



INTERNATIONAL BOARD ON BOOKS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

**iBBY**  
AUSTRALIA

**NOMINATION  
IBBY HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN AWARDS  
2024**

**COUNTRY OF NOMINATION: AUSTRALIA**

**WRITER CANDIDATE: GARY CREW**

**DOSSIER**



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**CULTURAL FUND**

## **Acknowledgements**

Dossier compiled by Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright on behalf of IBBY Australia,  
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Information contained in the dossier has also been supplied by Gary Crew and has been drawn from other bibliographical sources, including the AustLit database, and records held at the National Centre for Australian Children's Literature.

Contents of the dossier may be viewed by interested researchers and IBBY members, and is posted on the IBBY website. However, due to copyright restrictions on the **reviews and articles** by individual contributors, these cannot be copied or transmitted electronically.

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## 1. Biographical Information on the Candidate



**Gary David Crew** (23 September 1947-) was born and educated in Brisbane, Queensland, leaving school at sixteen to work as a draftsman. He attained a certificate in Engineering Drafting from the Queensland Institute of Technology in 1970 and continued to work in the field until 1973. Between 1974 and 1983 he worked as an English and history teacher at several Brisbane high schools, while also undertaking a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Queensland. In 1979 he completed a Master of Arts in postcolonial literature at UQ. Crew was appointed Head of English at Aspley High School and was later appointed to the same position at nearby Albany Creek High School. From 1990 he has worked as a freelance writer and lecturer first at the Queensland University of Technology, and since the 2000s at the University of the Sunshine Coast where he developed a number of creative

writing courses as a senior lecturer, and Professor. He is currently Emeritus Professor at USC. [Source: *AustLit*] Crew's teaching experience 'made him aware that traditional text selections were not relevant to many of his students. This made the task of encouraging close reading very difficult. He began writing novels for adolescents in the 1980s in an attempt to provide material relevant to a wider range of high school students.' [Source: *AustLit*]

His intriguingly complex postcolonial novels have garnered multiple awards. *Strange Objects* (1990) won major literary recognition in Australia – including in 1991 the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award, the Victorian Premier's Literary Award and Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year for Older Readers Award. *Angel's Gate* (1993) attracted similar critical acclaim, as joint winner CBCA Book of the Year Award 1994, along with international attention including the American Children's Book of Distinction Prize. In that same year Crew won the CBCA Picture Book of the Year Award for *First Light* illustrated by Peter Gouldthorpe. Crew was shortlisted for the USA Edgar Allen Poe Mystery Awards for *Strange Objects* in 1994 and *Angel's Gate* in 1996. Further novels have included *No Such Country* (1991), *Edward Britton* (2000), *The Diviner's Son* (2002), *The Truth About Emma* (2007) and *Voicing the Dead* (2015).

His more than 50 picture books, include the groundbreaking *Lucy's Bay* (1992) with Gregory Rogers, *First Light* (1994) with Peter Gouldthorpe, and *The Watertower* (1994), *Beneath the Surface* (2004) and *Caleb* (1996) with Steven Woolman, crossing genre boundaries between science fiction and gothic mystery. Crew also collaborated with another acclaimed artist Shaun Tan on *Memorial* (1998) and *The Viewer* (2012). Many of his picture books have introduced debut illustrators to publishing and he has mentored many collaborators. He has also worked with some of Australia's most established illustrators.

Crew has edited a number of collections and was series editor for Lothian's *After Dark* horror novellas. He has published short stories in anthologies such as *Spine-Chilling: Ten Horror Stories* (1992), *The Lottery* (1994) and *Nightmares in Paradise* (1995), and also published a collection of his own short stories, *Dark House* (1995).

Gary Crew is an outstanding writer for children and would be a highly deserving recipient of the Hans Christian Andersen Award 2024.

[See also **5. Awards and Other Distinctions p 11.**]



## 2. Portrait Photograph of the Candidate



*Photo courtesy: Quest Community Newspapers Sunshine Coast, QLD*

[See copy in **Appendix C. CD** contained in dossier.]

### 3. Statement of Candidate's Contribution

'Someone has to pave the way, to shove aside convention, and in Australia, through the nineties, it was Gary Crew.' (Roy in Tyle 2009, p 18)

**Gary Crew** has been awarded or been nominated for over fifty national and international literary awards. He is one of Australia's most awarded authors for youth, winning the Australian Children's Book of the Year four times; twice for his novels, twice for his illustrated books. As developer and Program Leader of the highly regarded Doctorate of Creative Arts (Creative Writing) at University of the Sunshine Coast, he has mentored many creators during a career in which both creative and academic achievement have combined to make him a luminary in both fields of endeavour.

