Challenging childhoods: representations of conflict in junior Australian historical fiction since 1945

Kylie Flack, Macquaries University, Australia

The Asian Conference on Literature & Librarianship 2014
Official Conference Proceedings 2014

0492

Abstract

Representations of conflict permeate Australian junior historical fiction, including acts of extreme violence, acts of political protest and acts of war both within and beyond the nation's boundaries. A broad survey of the novels by Australian authors on Australian topics published since 1945 reveals a strong tendency to place children at the centre of significant community, national and international events, or phases of the nation's past, and wars have been (important/central etc – this sentence feels unfinished).

Since 2000, , to illustrate, more than 150 junior historical novels have been published in Australia, encompassing subjects as diverse as life on the goldfields in the mid 1800s, an outbreak of the bubonic plague in the early 1900s, and the bombing of Darwin in 1942. As narrators and characters, children negotiate dangerous and challenging circumstances, resolving their problems in a variety of ways.

This paper overviews the representation of conflict in junior historical fiction since 1945, identifying both the historiographical implications and the implications for children's acquisition of knowledge about the past outside a classroom setting. Inherent within these implications, it will be shown, is the use of historical narrative to construct and convey particular understandings of personal, community and national identities. The paper will also present findings of the author's pilot qualitative research with children that used the historical novel *My Father's War* by Sophie Masson as a stimulus, providing an example of how children's voices may enrich current conversations around the writing of Australian history and historical fiction.

In the junior historical novel *My Father's War*, author Sophie Masson places her protagonist, twelve-year-old Annie Cliff, in war-torn France in 1918, searching for her missing father, who is a soldier in the Australian Imperial Forces fighting on the Western Front. In a narrative structured as a diary, Annie records the death and suffering she witnesses, as well as the personal conflict she experiences. Her April 28 entry reads:

> I feel so discouraged. So hopeless. The deaths of poor Blue and Owl still hang heavy in my mind. I can't help remembering how kind they were, how full of life. And that makes me think of the other people I know who've died…. Everything seems so dark and sad.[1]

As an historian researching how children learn about the past outside of school, I am interested in how child readers might respond to such a sombre representation of the past, as well as how such historical narratives may fit within the broader currents and developments in Australian historiography since 1945. My doctoral research considers how the historical subjects and themes fictionalized for children have evolved since 1945, including narratives around war, settler-indigenous relations and community conflict, which have emerged as popular ways of presenting the past to children.

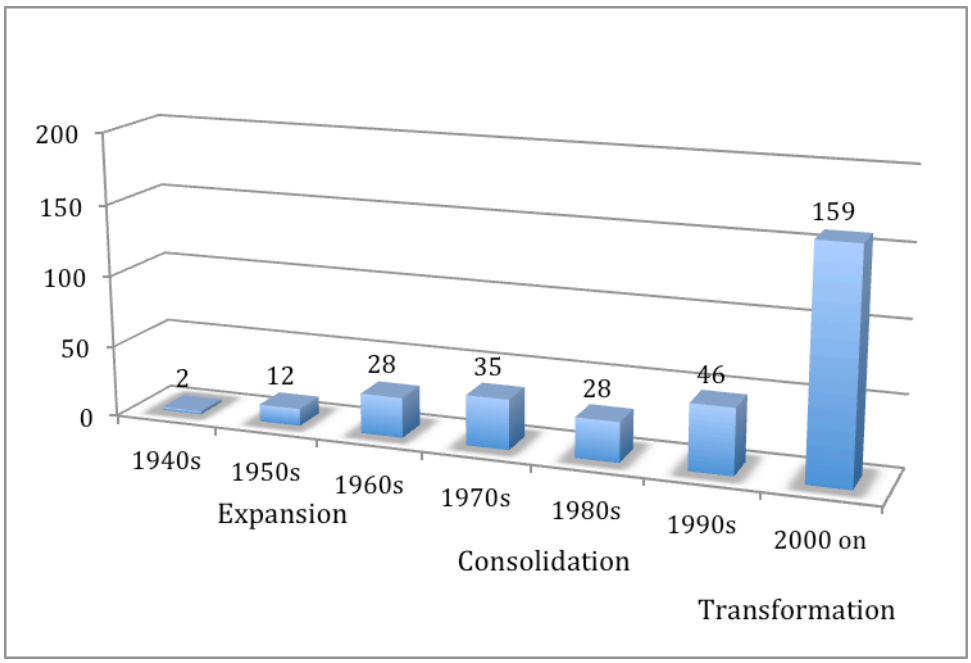
Personalizing external conflict through a child protagonist provides the child reader with a perhaps more empathetic way of connecting with the past. Portraying the internal conflicts of child characters may provide a similar point of connection. From a historiographical perspective, recognising that children's literature is often seen to have an educative function, using conflict as an analytical category to interrogate junior historical fiction highlights those aspects of national, community and personal life considered by authors and publishers to be worth representing to children and to be of interest to them.

