills to be a professional writer, but undertaking this piece of
research has added a new dimension to my skillset as a “better research
professional” (Webb & Brien, 2015, p. 1323) and thus better writer. The iterative
process of conducting practice-led research has enriched my skillset.

As a children’s author, I regularly present creative writing workshops to
children and to adults at writing festivals and in schools, and the new
understanding of my own work that this project has developed in me also informs
my practice in those workshops and presentations. Further, as an experienced
English teacher, the deepening understanding of children’s literature and,
specifically, poetry, has again benefitted my ability to provide professional
development to teachers in strategies for using poetry in the classroom and for
teaching the writing of poetry to their students. Over the course of my candidature
I have presented to teachers and other creative arts researchers, thus sharing my
new knowledge, and engaging in an interchange of skills and knowledge. It is my
intention to continue to engage with the children’s literature community on this academic level through research as well as through future creative works, constantly growing and sharing my professional skills to promote further research insights.

A vital consideration throughout the development of the creative works was the need to offer child readers, the target audience, the opportunity to explore their own versions of belonging, by either reflecting their experiences or exploring universal emotions. In order to best achieve this, the poems and the verse novel were written in the tradition of contemporary realism – that is, through exploring events and experiences which could really happen set in the contemporary world (Hirsch, 1980, p. 12; Short, Lynch-Brown and Tomlinson, 2014, p. 12). Realistic literature allows readers to observe the process of growth and the ongoing process of constructing self (Michaels, 2004, p. 57). Readers can explore aspects of their own lives, as well as real life situations that they have not faced themselves, in a non-threatening way through literature. Susanne Gervay (2008), herself a writer of contemporary realism for children and young adults, advocates a combination of humour and real-life situations, enabling readers to experience and consider a range of issues, and to develop critical thinking skills (pp. 36-37). The use of contemporary realism for my own works provides an opportunity to explore aspects of belonging to which children may relate – including belonging to family, sporting, cultural, education and peer groups.

Combining contemporary realism with poetry, in its different forms, seems an especially appropriate way to explore the theme of belonging. Poet Aidan
Chambers labels the poet’s role as one of directing the reader inward, by using ‘reference points from the external world’ (Chambers, 1985, p. 24). Professor Karen Coats asserts that children prefer to see their own feelings and experiences explored in poems (2010, p. 50). They will better connect with a poem if they understand both the subject matter and the words (p. 51). In this tradition, the poet’s role is to ensure that their poetry is accessible to child readers. The combined use of contemporary realism and poetry as a basis for the creative works undertaken in this project allows real-life issues and day-to-day realities to be explored, engaging young readers through careful crafting, word choice, and a focus on subjects and ideas with which young readers are likely to connect. My choice of such topics and ideas also provides insights into my own views on childhood and on what young readers may or may not find relevant.

Chapter One of this thesis included a discussion of the work of Allison Halliday and her claims that the selection and presentation of poems for a 1991 anthology for children provided an insight into how the editor, Brian Patten, and adults more generally, view childhood itself. Having presented my own creative works, Halliday’s findings now provide an interesting lens through which to consider the version of childhood my own work implies. I want to consider whether my work reflects the five ‘indicators as to the notion of childhood’ (p. 26) that Halliday asserts Patten demonstrates through the selection and presentation of his anthology.

Firstly, Halliday says that the presence of illustrations in Patten’s anthology implies the perceived need for illustrations to support understanding. The inclusion
or exclusion of illustrations is not something I am overtly conscious of when I craft an individual poem. However, all of my previous published poetic works have made use of illustrations when published. The publication process is such that the decision to include an illustration, the size and placement of the illustration and its content, are outside of my control as poet. In a book length work, such as my verse novels (Murphy, 2009a, 2010, 2014a), I am asked by my editor to give some feedback on the illustrations after they have been drafted, but my ability to request changes is very limited. When my poems have been published in magazines or anthologies, I have not seen the illustrations, or whether one is included, until the work is published. These factors mean that when writing poetry I do not consider whether or not an illustration is needed for a particular poem, or what that illustration will depict. The inclusion of illustrations, then, underpins Halliday’s interpretation that this implies they are required, although their need is not necessarily identified by the poet.