#### Experimentation in Genre:

##### a) Post colonial Fiction:

From the publication of his award-winning *Strange Objects*, Crew's exploration of post colonial themes has been a distinctive aspect of his work. This was followed by later novels such as *Angel's Gate* and *No Such Country* and picture books such as *The Viewer*, *Memorial*, *The Lost Diamonds of Killiecrainkie* and *The Valley of Bones*. He has been interested in re-visiting scenes from the past and breathing new life into them; in interrogating historical truth and in identifying the marginalised voices of our historical records. He has said that 'People should be looking for absences and try to understand and close absences.' (McKenna and Neilsen, 1994, p 17) He has added that 'the issue of 'otherness is crucial to an understanding of these novels' (p 18).

He once wrote that Australia was a different place from which to write history, for '*In this country, if we would turn back to look for our past - whether it be personal or collective - we must search among the absences, the seemingly bright and airy spaces, wherein lie the illusive dust motes of memory.*' (Crew, 'The Architecture of Memory', 1992, p 154) He makes a case for the writer's capacity to unearth and articulate silences and absences, which have included our country's foundation and identity myths. His work has always been about exploding and/or exploring such national mythologies.

Another facet of his work is playing with literary genres of the past in his fictions – the Victorian melodrama in *Edward Britton* (with Phillip Neilsen) a novel based on the imprisonment of young convict boys at Point Puer, at Port Arthur in Tasmania, the romance genre and the soap opera in *Inventing Antony West*, and the gothic in *Gothic Hospital*. These were followed by the *Sam Silverthorne* series which explored Boys Own Adventure tropes via the prism of such thinking. He enjoys the concept of playing with literary history as much as with social history.

Finally, his immense contribution in *Mama's Babies* and other works is equal to that of historians of childhood such as Brenda Niall, Ian Britain and Robert Holden, who have resurrected diaries and records which offer a real taste of the Australian past. Crew's imaginative replays of these often-forgotten pasts have restored a part of our history which was threatened by extinction – the history of our children.

**b) Macabre:**

Crew's experiments with plot and characterisation in the macabre has attracted young readers to his themes of identity and alienation. Paulsen and McMullen (1998) acknowledge that his work 'is rich in symbolism and metaphor, and whatever genre Crew chooses to write in he explores important human themes such as search for identity, the mystery of life, the awe of the universe and the mortality of humankind' (p 158). [Source of quote: *AustLit*]

**c) Fantastical:**

The study of fantastical magic realism and Todorov's theories (McKenna and Neilsen, 1994, p 21) were important in Crew's evolution and he has emulated these concepts in his work.

**Groundbreaking Picture Books:**

His groundbreaking work in picture books evinces his interest in innovative design, close collaboration with both debut and established illustrators, and in complex, multi-level texts which require the application of close reading or 'looking' and critical literacy skills.

**Stylistic Experimentation:**

The fragmented text of *Strange Objects* heralded Crew's interest in playing with different forms of text, in employing multiple narrators, and in experimenting with language. This is also evinced by his picture book collaborators who have challenged traditional formats by using innovative typography (*The Watertower* and *Beneath the Surface*), collage (*Memorial*), paper engineering (*The Viewer*), comic/graphic novel format (*Tagged*), a faux-antique cover (*The Boy Who Grew into a Tree*) and many other innovations.

**Crew's work is carefully crafted and rich in literary metaphor and symbolism:**

*I tend to think of him as a craftsman – an artisan in the old sense of the word: an uncompromising master of his trade, and of his tools.*' (Eaton in Tyle 2009, p 19) For example, 'She looked very beautiful; the moonlight on her face, her dark hair out and spilling down her back, her white nightdress falling in straight folds like marble.' (*Angel's Gate*, p 1)

**Creative Non-Fiction and Faction:**

Crew's historical research has also resulted in several remarkable works of creative non-fiction, including the 'Extinction' series with Mark Wilson, *The Story Of Eva Carmichael: the wreck of the "Loch Ard"* illustrated by Paul O'Sullivan (2018), *Quetta* illustrated by Bruce Whatley (2002), *The Castaways of the Charles Eaton* illustrated by Mark Wilson (2002), *Gulliver in the South Seas* illustrated by John Burge (1995), and *In the Wake of the Mary Celeste* illustrated by Robert Ingpen (2004).

**Respect for Audience:**

Gary Crew's work demonstrates his determination to offer young readers a challenging and yet entertaining reading experience. His distinguished secondary and tertiary educational background has deeply informed his work as well. The breadth of topics, styles, formats, and genres he has tackled provide ample evidence that he is one of Australia's most influential and significant wordsmiths.

#### 4. Essays, Interviews or Articles

This dossier **contains copies** of the following **three articles** in **Appendix A**:

Mills, Alice 'Writing on the Edge: Gary Crew's Fiction' *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature*, December Vol 8, No 3, 1998, pp 25–35.