Focusing on representations of conflict, today I will:

- Provide an overview of Australian junior historical fiction since 1945
- Place junior historical fiction in its historiographical context, including the role it may play in the construction of identity
- Consider children's responses to historical fiction

[1] Masson 2011 pp204-5

Australian junior historical fiction, 1945-2012 (draft)



Source: K.Flack 2013 (subject to revision)

As illustrated in the graph, my research so far suggests that the Australian junior historical fiction genre has evolved in three phases, with approximately half of the novels and picture books published from 2000 onwards. These phases relate to publication trends and marketing strategies, as well as the features of individual novels such as subject matter, thematic content, and literary style.

In the immediate post-war years, children's literature was not a commercial priority for local publishers. As Robyn Sheahan-Bright notes:

> Despite the growth of local book production during World War II, caused by the difficulty of obtaining imports, the output of children's books was poor…[2]

From the perspective of 'conflict', fiction in the period 1945 to 1969 included representations of the colonial period in Australia that either upheld or unsettled the prevailing orthodoxy of brave white pioneers and settlers conquering the dangerous frontier, pushing its boundaries ever outwards.

Novels that upheld the prevailing orthodoxy, such as Doris Chadwick's *John of the Sirius* trilogy, portray settler-indigenous relations in a relatively benign way, downplaying the level of violence and bloodshed accompanying the British colonization of Australia. Conversely, novels that unsettled and subverted the prevailing orthodoxy, such as Mavis Thorpe Clark's *They Came South* and Nan Chauncy's *Mathinna's People*, highlighted the devastating impact of conflict between indigenous and settler communities. In doing so these novels presented colonial history in a very different way to the school curriculum, which, according to historian

---

[2] Sheahan-Bright in Munro and Sheahan-Bright 2006 p 279

Anna Clark, focused on '…'great men, great deeds and great events'…', 'history-as-progress and the advance of civilization through the British Empire.'[3]

Some of the novels of the 1950s and 1960s, then, reflect a move from plot-based adventure stories using stock characters and expected settings to stories of individuals with more varied backgrounds and complicated emotions. Personal conflict plays an important role in developing more nuanced accounts of the past, as reflected in novels such as *The River Kings* by Max Fatchen, in which a young boy runs away from a violent stepfather. This move represents a significant milestone in the development of junior historical fiction towards a more inclusive, complex and honest rendering of aspects of the nation's past.

Furthermore, the emergence of fantasy as a narrative strategy in some historical novels of the 1960s, such as Randolph Stow's *Captain Midnite* and Nan Chanucy's *Tangara*, may be seen as opening the way for more experimentation and sophistication in the corpus in succeeding decades, including how conflict was represented.

The publication of 35 junior historical novels in the 1970s represented an increase of approximately 25 per cent on the previous decade, hinting at a consolidation of postwar expansion and the possibility of continuing growth. Certainly, the Australian publishing industry was in a growth phase, as Jim Hart notes:

> If the 1960s was the infancy of modern Australian publishing, then the 1970s was surely its adolescence ...[4]

The novels that I have reviewed do not exhibit any radical departures from the established genre conventions or narrative techniques, although pushing at the boundaries continued. Bushrangers, convicts, settler-indigenous relations and the search for gold continued to appear as dominant subjects, suggesting that publishers viewed such novels as a staple of the children's market. And agentic child characters continued to experience conflict, either due to their personal circumstances or as a result of broader community, national and international events.