In the case of the collection for early childhood readers, *All About Me* (Chapter Three), my intention was to create a collection suitable for a picture book length manuscript. With most picture books being thirty-two pages in length, with full colour illustrations used throughout, the decision to craft poems for this format meant that there was an awareness that these poems will be illustrated should the manuscript be commercially published. This awareness of format also determined the number of poems I selected. Yet while I was aware of the need for illustrations for this format, my experience as a picture book author (Murphy, 2004, 2006, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2015b) is that, just as with other published works, it is outside of my role to determine what or where these illustrations will be.
Whilst Halliday asserts that the use of illustrations suggests a desire to support understanding, the role of illustrations in picture books is not simply to explain the content of the poem, but also to add layers of meaning and decoration. Child readers do sometimes rely on illustrations to make sense of the text, and both text and illustration together create layers of meaning. Child readers also move between text and illustration in forming their own interpretation of what they are reading (Feathers & Ayra, 2012; Yu, 2009). Whilst a picture book anthology of poems is different from a narrative picture book, and thus the illustrations won’t necessarily help to build a narrative across many pages, looking at published anthologies and collections shows that the illustrations do not simply replicate the words. In *Goat in My Coat* (Milne, 2010), details in the illustrations show emotions and information not included in the poems. The poem ‘Meow!’ recounts:

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The cat sat on the mat

The dog sat on the cat

The frog sat on the dog

The rat sat on the frog.
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The emotions of the animals are not mentioned in the text. However, the illustration shows an unhappy cat and, at the top of the stack, a smiling rat. Child readers may interpret these emotions from the pictures, and may also discuss the subsequent stanza and illustration which shows the stack falling apart and the cat on its feet, walking away, implying that the cat may have shaken the other animals off, though the text does not say this. It is generally the illustrator (in this case,
Andrew McLean) who will make such visual decisions, with the final result meaning that child readers may have a different interpretation from the one that either the poet or the illustrator intended.

So whilst, as Halliday suggests, the use of illustrations may mean that adults regard children as requiring visual support for understanding, and whilst research demonstrates the value of illustrations to support understanding and build layers of meaning, as a creator, I do not consciously consider how an illustrator might choose to interpret the poem. In the version of ‘Steps’ (p. 95) published in The School Magazine’s Blast Off (see Appendix 1), Matt Ottley, the illustrator depicts the steps in question as one long flight of stairs, with a child standing at the bottom. The perspective, from the top of the stairs, makes the child seem dwarfed by the size of the staircase. Ottley thus with his use of scale and perspective provides a visual clue as to why the narrator sighs ‘then trudge[s] slowly’ (Murphy, 2015c). This visual interpretation may support understanding but is not something that was within my control. Because the poem was written based on my own (adult) experience, my own imagined visual concept of the stairs was very different than Ottley’s interpretation – the stairs which I do climb on my daily beach walks have several landings and turns. However, Ottley’s interpretation is satisfying to me in that it offers additional support and a different perspective, ensuring that this is not just a poem about my experience but about a child character’s experience. Thus, illustrations enhance the published poetic work, and may offer new or deeper interpretations, but are not necessarily required for understanding. For myself, I aim to allow the words to stand alone at manuscript stage, with illustrations adding to the final product if deemed necessary by editorial staff.
Halliday’s second contention links the linguistic challenge of many of the poems selected by Patten with a perception that children are interested in word play and the role of language, and that they are verbally sophisticated (pp. 27-28). My own work for this project does indeed include word play and also uses sophisticated language. The title poem of *You and Me* (p. 110), implicitly about the relationship between the child narrator and his/her mother, relies for its humour on a grammatical error made by the child and the initial attempt by the mother to correct it. The child’s response of ‘whatever’ has tones of frustration or annoyance, but the resolution is positive. As a creator, I presume that a child reader is sophisticated enough to see the humour of the error and the mother’s impulsive response to correct the grammar. Although this poem is spoken by a child voice, the mother’s unthinking reaction to the grammar before heeding the intent of the child’s speech is something that I was very aware of both as a mother and, looking back, as a child.