Stone, Michael 'The Ambiguity of Hesitation in Gary Crew's Strange Objects' *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature* Vol 3, Issue 1, April 1992, pp 18–27.

Tyle, Leonie 'Advocate for Children's Literature: Gary Crew' *Magpies: Talking About Books for Children* Vol 24, No 3, July 2009, pp 18–19.

#### **Key Sources:**

The following two sources have provided in-depth information about Gary Crew, some of which has been included in this dossier.

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<<https://www.ncacl.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/CrewGaryFindingAid2013.pdf>>

'Gary Crew' *AustLit: The Resource for Australian Literature*  
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<<https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/>>

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'Gary Crew Interviewed by NA Bourke' *Perilous Adventures* Issue 9.03  
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Heyde, Emma 'On Mature Reflection: Strange Objects and the Cultivation of Reflective Reading' *Children's Literature in Education* Vol 31, Issue 3, September 2000, pp 195–205.

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McKenna, Bernard and Neilsen, Philip 'Post-Colonialism, Justice and Good Stories: An Interview with Gary Crew' *Imago: New Writing* , Vol 6, No 2, July 1994, pp 14–30.

McPherson, Joanne 'Taming the Wild Child : Colonialism and Postcolonialism in Gary Crew's Angel's Gate' *Compr(om)ising Post/colonialism(s): Challenging Narratives and Practices* 2001, pp 251–260.

Mills, Alice 'A Psychoanalytic Reading of Gary Crew and Peter Gouldthorpe's First Light' *Children's Literature Matters : Proceedings of the 3rd Australian Children's Literature Association for Research Conference* edited by Robin Pope. ACLAR, 2001, pp 90–99.

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Niewenhuizen, Agnes, ed. [Interview with Gary Crew] in *The Written World: Youth and Literature* Port Melbourne, D. W. Thorpe, 1994, pp 147–154.

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Watson, Victor, ed. 'Crew, Gary (David)' in *Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* Cambridge: CUP, 2001, p 183.

Zahnleiter, Joan 'Know the Author – Gary Crew' *Magpies: Talking About Books for Children* Vol 6, No 4, September 1992, pp17–19.

**[See *AustLit* for extensive listing of articles and reviews.]**

**[See also list of reviews of 5 books submitted, p 27.]**

## 5. Awards and other Distinctions

### International Awards Arranged per Award Category:

#### INTERNATIONAL AWARDS

##### Edgar Allen Poe Mystery Award, USA:

- **1996 Shortlisted** *Angel's Gate*
- **1994 Shortlisted** *Strange Objects*

##### Hungry Minds' Review, US Children's Book of Distinction:

- **1994** *Angel's Gate*

##### IBBY Honour List:

- **1996** Peter Gouldthorpe for *First Light* written by Gary Crew

##### International Youth Library, White Ravens Awards, Germany:

- **2012** *Damon*
- **2003** Special Mention: *Old Ridley*
- **1998** Special Mention: *Tagged*
- **1997** Special Mention: *Caleb*

##### The Royal Geographic Society Whitley Award:

- **2004** *The Extinction Series*

##### United States School Library Association Best Book of the Year:

- **1997** *The Watertower*

#### AUSTRALIA

#### AWARDS FOR PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENT

- **2006** awarded a \$10,000 National Australian Learning and Teaching Council Carrick Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning (equivalent to the current Outstanding Learning and Teaching Awards) for 'Leadership in the creation and ongoing development of a professionally productive Creative Writing department in a new regional university'.
- **2006** awarded the Vice Chancellor's Medal for Outstanding University of Southern Queensland Researcher.
- **2010** awarded Outstanding Alumnus of the Year: Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, USC, the endorsement reading (in part): 'Not only does Gary have an

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extraordinary talent for writing, he is also a highly acclaimed academic, responsible for establishing the Creative Writing department at USC.’

- **2015** nominated for an AQT (Advanced Quality Teaching Award) for ‘encouraging students to achieve success by demonstrating it is possible to do so through the publication of his own works. His experience and knowledge in the (publishing) industry is invaluable to Creative Writing students’.

## **AUSTRALIA**

### **CHILDREN’S & YA BOOK AWARDS**

#### **Australian Awards Arranged per Award Category:**

##### **Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature Children’s Literature Award:**

- **1994** National Children’s Book Award: *Angel’s Gate*

##### **Australian Book Award:**

- **1991** *Angel’s Gate*

##### **Aurealis Awards for Excellence in Australian Speculative Fiction, Children’s Division, Short Fiction:**

- **2013 Short Listed** *In The Beech Forest.*
- **2013 Short Listed** *The Boy Who Grew into a Tree*
- **2005 Shortlisted** *The Mystery of Eilean Mor*
- **2004 Winner** *Beneath the Surface*
- **2002** Honourable Mention *Old Ridley*