Against the familiar backdrop of genre conventions and subject matter, some authors did seek to broaden and deepen the portrayal of the past in the 1970s. As an example, David Martin's *The Chinese Boy,* retrieves the stock figures of the Chinese on the Australian goldfields in the mid 1800s and breathes new life in to their experiences of racial conflict.

In the 1980s, the world wars, the bushranger Ned Kelly and the Depression became part of the junior historical fiction corpus, all subjects involving conflict. As examples, in *Deepwater*, Judith O'Neill writes of anti-German feeling in an isolated rural community during World War 1 and James Aldridge's novels *The True Story of Lilli Stubec*k and *The True Story of Spit McPhee* depict personal and community conflict during the Great Depression.

---

[3] Clark in Macintyre and Clark 2004 p173
[4] Hart in Sheaghan-Bright and Munro 2006 p53

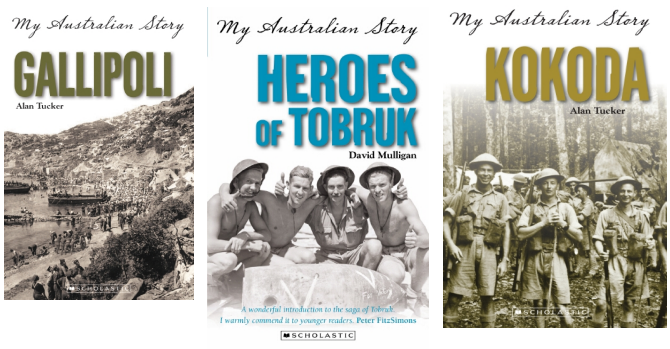
The publication of junior historical fiction increased by approximately thirty per cent in the 1990s, based on the 1980s level. Although this increase is similar to previous decades, I have chosen to place the 1990s within the transformation phase as subjects and narrative techniques diversified significantly. One example of this diversification is the picture book *The Rabbits*[5], an allegorical representation of the impact of colonization on Australia's indigenous population and the natural environment.

The publication of approximately 159 novels from 2000-2012 reflects a 245 per cent increase on the 1990s level, although I do note that historical fiction remains a small proportion of Australian children's literature. There are various contexts in which the extraordinary growth in the historical fiction genre might be placed, from general children's literature to popular culture, from the history of childhood to the rise of consumerism, from educational funding to parenting practices, and from public history to political history.

Time prevents me from discussing these contexts today. Generally, however, as the corpus expansion accelerated from 2000, many new subjects have been explored and novelists appear free to turn their gaze to virtually any aspect of Australian social and cultural history. Another tendency since 2000 has been to publish novels in series connected either by narrative structure and style, such as the Scholastic Australia *My Story* series and the *Our Australian Girl* series; or by characters and theme, such as Kirsty Murray's *Children of the Wind* series.

Recent examples of junior historical fiction include stories that place children in positions where they defy the expectations of society, experiencing personal conflict as well as reflecting the conflict in the community and at a national level around such issues as unfair application of the law, removal of Aboriginal children from their families by government authorities and the experiences of refugee. War narratives have emerged as an increasingly popular subject for historical novelists.

Examples of historical fiction exploring conflict in a war setting



[5] Marsden and Tan 1998

Reading junior historical novels from a historiographical perspective suggests that as notions of the nature of history and historical practice were increasingly challenged, new paths opened up in terms of the eras and topics deemed acceptable for the historian's, and the historical fiction writer's, attention. By extension, new paths for child readers were also deemed acceptable, some of which question rather than confirm the versions of the past presented in school curriculum, and that also write against the grain of the versions of the past encouraged in dominant national discourses around what it means to be Australian.

By the close of the 1960s it is clear that authors did not view Australia's colonial past as the only subject of historical interest. Brenda Niall notes, for example, that developing a sense of place was an important feature of Australian children's literature in the 1960s.[6], a sensibility evident in the historical fiction genre.
The work of historical fiction writers such as Max Fatchen and Reginald Ottley, provide examples of how a sense of community identity may be constructed through the choice of particular settings from small river towns to isolated outback cattle stations. And within these settings, authors place characters experiencing internal and external forms of conflict, including battles of survival in harsh environments and battles of wills with imposing adults.