Other poems in this collection use word play. The series of haiku scattered throughout the collection stem in part from a play on words based on the homonyms ‘haiku’ and ‘Hi-ku’ (p. 125). The other haiku – ‘My-ku’, ‘Cry-ku’ and so on, all build on this play of words through their rhyming titles. The poem ‘Look Up’ (p. 158) similarly uses made up words, particularly compound words – ‘No-time-to-talk-er’ and ‘Meet-no-eye-er’ – to change verb phrases into nouns, and to add humour to the rhyme of the poem. My use of these shows that I expect children to be able to understand the meaning of these new words and to possibly enjoy the humour of their use.
Vocabulary choice across all three creative works is often sophisticated and poems in the two collections especially use words that I am aware many children will not be familiar with, or even comprehend by themselves. The word ‘paraphernalia’ for example, from the poem of the same name (p. 162), is unlikely to be used regularly by child readers and may well be new to many. However, my choice to use this word stems from my own love of vocabulary. My assumption is that most children will be able to make sense of the word because it is partially defined by the content of the poem, with the narrator referring first to all the things s/he carries to go fishing: ‘rod and reel/ Bait and bucket/ Tackle box,/ Knife/ And board’ before claiming that the pelican doesn’t need ‘this paraphernalia’. This expectation of children being able to grasp, and even gain pleasure from, challenging vocabulary, is in line with the perception of verbal sophistication Halliday contends is held by Patten.

Halliday’s third observation of Patten’s collection is the selection of mostly short poems (less than two pages in length), which she sees as suggesting that adults perceive children as having short attention spans. The poems in my own two collections are generally short – with most being shorter than a page, and only one – the suite of poems, ‘Heroes’ (p. 165) – being longer than two pages. The verse novel is also short, with the word count being much lower than one might expect for a prose novel for a similar readership. However, I disagree with Halliday’s assertion that this reflects a judgement of children’s attention spans. Contemporary poetry, no matter the age group or target readership, tends to be short. Poetry is by nature a compressed form, which allows for richness and layers of meaning. As I
show in my comparison of prose and verse novels in Chapter Six, compression invites sophisticated emotional responses.

The fourth characteristic which Halliday sees as reflecting Patten’s views on childhood is the high proportion of humorous poems in the anthology, particularly those which rely on language peculiarities or on absurdity. Reflecting on my own creative works here, I see that I have used humour in about a third of the poems, though of course with humour being subjective, it is hard to assess whether my own work is funny, particularly in poems which are not overtly silly or absurd. In *All About Me*, there are some lines which young children might find humorous because they are mildly scatological – especially the words ‘bot’ (p. 46) and ‘bum’ (p. 48). There is little overt humour in this collection, though, with humour more likely to come from children enjoying the sensory experiences, particularly of movement-based poems such as ‘Shake It’ (p. 48) and ‘Silly Sausage’ (p. 54).

There is more obvious humour in *You and Me*, although again I am aware that humour is subjective. For example, the humour in ‘From The Ball of Fluff Under Your Bed’ (p. 94) lies both in the talking ball of fluff and in the things it shares the space under the bed with. However, whilst many children may find this funny, a child with a difficult relationship with their mother, or other carers, may find the poem sad, or frightening, and not see the humour. Several other poems, including ‘Off Air’ (p. 113), ‘The Visitor’ (p. 112) and ‘Lie-ku’ (p. 118) also focus on the humour of family dynamics, which again will be perceived differently by different readers. Other humour relies on word-play, including the titles of the haiku series, and the poem ‘Caught’ (p. 112) which shares a family outing through various
meanings of the word ‘caught’. Some poems rely on observational humour – possums playing in a roof sounding like soccer players (p. 156) and a seagull being a thief when it wants some of the narrator’s hot chips (p. 156). Because humour is subjective, I see the inclusion of humour depending very much on what I perceive as funny, and as such this may reflect my view of childhood, including my view that fun and levity are an important component of childhood – and, indeed, all stages of life.

The fifth and final facet which Halliday sees reflecting an anthologist’s view of childhood is the thematic focus of the anthology. In the case of Patten, Halliday notes the two main themes are nature and childhood itself, with other themes including love, sensory pleasures and memory (p. 29). The prevalence of nature as a theme in children’s poetry is perhaps not surprising since it is also a dominant theme in poetry intended for adult readers. As Linsay Knight, children’s publisher and poetry advocate with her own small poetry press, says: ‘Poetry and nature have been linked together throughout history’ (2016). In my own collections, childhood experiences, nature and sensory experiences all feature prominently.