##### **Australian Publishers Association (APA) Book Design Awards – Best Designed Children’s Fiction Book:**

- **2016 Shortlisted** Ryan Pemo *The Visions of Ichabod X* written by Gary Crew

##### **Australian Wilderness Society Award for Children’s Writing:**

- **2009 Nominated** *Cat on the Island*
- **2004 Winner** *The Extinction Trilogy*

##### **Books I Love Best Yearly (Bilby) Award – Early Readers:**

- **1995** *The Watertower*

##### **Children’s Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Picture Book of the Year Award:**

- **1999 Honour Book:** *Memorial*
- **1994 Winner** *First Light*
- **1995 Winner** *The Watertower*
- **1992 Shortlisted** *Lucy’s Bay*



**Children’s Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Book of the Year: Older Readers**

**Award:**

- **1994 Joint Winner** *Angel’s Gate*.
- **1991 Winner** *Strange Objects*

**Children’s Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Notable Books:**

- **2011** CBCA Notable Book: *Serpent’s Tale*
- **2005** *The Mystery of Eilean Mor*
- **2005** *Young Murphy*
- **2004** *In the Wake of the Mary Celeste*
- **2004** *I Saw Nothing*
- **2003** *The Diviner’s Son*
- **2001** *Edward Britton*
- **1999** *In My Father’s Room*
- **1998** *Troy Thompson’s Poetry Book*
- **1998** *Mama’s Babies*
- **1997** *Tagged*
- **1996** *Bright Star*
- **1995** *Gulliver in the South Seas*
- **1995** *Lost Diamonds of Killiecrankie*
- **1994** *Caleb*
- **1992** *The Blue Feather*
- **1991** *The Viewer*
- **1991** *Troy Thompson’s Prose Folio*

**Children’s Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Crichton Award for New Illustrators:**

- **2007 Shortlisted** Aaron Hill *Automaton* written by Gary Crew
- **2006 Winner** Jeremy Geddes *The Mystery of Eilean Mor* written by Gary Crew
- **2002 Shortlisted** Marc McBride *The Kraken* written by Gary Crew
- **1998 Joint Winner** Shaun Tan *The Viewer* written by Gary Crew

**Ditmar Awards:**

- **1998 Shortlisted** Shaun Tan for *The Viewer*

**Ned Kelly Award for Crime Writing:**

- **2002 Shortlisted** *Edward Britton*
- **1997 Winner** *The Well*

**NSW Premier’s Literary Awards, Patricia Wrightson Prize for Children’s Literature:**

- **2005 Shortlisted** for *Beneath the Surface*

**New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards, Ethel Turner Prize:**

- 1991 Winner *Strange Objects*

**Queensland Premier's Literary Awards (later Queensland Literary Awards):**

- 2000 Shortlisted *Memorial*

**Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Young Adult Fiction:**

- 1991 Winner *Strange Objects*

**Western Australian Premier's Book Awards:**

- 1998 Shortlisted *The Blue Feather*

**The Wilderness Society Environment Award for Children's Writing:**

- 2004 *The Extinction Series*

**YABBA Young Australian Readers Award:**

- 1995 Shortlisted *The Watertower*

**International and Australian Awards Arranged per Year:**

2016 Shortlisted Ryan Pemo Australian Publishers Association (APA) Book Design Awards

– Best Designed Children's Fiction Book *The Visions of Ichabod X* written by Gary Crew