Just as authors were exploring the experiences of children within different social and cultural environments, a concern with exploring Australia's social and cultural history is evident in the academic world of the 1950s and 1960s, also a time of expansion in Australia's universities. Imagining new paths for Australian history commenced with movement away from "a broader British imperial historical enterprise"[7], Teo and White noting:

> From the late 1950s onwards there was a gradual shift of attention from political and social elites to various social groups which had been disadvantaged in one way or another.[8]

This shift of attention was firmly embedded in academic history and historical fiction by the 1970s. The 1970s saw the emergence of social and cultural perspectives on the past, encouraging a variety of specialisations within academic history, including those focused on the experiences of ordinary people. Social historians sought models of interpretation to bring meaning to this approach to the past. As Anna Clark notes, it was also a time when teachers and curriculum designers increasingly emphasized the importance of relating the experiences of minority groups to students.[9]

Writing against the dominant discourses in academia and in the literary world confirmed the influence of social and political issues of the time and demonstrated the inadequacy of traditional conceptions of national identity to supply narratives relevant to Australia's increasingly culturally diverse post-World War II population.

---

[6] Niall 1988 p6
[7] Curthoys in Teo and White 2003 p26
[8] Teo and White 2003 p5
[9] Clark in Macintyre and Clark 2004 p174

During the 1980s, challenges to understanding the nature of history as an academic discipline continued. The emergence of cultural studies as a popular academic field in America brought the 'cultural turn' to the fore. In Australia and overseas, new ways of researching the past included development of new fields, such as applied history"[10], as well as looking at popular understandings and public forms of history-making in new interdisciplinary fields such as gender studies, media studies, and cultural studies.

In terms of historiography, the challenges of the lead up to the 1988 Bicentenary of the settlement/invasion of Australia demonstrated that the choices around the national story were increasingly interrogated and contested, both within the academy and beyond. As Stuart Macintyre observes, 'in 1985 an acrimonious debate broke out over how [the bicentenary] should be celebrated.' [11] Over time, indigenous individuals and organisations made it clear that the Bicentenary was not a cause for celebration, whilst others, such as the historian Geoffrey Blainey, criticized the program as being subservient to minority interest groups and as denigrating the British contribution to Australian history. At stake was how Australians were to think of themselves as a nation two hundred years on from the arrival of the British, as well as which narratives were to inform the celebrations and commemorations that expressed, and might in turn influence, a collective national identity.

Just as the junior historical fiction genre continued to develop n the 1990s, the construction of Australia's past also continued to traverse what has been increasingly challenging terrain. A critical aspect of Australian historiography in the 1990s is the so-called History Wars, the intense politicisation of ways of viewing the nation's past.

Peaking during the mid to late 1990s, the History Wars in Australia highlighted widespread concerns across the political spectrum that inadequate or inappropriate school-based history placed children at risk. Indeed, former Australian Prime Minister John Howard specifically identified the school curricula as a site where the hearts and minds of children could be won or lost in relation to national identity and national pride.[12] Such concerns are evident in the history and culture wars in other countries and continue to inform curriculum development in Australia and overseas.[13]

In the past five years, the publicly-played out vitriol of the History Wars has declined but skirmishes do erupt from time to time, as demonstrated by reactions to the work of historians Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds on the alleged militarization of Australian history and school-based history education.[14] The publication of more war-related historical novels in the *My Australian Story* series, which Kim Wilson has described as having a deliberate nationalistic purpose, indicates historical fiction for children may also be being 'militarised.' Other writers have also produced works that sit within a national identity discourse that venerates the Anzac legend.