In my early childhood collection, All About Me (Chapter Three), in order to unpack the idea of belonging as it might apply to such young children, I have attempted to explore a range of experiences which I assume will be common to most child readers – waking up in the morning, eating, bathing and so on. So, in ‘Ouch’ (p. 59), for example, I assume that most children will have experienced small injuries such as bumping a knee or stubbing a toe. The final lines, ‘Lucky there’s you/ To fix my boo-boo’, speak to unnamed adult listener, again reflecting what I
hope is the experience of most children – a reassuring adult presence in times like this. The intention here is to present young readers with scenes and experiences with which they will relate, so that they see themselves reflected in the collection. Another theme which runs throughout this collection is that of self-discovery or self-awareness, which is perhaps a version of what Halliday terms sensual pleasure. So, poems such as ‘Bits of Me’ (p. 47) and ‘Skin’ (p. 50) explore a child’s physical features which I assume to be common to all children, whilst poems such as ‘Hair’ (p. 49) assume a commonality (of having hair) while also acknowledging and celebrating differences – ‘Hair can be black/Or brown/Or white’ – which young children will gradually become aware of. Other poems, including ‘Shake It’ (p. 46) and ‘Join In’ (p. 57) celebrate sensory pleasures such as dancing and moving whilst at the same time building a sense of belonging as child listeners and the adults who read the poems with them move together.

In my collection for older children, You and Me (Chapter Five), experiences of childhood again feature prominently, although here I was aware of the difficulty of identifying experiences that are universal. Whilst early childhood is a time of inward focus, where many experiences, such as discovering one’s body, are universal, as children grow their lives tend to differ more markedly and they become more aware of these differences. In keeping with the theme of belonging, careful decisions needed to be made to be both to the focus of individual poems, and to the range of versions of belonging presented, an issue which will be discussed later in this chapter. So, while there are experiences which I believe are relatively universal – reading a book, going to school, playing and sport – many of the experiences are ones that I recognise are not universal, although perhaps the
emotions felt may be. So, for example, ‘Time for Me’ (p. 92) is set within a big, extended family, apparently all sharing the same house – Granny, Gramps, Mum, Dad, siblings, uncle, aunt and more. My assumption here is not that every child will come from a traditional extended family, or even one where there seems such harmony – Granny and Gramps are working together in the kitchen, and Mum and Dad are working together fixing things. Instead, I assume that the feeling of needing personal space, ‘time for me’ is one that many, if not all, children will connect with. So my assumption is one of universal emotions rather than universal experiences.

Other childhood experiences explored are less common. ‘The Guide’ (p. 98) explores the role of a guide dog from the perspective of its owner, while ‘How You’ll Find Me’ (p. 108) offers the perspective of a child whose family is homeless. My purpose in doing this was to attempt to offer many different versions of childhood experience and to increase the possibility of all children finding their experiences reflected in the collection in some way. Most of the poems are written from a first person perspective so that these experiences are not viewed as those of ‘others’, which would imply that the target readership is only people who have not had such experiences.

Nature also features prominently in this collection, most strongly with poems about animals, including ‘Marmalade and Marmaduke’ (p. 148) and ‘Thief’ (p. 156). There are also poems which include nature as part of an expanded view of world issues such as conservation and urbanisation. ‘Look Up’ (p. 160), for example, is set in the inner city, but encourages the listener to look up and see the beauty and emotion around, in built environments (“architectural sprees”) as well as in trees and even in “people’s faces”. The juxtaposition of ‘Waiting’ (P. 150) about a spider
catching a bug, with the following poem ‘Freedom’ (p. 152), where the speaker compares a bug caught in a jar with people caught behind fences also offers an opportunity for readers to make connections between the natural world and societal issues. Awareness of world issues is also explored in poems exploring the experiences of refugees, such as ‘Glad I’m here?’ (p. 159), as well as attitudes towards war, in ‘Heroes’ (p. 164), and global warming, in ‘Dry-ku’ (p. 149).

