

**LINES IN SPACE: AUSTRALIAN VERSE
NOVELS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG
ADULTS (YA)**

IN CONJUNCTION WITH 'COPPER COAST'

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ABSTRACT

Verse novels are new sorts of books for children and adolescents that can be found on Australian bookshop and library shelves, and awards lists. This thesis, ‘Lines in space: Australian verse novels for children and young adults (YA)’ — in conjunction with ‘Copper Coast’ locates verse novels as a significantly different genre of writing for the younger-than-adult market. Verse novels feature pared-back prose, set out as for poetry, which also tell a story, or a number of stories, in first- or third-person narratives, from single or multiple points of view.

The exegesis argues and the creative product illustrates that child and YA verse novels employ: voice-zones assembled in plot sequence; spare language; white space; and lines shaped into text tiles. The assumption that a verse novel is *verse* is challenged in this thesis. Verse novelists, like ordinary prose writers, may choose elements of expression traditionally associated with poetry but such features are not essential in verse novels for children and adolescents. What count are the characterisation, voice, and narrative pull, through the lines in space.

Using as a methodological research tool texts that have won awards, this exegesis surveys primary, review and critical literature, tracing contemporary beginnings of verse novels for children and adolescents in Australia. Critical research in relation to the creative product provides a conceptual framework that is briefly applied to a variety of contemporary American and Australian exemplars, including a focus on Catherine Bateson’s YA verse novel, *his name in fire*. This thesis identifies a recent local flourishing of junior verse novels.

Practice-led research is married with creative praxis in the innovative form of a verse (voice-zone text tile) novel manuscript for teens, ‘Copper Coast’. Reflection on the process of research and craft for the manuscript concludes the exegesis.

KEYWORDS

verse novel; children’s and adolescent / young adult (YA) literature; voice-zone; white space; spare language; text tile; creative praxis

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis (exegesis and creative product) does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Kathryn Jane Deller-Evans

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NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

In this exegesis I use the term *voice-zone* in a specific way. I use it to mean individual character sections of a verse novel. Similar sections in poetry have been termed the ‘voice-lyric’ (Thomas 2001), but for the verse novel I believe it more appropriate to take the term from Mikhail Bakhtin’s analysis of Alexander Pushkin’s nineteenth century verse novel, *Eugene Onegin*. In the *Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin discusses how a fictional character has an individual zone, her or his ‘own sphere of influence on the authorial context surrounding him [/her], a sphere that extends — and often quite far — beyond the boundaries of the direct discourse allotted’ (Bakhtin 1981, p. 320). The term he uses in the original is Russian, *речевая зона* / *rechevaia zona*, which is best translated as *speech zone* but can mean ‘voice-zone’ in the sense of voice as spoken (rather than, say, musical voice)¹. As Lodge and Wood (2000) suggest, ‘this zone... is not set off from authorial speech in any formally compositional or syntactical way; it is a zone demarcated purely in terms of style’ (p. 109).

In a verse novel this zone may comprise the entire work if there is only one protagonist’s voice, or it may be a page or two in the voice of a particular character, alternating with voice-zones of a second or multiple characters. Not every voice-zone in a verse novel will have the same form. One character may, for instance, be represented in first person present tense, and another character in limited third person immediate past tense. A voice-zone covers a variety of forms

¹ Thank you to colleague Dr Narulla Asamov for clarifying this distinction in the translation

of address and may include dialogue, letter writing or song lyrics, recollections, or it may be thoughts spoken out loud or as interior monologues.

An innovative term coined in this thesis is *text tile*. This I use in reference to sections of a verse novel that may or may not coincide with voice-zones. Individual authors of verse novels choose different arrangements of text; some may have character zones represented by entitled, numbered or named sections, and others may present one voice throughout the entire verse novel. Titles or first lines in bold font may separate sections of verse novel text. Authors of multiple verse novels may also vary their technique from book to book. I use text tiles in preference to naming separate parts of the overall text ‘poems’, despite some authors referring to their own work in that manner. I prefer the noun ‘tile’ to *block* or *brick* because the right hand side of lines of text in a verse novel are usually ragged, not uniformly regularly-shaped (unless done so intentionally). I envisage the tile encompassing various shapes.

In the accompanying teen ‘voice-zone text tile’ (verse) novel manuscript, ‘Copper Coast’, I employ two main protagonists as dominant focalisers whose narratives intertwine with those of two lesser characters. All four characters have individual voice-zones. Every time a voice-zone changes a fresh page with a character name and pictograph symbolises that transition. Locations are also given in a subheading with each fresh voice-zone. Within the voice-zones are text tiles. New text tiles are separated and the shift denoted by section markers (§). These function for me generally as new scene signifiers, just as rows of asterisks or blank lines may do in a prose fiction.

PREFACE

Some years ago in Canberra, eminent Australian academic historian Greg Denning encouraged participants in a graduate writing workshop to label their thesis headings inventively. With respect to this work I have imagined a local magpie (specifically, the South Australian state avian emblem ‘the piping shrike’) embarking on a journey of discovery; with each successive chapter in the thesis representing a stretch of that passage. A minor theme of birds in my novel echoes this. Interconnected for me is the 1980 Adelaide Festival of Arts world-famous staging of Peter Brook’s *The conference of the birds* (Carrière & Brook 1982), which took place over the course of a long night in a quarry. I liked that Brook’s conception sprang from the ancient, revered Sufi poem by Farid ud-Din Attar (1177). The play’s central tenet sees birds set out and return, to discover home as for the first time. This idea connects my exegesis, ‘Lines in space’, with my creative product, the teen voice-zone text tile novel ‘Copper Coast’, in which the protagonist is cast out from her home in Cornwall, alighting in rural South Australia, but tracking a reverse migration.

Writers who build a nest within the academy must position themselves. David Lodge admits in his ‘Introduction’ to *After Bakhtin* (1990), that as both an academic and a novelist he saw himself straddling both the world of scholarship and the literary-cultural world with all its consumption ‘for profit and pleasure’ (p.7). He talks of domesticating developments in literary theory for twin purposes: that of his own research articles of criticism, and as well for use in his campus novels, where he satirises academic lives and practices. Author DH Lawrence, too, understood the need to yoke the quotidian to the ethereal; and the higher calling of art to the ordinary, when he wrote ‘and you know there is a water-closet on the premises’ (1925, p. 181). In my creative product, the equivalent to the WC

is a long-drop, a classic ‘Aussie dunny’ intended to place my novel’s antipodean cultural heritage.

I recognise these quotations as representing the need for the real in fiction. For me, a verse novel is not just airy like the unencumbered flight of birds, but rather, also grounded in its human-ness, epitomised by that repository for the most basic of biological needs as noted by Lawrence. In Australia, we are girt by sea: there is the containment of oceans, surrounding the space of the continental earth, which may be riven by drought or flooded by rains, and the beachside littoral junction that is the site between. This creative writing doctorate encompasses both academic inquiry and the writing process. Ahead is an example, and also a reflection upon, a new kind of Australian writing, the verse novel for children and adolescents, which, as I will argue, owes more to its prosaic inheritance than to any poetical genetic traits. I will reveal how verse elements may be used by practitioners but how the form owes its strength to the elements of spare language lines shaped into text blocks in the form of voice-zones, advancing plot through white space. In this thesis I investigate verse novels for children and adolescents from inside and out, an exploration that has involved my taking a metaphorical voyage, a migration, an expedition — a trek roaming the skies, sea, and the land below — to a hoped-for happy landing.