I have little doubt that questions around the versions of the past communicated to children will continue to be debated in the twenty first century. In fact, in January this

---

[10] Macintyre 2004 p26
[11] Macintrye in Macintyre and Clark 2004 p94
[12] See McKenna 1997 p8
[13] See Clark 2006, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Macintyre and Clark 2004
[14] See, for example, Lake and Reynolds et al 2010; Ryan ANU E Press, viewed 30 April 2012; Windschuttle 2005

year, the Federal Minister for Education Christopher Pyne, appointed a two-man curriculum review panel, leaving no doubt that the Coalition government elected in November 2013 remains determined to expunge the so-called 'black armband view of Australia's history' from the new national history curriculum.[15] Implictly, children are still being positioned as vulnerable learners. Such a positioning made me wonder how children do respond to and imbibe nationalistic messages embedded in representations of the past, which are increasingly made outside the classroom, including through historical fiction, which brings me to the final section of this paper: children's voices in historiographical research

Children's responses to historical fiction

My pilot project, conducted in 2013, explored the meanings five children in their final year of primary schooling took from Sophie Masson's *My Father's War*. Interviews with the children showed the responses were mixed: three children conveyed their enjoyment of the novel, whereas two were less enthusiastic. For those children who enjoyed the novel, this seems to relate most to their interest in learning about the details of ordinary people living through World War 1 in France.

As P stated:

> I was also really (interested) to see how hard it was on these people, to see how they struggled to survive and that people had to steal food … 'cos they were going to starve or their families were going to starve.
>
> And also it seemed to be more personal, instead of where historians just write all facts...(P)

The participants brought with them a strong expectation about historical fiction: they fully expected to be informed about the past and trusted that the novel did present accurate information. The diary format used in *My Father's War* was a successful narrative strategy in engaging the child readers and connecting them emotionally to the main character. All except one participant expressed the view that the subject of war, with the attendant horrors and death, was not too distressing for children of their age. S commented that playing computer and console games means that many children of their age are not distressed by the idea of blood, suffering, and destruction. The participant who felt that the novel could be distressing thought that the level of a child's maturity was an important consideration, stating that:

> Yeah… it was just so gruesome and bloody a little bit." "It's ok if you're mature enough but a bit graphic. (K)

My research suggests that, disturbing as the conflicts in such novels may be, children appreciate realistic and detailed representations of the past, although adult gatekeepers will have a range of views over just how far such representations should be taken. A key challenge that authors comment on is the need to select aspects of the knowable past and use them to weave an entertaining and engaging story. As author Libby

---

[15] See www.smh.com.au/whre -pyne-and-the-neocons-went-wrong-20140115030v1u.html (viewed on 19 March 2014) and www.pyneonline.com.au/media/transcripts/review-of-national-curriculum (viewed 19 March 2014)

Gleeson observes, details of daily life and the characters' inner state assists in transporting readers into:

> … the world of the story. And by that act of transporting, the novelist can bring to life time past and allow the reader to make connections between that time and now.[16]

One of the points expressed in the academic literature around historical fiction is that authors feel the genre gives them the space to imagine the gaps in the record, especially the gaps relating to thoughts, feelings and motivations. Their imaginations may or may not be accurate or definitive, just as a non-fiction account may or may not be accurate or definitive, yet the impulse to render a plausible representation of the past appears to be strong.

Conclusion

The development of junior historical fiction in Australia since 1945 illuminates the inherent instability of history itself, authors employing a range of narrative strategies and exploring a diverse set of historical subjects, providing multiple perspectives on the past as they do so. My research seeks to document not only these multiple perspectives but to also place the texts within their own historic setting and within the broader field of Australian historiography.

In asking children what they think about *My Father's War*, my aim is to also enter into conversations around potential new directions for the practice of historiography, which include developing methodologies around oral historiography as in the work of Anna Clark, and in moving beyond a preoccupation with accuracy and validity in analyzing historical fiction, as suggested by historian Sarah Pinto.

> …historical novels are a crucial way in which pasts are talked about, written and lived. As such, historical novels deserve historical attention, not to demonstrate the genre's inaccuracies, inventions or 'problems', but, as historian Robert Rosenstone (2002) has suggested of filmic histories, to analyse 'how the past has been and is being told'.[17]

Perhaps these new directions will also prove to be of interest to researchers approaching historical fiction from the perspective of literature and librarianship. I welcome your questions and comments and thank you for listening.