The recurring themes and topics of my two collections do indicate to some extent my own views on childhood, as well as focussing on things which I had interest in as a child, or that I have viewed my own children enjoying. There are, for example, many poems about swimming and sport, two things which featured prominently in my own childhood and in my children’s lives as well. I was also, in these collections, influenced by my chosen theme of belonging, to create, and subsequently select, poems which in some way explored aspects of belonging. It is interesting to note here that the nine poems from the second collection which were accepted for publication during the course of my candidature (see List of Publications, p. ix) also are mostly about either nature or childhood experiences. Four (Blue, p. 145; Marmalade and Marmaduke, p. 148; Paraphernalia p. 164; Waiting, p. 150) are about animals, four about outings to the beach or camping (Paraphernalia p. 164; Steps, p. 97; Caught, p. 113; Morning, p. 95), and another is set at school (Lunchtime, p. 135). It is possible that the themes of childhood and nature are seen as being of interest to children by the adults who select them for publication, but it is also possible that this is a reflection of the subjects I write well about, or which I choose to submit for publication.
The themes noted by Halliday as prevalent in Patten’s work are also prevalent in my own, with the preponderance of poems about childhood itself perhaps giving some illumination to the difficulty of defining just what a child is, which was discussed in Chapter One of this thesis. That chapter acknowledged the difficulty of determining exactly what a child is, and the subsequent difficulty of determining just what makes a poem ‘for children’. However, through looking at the works constructed for this project and revisiting Halliday’s paper, it seems possible to make some observations about my own version of childhood. It seems that for me a child is someone who, whilst perhaps young in age and very much learning about things of which adults may already know – body parts, eating and sleeping for example – is also someone who becomes increasingly aware of the world around them and their own place in it. The interests and experiences of a child can be simple, which is why there are poems about playing make-believe (The Cubby, p. 53) or contemplating the shape of a bird’s beak (Cutlery, p. 154). However, young people are also insightful and curious about global and moral issues and thus there are poems about refugees (Freedom, p. 152) and war (Heroes, p. 167). Young people, I also assume, are aware of emotions, their place in their families, in peer groups, at school and so on. I also assume a range of interests, including sport, animals and nature, reading and, again, global issues, although I do not assume that every child will be interested in all of these things, nor that they will agree with my take on them. Less clear is whether these poems teach the ‘adult values’ which Stephens (1992) and Rose (1994) see as one of the roles of children’s literature. While I feel that my aim is not to teach young readers how to live, or which values to hold, at the same time, my own interests, values and views of childhood must
shape the topics I write about and the stance I take on those topics. So while I aim not to preach my values, there is a possibility that I am espousing them through my own creative preferences.

I commenced this project with an ambition to explore the theme of belonging, which I saw as ‘universal’, through poetry aimed at children. I believed that it would be possible to speak to every child through my creative works, especially the two anthologies. It was my aim that the poetry in the collections would be accessible for every child, particularly every Australian child. Over the course of writing and compiling the collections I came to a growing realisation that this was not possible, for a range of reasons, and that what I could instead aim for was a body of work that was broad in its subject matter and, hopefully, its appeal, exploring different forms of belonging in the hope that some part of each work would speak to as many different children as possible.

In the case of the early childhood collection, I attempted to offer experiences and sensations which were as close to universal as I could – eating, sleeping, moving, discovery of body parts and so on. Early drafts of this manuscript included poems which focussed on family members, including Mum, Dad, siblings and grandparents. But, while some of these poems seemed strong enough to include, and one, ‘Gran’s Visit’ (Murphy, 2016) was published in an international anthology, I felt that such poems lay outside my goal to be universal – in that not every child reading the collection will have a Mum, or a Gran, for example. Instead I selected poems that recognised adults through the child voice speaking directly to them in such a way that this could be any significant adult or carer, as in ‘Together-Time’ (p.
where the listener is asked “Cuddle me close”, and ‘Ouch’ (p. 58), where the child acknowledges the adult presence by saying “Lucky there’s you/To fix my boo-boo”. Even then, I realised it was impossible to be universal – what of the child with no stable adult presence in their life, or the child who doesn’t have food to enjoy for breakfast? Again, I had to accept that it was not possible to create a truly universal collection.

The second collection posed similar conflicts. Poems with nuclear families, such as ‘Out’ (p. 114) with Mum, Dad, speaker, younger sibling and even a dog, needed to be balanced with poems such as ‘Normal’ (p. 106) which questions just what a ‘normal’ family is. ‘How You’ll Find Me’ (p. 108) features a homeless family and the final voice in ‘Heroes’ (p. 167) has lost several family members to war. However, there are still many references to parents and, particularly, mums. This risks excluding some children but was difficult to avoid in such a lengthy collection and one in which belonging was the chosen theme. The prevalence of mothers in the poems was also, perhaps inevitably, reflective of my role as mother and grandmother and my closeness to my own mother throughout my childhood, and still.