2013 Short Listed Aurealis Awards: *In The Beech Forest*.

2013 Short Listed Aurealis Awards: *The Boy Who Grew into a Tree*

2012 IYL White Ravens Award (Germany): *Damon*

2011 CBCA Notable Book: *Serpent's Tale*

2009 Nominated for Australian Wilderness Society Award: *Cat on the Island*

2007 Shortlisted CBCA Crichton Award: Aaron Hill *Automaton* written by Gary Crew

2006 Winner CBCA Crichton Award: Jeremy Geddes *The Mystery of Eilean Mor* written by Gary Crew

2005 Shortlisted Aurealis Award for Speculative Fiction: *The Mystery of Eilean Mor*

2005 CBCA Notable Book: *The Mystery of Eilean Mor*

2005 CBCA Notable Book: *Young Murphy*

2005 Shortlisted New South Wales Premier's Award: *Beneath the Surface*

2004 Winner Aurealis Award: *Beneath the Surface*

2004 Notable Australian Children's Book: *In the Wake of the Mary Celeste*

2004 The Wilderness Society Environment Award for Children's Writing: *The Extinction Series*

2004 The Royal Geographic Society Whitley Award: *The Extinction Series*

2004 CBCA Notable Book: *I Saw Nothing*

2003 CBCA Notable Book: *The Diviner's Son*

2003 White Ravens Award (Germany) Special Mention: *Old Ridley*

2002 Aurealis Sci Fi and Fantasy Awards, Honourable Mention: *Old Ridley*

2002 Shortlisted for the Ned Kelly Crime Fiction Award: *Edward Britton*

2002 Shortlisted CBCA Crichton Award: Marc McBride *The Kraken* written by Gary Crew

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2001 CBCA Notable Book: *Edward Britton*  
 1999 CBCA Picture Book of the Year, Honour Book: *Memorial*  
 1999 CBCA Notable Book: *In My Father's Room*  
 1998 White Ravens Award (Germany) Special Mention: *Tagged*  
 1998 CBCA Notable Book: *Troy Thompson's Poetry Book*  
 1998 CBCA Notable Book: *Mama's Babies*  
 1998 Joint Winner CBCA Crichton Award: Shaun Tan: *The Viewer*  
 1998 Shortlisted WA Premier's Award: *The Blue Feather*  
 1997 White Ravens Award (Germany) Special Mention: *Caleb*  
 1997 Ned Kelly Award for Crime Writing: *The Well*  
 1997 United States School Library Association Book of the Year: *The Water Tower*  
 1997 CBCA Notable Book: *Tagged*.  
 1996 CBCA Notable Book: *Bright Star*  
 1996 Shortlisted Edgar Allen Poe Fiction Award, USA: *Angel's Gate*  
 1995 CBCA Notable Book: *Gulliver in the South Seas*  
 1995 Shortlisted for the Yabba Children's Choice Award: *The Watertower*  
 1995 CBCA Notable Book: *Lost Diamonds of Killiecrankie*  
 1995 Bilby Award for *The Watertower*  
 1995 CBCA Picture Book of the Year Award *The Watertower*  
 1994 Edgar Allen Poe Mystery Fiction Award USA Winner: *Strange Objects*  
 1994 CBCA Book of the Year: Older Readers (Joint Winner) *Angel's Gate*  
 1994 Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature Children's Literature Award: *Angel's Gate*  
 1994 Hungry Minds' Review, US Children's Book of Distinction: *Angel's Gate*  
 1994 Notable Australian Children's Book: *Caleb*  
 1994 CBCA Picture Book of the Year: *First Light*  
 1992 CBCA Notable Book: *The Blue Feather*  
 1992 Shortlisted CBCA Picture Book of the Year: *Lucy's Bay*  
 1991 CBCA Notable Book: *The Viewer*  
 1991 CBCA Notable Book: *Troy Thompson's Prose Folio*  
 1991 CBCA Book of the Year: *Strange Objects*  
 1991 Victorian Premier's Award: *Strange Objects*  
 1991 New South Wales Premier's Award: *Strange Objects*  
 1991 Australian Book Award: *Angel's Gate*

## 6. Complete Bibliography

### PICTURE BOOKS:

2018 *The Story of Eva Carmichael: the wreck of the "Loch Ard"* written by Gary Crew; [illustrated by Paul O'Sullivan] Harbour Publishing House.

2018 *Leaving the Lyrebird Forest* [with Julian Laffan] Lothian, Hachette.

2016 *Timing the Machine* [with Paul O'Sullivan] Harbour Publishing House

2015 *The Blue Feather* [with Michael O'Hara] Hachette. Sydney.

2015 *The Visions of Ichabod X* [with Paul O'Sullivan] Harbour Publishing House. Sydney.

2014 *The Cuckoo* [with Naomi Turvey] Ford Street Publishing.

2012 *The Boy Who Grew Into a Tree* [with Ross Watkins] Penguin.

2012 *In The Beech Forest* [with Den Scheer] Ford Street.

2012 *The Viewer.* [with Shaun Tan] Lothian Books Melbourne.

2012 *The Kraken* [with Mark McBride] Better Books, Sydney.

2012 *Bright Star* [with Anne Spudvillas] Better Books, Sydney.

2012 *Old Ridley* [with Mark McBride] Better Books, Sydney.

2011 *Damon* [with Aaron Hill], Hachette.

2011 *Troy Thompson's Excellent Peotry Book* [new edition], Illustrated by Craig Smith. Better Books.

2011 *Troy Thompson's Excellent Peotry Book* [new edition], Illustrated by Craig Smith. Better Books.

2010 *The Serpent's Tale* [with Matt Ottley], Lothian, Hachette.

2009 *Finding Home*, [with Suzy Boyer] Ford Street.

2008 *Cat on the Island*, [with Gillian Warden] Angus & Robertson.

2006 *Stolen Children of Quentaris* Lothian.

2006 *Automaton* [with Aaron Hill], Lothian.

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2005 *The Lantern* [with Bruce Whatley], Hachette.

2005 *Young Murphy* [with Bruce Whatley], Lothian.

2005 *The Mystery of Eilean Mor* [with Jeremy Geddes], Lothian.