---

[16] Gleeson in Scates 2004 p88

[17] Pinto, S 'Emotional histories and historical emotions: Looking at the past in historical novels', *Rethinking History*, Volume 14, No.2, June 2010, p200

References

Clark, Anna. 'The History Question/Correspondence', *QE*, Volume 24, 2006

Clark, Anna. *History's Children*. University of New South Wales Press: Sydney, 2008a

Clark, Anna. 'Learning about stuff outside the box', *Overland*, Volume 191, pp4-16 2008b

Clark, Anna. 'Teaching the nation's story: comparing public debates and classroom perspectives on history education in Australia and Canada', *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, Volume 41, No.6, pp745-762, 2009

Lake, Marilyn and Reynolds, Henry. *What's Wrong with Anzac? The Militarisation of Australian History*. University of New South Wales Press: Sydney, 2010

Macintyre, Stuart and Clark, Anna. *The History Wars*. Melbourne University Press: Melbourne, 2004

McKenna, Mark. 'Different perspectives on Black Armband History', *Research Paper No.5*, Issue 199-98, Parliament of Australia, Canberra, 1997

Munro, Craig, and Sheahan-Bright, Robin. *Paper Empires: a history of the book in Australia, 1946-2005*. University of Queensland Press: St Lucia, Queensland, 2006

Niall, Brenda. 'Children's Literature', *Australian Literary Studies,* Volume 13, Number 4, pp547-559, 1988

Ryan, Lyndall. ' 'Hard evidence': the debate about massacre in the Black War in Tasmania', *ANU E Press*, viewed 30 April 2012

Pinto, Sarah. 'Emotional histories and historical emotions: Looking at the past in historical novels', *Rethinking History*, Volume 14, No.2, June 2010, pp189-206

Scates, Bruce (Ed). *A Future for the Past: the State of Children's History*. History Council of New South Wales: New South Wales, 2004

Teo, Hsu-Ming and White, Richard (Ed's). Cultural History in Australia. University of New South Wales Press: Sydney, 2003

Windschuttle, Keith. 'Doctored evidence and invented incidents in Aboriginal historiography', *The Sydney Line*, pp1-12, 2005

www.smh.com.au/whre -pyne-and-the-neocons-went-wrong-20140115030v1u.html (viewed on 19 March 2014) and www.pyneonline.com.au/media/transcripts/review-of-national-curriculum (viewed 19 March 2014)

Novels

Chadwick, Doris. *John of the Sirius.* Oxford University Press: London, 1967

Chadwick, Doris. *John of Sydney Cove*. Thomas Nelson: London, 1957

Chadwick, Doris. *John and Nanbaree*. Thomas Nelson: London, 1962

Chauncy, Nan. *Tangara*. University of Queensland Press: St Lucia, Queensland, 2007

Chauncy, Nan. *Mathinna's People.* Oxford University Press: London, 1967

Fatchen, Max. *The River Kings*. Hick Smith and Sons in association with Methuen: Sydney, 1966

Marsden, John and Tan, Shaun. *The Rabbits*. Hachette Australia: Australia and New Zealand, 2011

Masson, Sophie. *My Father's War*. Scholastic Press: Lindfield, 2011

Murray, Kirsty. *Bridies Fire*. Allen and Unwin: Crows Nest, 2003

Murray, Kirsty. *Becoming Billy Dare*. Allen and Unwin: Crows Nest, 2004

Murray, Kirsty, *A Prayer for Blue Delaney*. Allen and Unwin: Crows Nest, 2005

Murray, Kirsty. *The Secret Life of Maeve Kwong*. Allen and Unwin: Crows Nest, 2005

O'Neill, Judith. *Deepwater*. Mammoth Australia: Port Melbourne, 1989

Ottley, Reginald. *Boy Alone. By the Sandhills of Yamboorah*. Harcourt, Brace and World: New York, 1966

Stow, Randolph. *Captain Midnite. The Story of a Wild Colonial Boy*. St Edmundsbury Press: Suffolk, 1984

Thorpe Clark, Mavis. *They Came South*. William Heinemann: Melbourne, 1963