Another, related, difficulty was that of writing outside of my own experience both in terms of family structure and in cultural and lived experience. Crafting poems about experiences, including but not limited to those of refugees and disabled children, holds the dual risks of being tokenistic or of appropriation. Where possible, I tried to make poems about such experiences non-specific, so that they could be applied to a number of situations. The poem ‘Outsider’ (p. 138) for example, in representing the voice of a child who wants to ask “how you are” but
“can’t speak to you” could be from the point of view of someone who can’t communicate because they don’t speak English, but could equally be someone with a disability affecting communication, or simply somebody who is shy and isn’t sure how to communicate effectively. Readers can interpret the poem in a way that they connect with. Other poems are more specific. The poems about refugees or migrants, including ‘Glad I’m Here?’ (p. 159) and ‘Freedom’ (p. 152), as well as the story of Amed in Worse Things, clearly explore issues faced by refugees and migrants. My choice here to include these although they are outside of my lived experience lies in my desire for the purpose of this project both to be as inclusive as possible as well as to focus on issues of belonging which I see as prevalent in contemporary Australia. At the same time, I did not feel comfortable or confident in making the cultural practices or traditions of immigrants central to any work because these are not my stories to tell.

The dilemma for me as an Anglo-Saxon, straight, middle-aged woman was that if I was going to create a collection of poetry about belonging, then it was important that I write from outside my own experience in order to offer a way in for as many prospective child readers as possible. It is vital that children see their cultural and everyday lives reflected in the books they read, in order to develop a positive sense of belonging (Adam & Harper, 2016a, p. 10), but equally important that children are exposed to experiences and viewpoints beyond their own. Inclusive literature does not just allow children to see themselves on the page, but has the potential, as educators Adam and Harper say, to “develop critical and creative thinking; intercultural understanding; personal and social capability; and, ethical understanding” (2016b, p. 2). As fellow doctoral candidate and educator
Rachel Lo (2016) says, “we must incorporate varying depictions [of families] to ensure all people have resources for support and will be prepared for encounters that extend beyond the majoritarian” (p. 150). This, along with the ability to discuss and accept such representations, Lo asserts, ensures epistemic justice, which occurs when children have access to collective resources (including literature) that reflect their social experiences and are thus confident that their own voices will be heard (pp. 148-149). Whilst one collection cannot fulfil this need on its own, by ensuring a range of experiences and voices are represented, I aim to contribute to this need for ‘collective resources’.

It is important to make note of my decision to avoid the overt representation of the voices of Indigenous Australians. Whilst wanting to include as many voices and representations as possible, I was aware of the need to be respectful of Aboriginal experiences and ownership of story, and the need to avoid appropriating experiences which I do not have permission to use. The issues here are explained clearly by indigenous writer and academic Melissa Lucashenko (2009) who insists that “silence is better than ignorant speech” (p. 5). There are, she stresses, three key issues for non-indigenous creators attempting to write Aboriginal lives or characters. Firstly, the issue of protocol, which arises because there is, Lucashenko explains, “no ‘anonymous’ writing of Aboriginal people” (p. 5). When a story is set in any real Australian place, then any Aboriginal characters in the story are people who really exist – the traditional owners and residents of that land. Regardless of where a story is set, there “will always be a specific group of local Aboriginal people who have a stake” in what is written. The second issue is that of specific authenticity – the challenge of creating characters who are authentically drawn,
and not stereotypes. The third issue is that of appropriation, assuming an Aboriginal voice. As Lucashenko points out, most information that white Australians have about Aboriginal Australians comes from non-Aboriginal sources (p. 7). Lucashenko acknowledges that white writers may feel that by writing about Aboriginal characters or issues they are addressing or exploring racism, which, she says is “a worthy objective” but still one she would prefer to be addressed by listening and observing rather than writing.