2005 *Pig on the Titanic* [with Bruce Whatley], Harper Collins.

2004 *In the Wake of the Mary Celeste* [with Robert Ingpen], Lothian.

2004 *I Said Nothing; the Extinction of the Paradise Parrot* [with Mark Wilson], South Melbourne Vic., Lothian Books.

2004 *Beneath the Surface* [with Steven Woolman], Hodder.

2003 *I Saw Nothing: the Extinction of the Thylacine* [with Mark Wilson], South Melbourne Vic., Lothian Books.

2003 *I Did Nothing: the Extinction of the Gastric-Brooding Frog* [with Mark Wilson], South Melbourne Vic., Lothian Books.

2002 *Quetta* [with Bruce Whatley], Lothian.

2002 *The Castaways of the Charles Eaton* [with Mark Wilson], Lothian.

2002 *Old Ridley* [with Marc McBride], Hodder.

2001 *Arno the Garbo* [with Craig Smith], Lothian.

2001 *The Rainbow* [with Greg Rogers], Lothian.

2001 *The Kraken* [with Marc McBride], Lothian.

2000 *Valley of Bones* [with Mark Wilson], Lothian.

2000 *In My Father's Room* [with Anne Marie Scott], Hodder.

2000 *Gino the Genius* [with James Cattell], Lothian.

1999 *Leo the Lion Tamer* [with Leigh Hobbs], Lothian.

1999 *Troy Thompson's Radical Prose Folio* [with Craig Smith], Lothian.

1998 *Memorial* [with Shaun Tan], Lothian.

1998 *Troy Thompson's Excellent Poetry Book* [with Craig Smith], Lothian.

1997 *Tagged* [with Steven Woolman], Era.

1996 *Bright Star* [with Ann Spudvillas], Lothian.

1996 *The Blue Feather* (with Michael O'Hara), Reed.

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1996 *Caleb* [with Steven Woolman] Era Publications.  
1995 *The Figures of Julian Ashcroft* [with Hans de Hass], UQP.  
1995 *Gulliver in the South Seas* [with John Burge], Lothian.  
1994 *The Watertower* [with Steve Woolman], Era [reprinted 10 times]  
1994 *The Lost Diamonds of Killiecrankie* [with Peter Gouldthorpe], Lothian.  
1994 *First Light* [with Peter Gouldthorpe], Lothian.  
1992 *Lucy's Bay* [with Greg Rogers], Jam Roll Press, UQP.  
1992 *Tracks* [with Greg Rogers], Lothian.

### **YA NOVELS:**

2015 *Voicing the Dead*. Ford St. Melbourne.  
2015 25th Anniversary Edition of *Strange Objects*. Introduction by Shaun Tan. Hachette. Sydney.  
2007 *The Truth About Emma*, Hachette.  
2007 *Sam Silverthorne: Victory*, Hachette.  
2006 *Sam Silverthorne: Menace*, Hachette.  
2006 *Stolen Children of Quentaris* Lothian.  
2005 *Sam Silverthorne: Quest*, Hachette.  
2005 *The Lacemaker's Daughter*, Pan MacMillan.  
2005 *The Plague of Quentaris*, Lothian.  
2002 *The Diviner's Son*, Pan MacMillan.  
2001 *Gothic Hospital*, Lothian.  
2001 *Cruel Nest*, Lothian.  
2000 *Edward Britton* (with Philip Neilsen), Lothian.  
1999 *Dear Venny, Dear Saffron* (with Libby Hathorn), Lothian.  
1998 *Mama's Babies*, Lothian.  
1994 *Inventing Antony West*, UQP.  
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- 1993 *Angel's Gate*, Hodder.
- 1991 *No Such Country*, Hodder.
- 1990 *Strange Objects*, Hodder.
- 1986 *The House of Tomorrow*, Hodder.
- 1986 *The Inner Circle*, Hodder.

**JUNIOR FICTION:**

- 2015 *The Windmill*, Illustrated by Steven Woolman. Era Publications, Adelaide.
- 2014 *Cornfield*, Illustrated by Aaron Hill. Windy Hollow, Melbourne.
- 2006 *The Saw Doctor* Illustrated by David Cox. National Museum of Australia Press.
- 1999 *The Bread of Heaven*, Lothian.
- 1998–1999 *The Windmill Trilogy*, Era Publications.
- 1999 *The Survivors*, Illustrated by Steven Woolman. Era Publications.
- 1999 *The Grandstand*, Illustrated by Steven Woolman. Lothian.
- 1999 *The Cave*, Illustrated by Steven Woolman. Era Publications.
- 1998 *The Fort*, Illustrated by Greg Rogers. Lothian.
- 1995 *The Barn*, Illustrated by Tom Jellett. Lothian.
- 1996 *The Well*, Illustrated by Narelle Oliver. Lothian.
- 1996 *The Bent-Back Bridge* Illustrated by Greg Rogers, Lothian.

