

**The Construction of Youth in Australian  
Young Adult Literature  
1980-2000**

**A thesis submitted by Margaret Heuschele in  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Adolescence is an incredibly complex period of life. During this time young people are searching for and wanting to create their own unique identity, however being confronted with a plethora of roles and directions is challenging and confusing. These challenges are reflected in the vast array of young adult literature being presented to young people today. As a result young adult literature has the potential to function as scaffolding to assist teenagers in the struggles of adolescence by serving as an important source of information about the world and the people in it. Teenage novels also give young people the opportunity to try on different identities and vicariously experience consequences of actions while developing their own distinctive personality and character.

As this study reveals, the Australian young adult novel has undergone considerable developments, with 1989 serving as a milestone year in which writers and publishers turned in new directions. In general, Australian young adult novels have changed from books set predominately in rural areas, incorporating major themes of child abuse, death, friendship and survival with introverted characters aged between twelve and sixteen in the early 1980s to novels with urban settings, a large increase in books about crime, dating, drugs and mental health and sexually active, extroverted characters aged between fourteen and eighteen in the late 1990s.

To chart the progression of these changes and gain an understanding of the messages young adults receive from adolescent novels an evaluative framework was developed. The framework consists of two main sections. The first part applies to the work as a whole, obtaining data about the novel such as plot, style, setting, temporal context, use of humour,

issues within the text and ending, while the second part collects information about character demographics including gender, age, occupational status, family type, sexual orientation, relationships with family and authority figures, personality traits and outlook for character. To qualitatively and quantitatively assess the construction of youth in Australian young adult literature a random selection of 20 per cent of Australian young adult books published in each year from 1980 to 2000 were analysed using the evaluative framework, with 186 novels being studied altogether.

During the 1990s in particular, Australian young adult literature was heavily criticised for being too bleak, too dark, presenting a picture of life that was all gloom and doom. This research resoundingly dismisses this argument by showing that rather than being a negative influence on the lives of young people, Australian books for young people present a comprehensive portrayal of youth. They probe the entire gamut of teenage experiences, both the good and the bad, providing a wide range of scenarios, roles, relationships and characters for young people to explore. Therefore Australian young adult literature provides an important source of information and support for the psycho-social development of young people during the formative years of adolescence.

This research is significant because it gives hard evidence to support the promotion of a representative selection of Australian young adult novels both in the classroom and in home, school and public libraries. By establishing the available range of contemporary Australian young adult literature through this study, young adult readers, teachers and librarians can be confident in the knowledge that appropriate titles are accessible which meet the needs and interests of young people. Consequently, the substantial amount of data gathered from this

study will considerably add to the knowledge and understanding of Australian young adult novels to date and provide an excellent starting point for further research in the future.

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