In attempting to write works which are accessible to most, if not all, Australian children and that explore issues of belonging as they might be experienced by those children, I sought to avoid appropriation of Aboriginal stories, whilst still hoping Aboriginal children would be able to connect with the work in the same way as white children, or children from all other ethnicities. So, rather than depicting Aboriginal characters or writing single poems for the collection which might be seen as being about uniquely Aboriginal experiences (which would risk unnecessary and inaccurate stereotyping or appropriation), I hope that prospective Aboriginal readers will see themselves reflected in the many poems which I see as being about things experienced by many children. An indigenous child might see themselves reflected in poems about sport, or school, or family life, in the same way as any other child. There is one poem in the second collection which does make brief use of an apparently indigenous voice. The second poem in ‘Heroes’ (p. 165) is from the perspective of a child whose grandfather was denied entry to the ‘pub’ “because he was black”. Whilst I recognise that I could be accused of appropriation here, my decision to include that voice was based both on my aim to include different perspectives in this series of poems, as well as on my own
experience and observations. When viewing a display of photos from the First World War in 2015, an Aboriginal child pointed out to me his great great grandfather in one of the photos, and told me that when this man returned he was denied entry to the RSL. I had heard similar stories of exclusion previously, and felt that including this kind of experience in this series of five poems was important, to emphasise that not every returning soldier was treated the same, or even recognised for their contribution, for ‘doing their bit’. I also avoided any omnipotent input into the poem – no discussion of how the child character views the treatment of his grandfather, or of his grandfather’s reaction.

At the end of this project, it is important to reflect on what I have learnt through undertaking such work, and where it sits as new work. Looking first at the collections, I have experimented with length and style throughout the project, both in works that are included in the final collections and those eventually left out. As well as the thread of belonging and the recurrent themes mentioned previously, I have experimented with using other poets’ work as a model for my own. ‘This is just to say’ (p.115), for example, is modelled on William Carlos Williams’ work of the same name (1934), and its reference to plums in the last line highlights this connection. ‘Cats’ (p. 147) is modelled on the rhyme and rhythm structure of Robert Louis Stevenson’s ‘At the Seaside’ (1913), a form which appealed to me for its formal challenge. ‘Tiger’ (p. 153) is modelled on William Blake’s ‘Tyger’ (1794) and uses the word ‘symmetry’ as a further echo of the original. Using successful poems as models for my own work provided inspiration and challenge, as well as providing opportunities for young readers and educators to do the same. In both
collections, I also experimented with form, rhyme and rhythm – for example, in the series of haiku (which are, more properly, senryu), I have used the western version of the form, with its stress on adhering to seventeen syllables, as well as the plays on words of the titles to find both topics and content. With most of my previously published poetry being free verse, I have enjoyed challenging myself to write poems very reliant on rhyme and structured rhythm, including poems such as ‘Clean Up’ (p. 44) and ‘Time for Me’ (p. 92).

At the commencement of the project I envisioned the verse novel Worse Things as being perhaps the major of the three works, because of its length and because it developed my skills as a verse novelist, for which I am best known as a children’s author. In writing the two collections and, subsequently, preparing this discussion, I have become increasingly aware that all three works have developed my skills and are considerably different from my previous body of work, and that the three work well together. With the theme of belonging being explored in all three works, and with the poems for the collections written across a period of around two years, at the same time as I was writing the novel, I found there were links created between the three. Sport features prominently in both You and Me and Worse Things and poems including ‘Outsider’ (p. 138) and ‘Glad I’m Here?’ (p. 159) echo the experiences of Amed. Whilst not something I considered when writing the poems, as a teacher I am now aware that these echoes could prove useful in a classroom situation with teachers and students able to use the poems to further their examination of the novel’s themes.

In planning and writing Worse Things my desire was to explore the theme of belonging through the use of multiple perspectives. My previous verse novels
(Murphy, 2009a, 2010, 2014a) were each written in the voice of one first person character, and I was keen to experiment with alternating perspectives. Initially the work had a working title of ‘Me, Myself and You’ and I attempted to use two first person voices – those of Jolene and Blake. My plan was for the third voice to be in fact two voices – the second-person ‘you’ of either Jolene observing Blake or Blake observing Jolene. However, when I started drafting the work I realised both the difficulty of maintaining this device throughout, as well as the feeling that there was a third character who could be watching. It was when I started to consider the story of this watcher that the novel, while changing direction, gained depth.