**EDITED SHORT STORY ANTHOLOGIES:**

- 1997 *Crew's 13* (compiling editor and contributor) ABC.
- 1997 *Force of Evil* (anthology of the author's own work) Reed.
- 1996 *Dark House* (compiling editor and contributor) Hodder.

**SHORT STORIES IN COLLECTIONS & MAGAZINES:**

- 2015 'The one they sat alone a valediction; Demanding mourning' *Social Alternatives* Vol 34, No 3, pp 67–8.
- 2015 'Dr Lovechild Regrets' in *Rich and Rare* edited by Paul Collins. Ford St, Melbourne.
- 2015 'A Step Behind' and 'The Staircase' in *Story Wizards* Macmillan (in conjunction with the Department of Education, Malaysia).

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- 2013 'Fossils' *Social Alternatives* Vol 32, No 4, pp 47–49.
- 2012 'Amanita Im', P. Collins. *Trust Me Too*. Ford Street, Melbourne.
- 2007 'The Last Cabinet', *Top Stories Volume 2*, Heinemann.
- 2003 '[Title?]' in *It's Alive* [Compilation], National Museum of Australia Publication.
- 2001 'Their ghosts may be heard: a response to Ernest Favenc's novel Marooned in Australia', in *Storykeepers* edited by Marion Halligan. Duffy & Snellgrove.
- 2000 'Flight Path', in P. Neilsen (ed) *Difficult Love*, University Central Qld Press.
- 2000 'The Staircase' and 'A Step Behind', S. Bernhardt (ed) *Story Wizards*, Macmillan, Sydney.
- 1999 'Another Rumour from the Wasteland', P. Collins (ed) *Rumours from the Wasteland*, Hodder.
- 1998 'Self Portrait', G. Crew (ed) *Force of Evil*, Reed.
- 1998 'Dear Mrs Campbell', in *School's Out! Learning to be a writer in Queensland: an anthology in six lessons* edited by Colin Symes and Robyn Sheahan-Bright QUT, 1998, pp 17–23.
- 1995 'The Staircase' in *Dark House: Stories compiled by the Master of the Macabre* edited by Gary Crew. Mammoth.
- 1995 'A Breeze off the Esplanade', in *Nightmares in Paradise* edited by Robyn Sheahan. UQP, pp 1–9.
- 1994 'Madonna of the Streets' in *Family: a collection of short stories* compiled by Agnes Niewenhuizen. Mammoth Australia.
- 1994 'Face to Stony Face', in *The Lottery; nine science fiction stories* compiled by Lucy Sussex. Omnibus Books.
- 1992 'Sleeping over at Lola's' in *Spine-Chilling: Ten Horror Stories* edited by Penny Matthews. Omnibus Books.
- 1991 'The Last Cabinet' in *The Blue Dress* compiled by Libby Hathorn. Mammoth Australia.

**PUBLICATIONS ON CD/AUDIO TAPE:**

- 2005 *The Lace Maker's Daughter*, Audio Books.
- 2003 *The Diviner's Son*, Bolinda Audio Books.
- 2001 *Edward Britton*, Bolinda Audio Books.
- 2000 *Strange Objects*, Bolinda Audio Books.
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1999 *Angel's Gate* [read by Stig Wemyss], Bolinda Audio Books.

1998 *Crew's 13* [read by Richard Roxburgh], ABC Studios.

1998 *The Blue Feather*, Louis Braille.

1995 *Angel's Gate*, Louis Braille.

1995 'The Watertower' in *Winners* [read by Roger Cardwell], ABC Audio.

### **ADULT FICTION:**

2012 *The Architecture of Song*, Fourth Estate.

2009 *The Children's Writer*, Fourth Estate.

### **NON-FICTION:**

2005 *Me and My Dog*, Lothian.

### **SELECTED REFEREED JOURNAL ARTICLES:**

Crew, G. 'Voicing the Dead' *TEXT Creative Writing as Research*, Special Issue No. 27, October, 2014.

Crew, G. 'Whose Image, whose Story? Investigating the Authenticity of Colonial Reportage' *The International Journal of the Image* Vol 2, No 4, 2012, pp 61–71.

Crew, G. & Watkins, R. 'Collecting Her' *TEXT Special Issue Website Series* Vol. 15, 2012, pp 1–11.

Crew, Gary '(Gary Crew looks at Fiction, Nonfiction and the Limits of Faction)' *Magpies : Talking About Books for Children* Vol 19, No 2, May 2004, p 8.