In saying this, the voice of Amed was the one which required the most reworking in the revision process. At the beginning of the novel we haven’t yet met him, and he is very much a watcher, an observer, talking about seeing ‘you’. Whilst my intention was to create an air of uncertainty around whether this was in fact a third character or simply the other two characters observing each other, it meant that readers had little chance to get to know Amed’s motivation and story. The decision to remove some of this uncertainty earlier led to a subsequent decision to label which character is speaking at the beginning of each poem, rather than using ‘Me’, ‘Myself’ and ‘You’ as the three delineators. I was also challenged by developing what I hope is an authentic voice for Amed. Though he can’t speak English out loud, I needed to tell his story in English. I opted to use more formal language for Amed to try to distinguish him from the other characters. The use of the definition poems (such as ‘Watch’ on p. 195) stemmed from this difficulty, allowing me both to highlight the key themes of the book and to echo Amed’s learning of English.
A final concern for me in developing these creative works was that which I elaborated both in the introduction and in Chapter Two – the issue of where poetry belongs, particularly given the paucity of poetry published in Australia. In developing this new work, I was expanding my own skills and filling perceived gaps in the publishing landscape, with the aim that children would have access to this work. While the luxury of three years’ scholarship stipend in which to create the works removed the commercial pressure to publish, my desire to continue to pursue a career as a children’s writer and to have my work read by its target audience meant that I was keen to produce commercially publishable work, at the same time that I was aware very few poetry collections are published in Australia. My compromise was to work towards finding publication opportunities for individual poems and to consider submission of the finished collections after the project is complete. As mentioned previously, nine of the poems from You and Me, and one from All About Me have been accepted for publication in the course of this project. The verse novel, Worse Things is also under consideration with an Australian publisher at the time of writing.

Interestingly, the acceptance of the three articles for either publication or presentation at conferences suggests that there is interest in children’s poetry from educators, academics and the creative community which is perhaps not matched by the output of poetry in the publishing sector. These acceptances have also allowed me to disseminate my research, and gain valuable feedback, a key part of the doctoral process, allowing me to become the “better research professional” that Webb and Brien (2015, p. 1323) attest a creative writing researcher must become.
Through the course of these studies I have also become aware of issues which did not come under the terms of this research, but which may warrant further exploration in future work, including: the extent to which culturally diverse voices and forms are represented in Australian children’s poetry; whether poetry collections and anthologies are marketed to children, or to the adults who use them to educate; the ways in which children themselves source poetic texts for private reading; and the processes involved in reading collections of poetry.

In the introduction, I spoke of my desire that doctoral studies would help me to overcome imposter syndrome and to determine where I belong in the children’s literature world. What I quickly discovered when I commenced my research was that my feelings of inadequacy and fear of not being ‘good enough’ to complete a Doctoral project were not unique, and in fact that, while this emotion needed to be managed and carefully channelled, emotion is “an integral part of the doctoral student experience” (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2013, p. 8630). Discovering that other students felt this way was a step towards my feeling a sense of belonging in the university setting. My own experiences of collegiality with fellow doctoral candidates are reflected in the experiences of participants in Aitchison and Mowbray’s study, where candidates enjoyed coming together in writing groups and other informal forums where the emphasis was on “support and empathy” (p.865) rather than on research performance. My confidence has increased alongside my growing competence as an academic writer as well as a creator, but at the same time I have become more comfortable with wanting to do better, to achieve more, rather than to feel that any one achievement is the one which will make me feel I
have made it as a writer. I belong: as a poet, a poetry lover, and one who can spread the word about the value of poetry through research and good writing.

Children’s poetry, I am now certain, belongs in the hands, homes, classrooms and hearts of children everywhere. It belongs as a key part of the literary world, although its diminutive size publication-wise is of concern. There is a place for children’s poetry in Australia. It is explored by academics and educators at conferences, it is mandated in the National Curriculum, and it is published, albeit in small numbers, in magazines and in book form. This thesis, through presentation of papers, publication of poems and the prospective publication of the remaining creative works, attempts to play a part in forging a larger place for poetry in libraries, classrooms, bookstores and homes as well as, importantly, the hands of children. There are, as this thesis has shown, many different kinds of belonging in children’s poetry, and many ways for children to belong in Australia. The different and varied parts of this thesis reflect the many different belongings which children can experience. As well as helping poetry find a place to belong, it also offers versions of belonging for children to read in a variety of poetic forms across their childhood years.
Appendix 1: Published Version of Poem ‘Steps’

Published version of Steps (p. 95) as it appeared in *The School Magazine: Blast Off* (Murphy 2015c), illustrated by Matt Ottley

There are one hundred steps at our beach and when we get there I run down them, whooping smiling laughing. Can’t wait to swim and splash and play. But when it's time for home I stand at the bottom Of those hundred steps and sigh then trudge slowly back to the car park.
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