Crew, G. 'Ideas behind the writing of the creative nonfiction novel *Strange Objects*' *TEXT Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, No 1, April 2000.  
<<http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue1/crew.htm>>

Crew, G. 'Museum Piece', *TEXT Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, Special Issue No 15, October 2012.  
<Available: <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue15/content.htm>>

Crew, G. 'The Image of the Atomic Bomb's Mushroom Cloud in Picture Books for Children' *Altitude*, Vol 10, 2012, pp 1–13.

Crew, G. 'The Architecture of Song', *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, Special Issue No 7, October 2010.

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Not available: <<http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue7/content.htm>>

### **SELECTED CONFERENCE ADDRESSES:**

Crew, G. 'Parallel Narratives' Historical Novel Society Australasia. Swinburne University. 8 – 9 September, 2017.

Crew, G. 'The Multiple Narrative of Jack Ireland: Castaway' IABA Asia-Pacific Conference Central Qld University. 23 July 2017.

Crew, G. Plenary: 'The Power of Reading: Introducing Innovative Narrative Genres in the Classroom' PETTA State Conference Brisbane. 2 September 2017.

Crew, G. Keynote: 'Writing the Australian Coast: Shipwrecks, Castaways and the Origins of a Nation' Stories of Place Conference: Linking History and Geography through Story. History Teachers Association of Western Australia in Association with the Shipwrecks Gallery, Fremantle and the Western Australian Museum. 22 July 2016.

Crew, G. 'The Castaway in Literature' Australian Literacy Educators Association. (ALEA. National Conference. Canberra) July 2015.

Crew, G. Plenary: 'Reading the Visual Text'. Primary English Teaching Association of Australia (PETAA. Queensland State Conference). Novotel, Brisbane, May 2015.

Crew, G. 'Creating the Illustrated Book'. Australian Literacy Educators Association. (ALEA. State Conference. Canberra. 2014.

Crew, G. 'Reading the Ficto-critical text: The Wreck of the Charles Eaton'. The First International Librarians Symposium. The Southport School. September 2015.

Crew, G. 'The Book, the Reader, the writer, the teacher.' Keeping Books Alive Conference. Melbourne. May 2014.

Crew, G. & Archer, C. 'Using Practice Led Research: Eco-critical Questions posed by tracking citations in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*' Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association (AULLA) National Conference. U. Q. May 2013.

Crew, G. 'The Historical Novel and the Impossibility of the Seamless Narrative', Constructing the Past: Australian History Association Conference. 2009.

### **FILMED INTERVIEWS:**

'Interviews With 10 Australian Authors, Ch 6: Gary Crew's Strange Objects' *ABC Education* 30 November 2021.

<<https://www.abc.net.au/education/interviews-with-10-australian-authors-ch-6-gary-crews-strange/13581804>>

*The Gary Crew Video* Gary Crew, (dir. Mark Waters) Crows Nest: Insight Profile, 2000 *film/TV*

*Meet Gary Crew* Sue Wighton\_(interviewer), Brisbane: Queensland Department of Education, 1991 *film/TV interview*.

*Australian Literature Gary Crew*, (dir. Les Vickers) Brisbane : Queensland Distance Education College, Media Centre, 1990 *film/TV interview*.

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## 7. Translated Editions

### *The Viewer*

- 2023 *The Viewer* to be published in China.
- 2012 *The Viewer*. [with Shaun Tan] Elliot Edizioni (Italy).
- 2011 El Visor, [with Shaun Tan] traducción Carles Andreu y Albert Vitó. *The Viewer*. Spanish. Barbara Fiore Editora, Spain. (World)
- 2003 English Language Overseas; Simply Read Books (Canada)
- Chinese simplified translation; Beijing Poplar Culture Project Co Ltd (China)
- 2006 Chinese traditional translation; Muses Publishing House (World excluding China)
- 2005 *Guan xiang jing / Gelei Kelao wen; Chen Zhiyong tu ; Jian Yijun yi*  
*觀像鏡 / 葛雷.克勞文 ; 陳志勇圖 ; 簡怡君譯 The Viewer Chinese* (Hui ben guan 25 Series) Taipei: Liao si chu ban you xian gong si.

### *The Watertower*

- 2023 New edition of *The Watertower* to be published by Hachette.
- 2011 *The Watertower*, [with Steven Woolman] Crocodile Books, USA.
- 2003 *Yr hen dŵr / Gary Crew, Steven Woolman; addasiad Elin Meek. The Watertower*. Welsh. Llanysul: Gwasg Gomer.
- 1997 *The Watertower*, Crocodile Books, New York
- 1996 *The Watertower*, Agertofts Forlag, Denmark.

### *Memorial*

- 2023 *Memorial* to be published in China.
- 2011 *Memorial* [with Shaun Tan] Elliot Edizioni Italy.
- 2003 *Memorial*, Simply Read Books, USA.

### *The end of the line*

- 2008 *The end of the line / by Gary Crew; illustrated by Gregory Rogers; cover illustration by Serg Souleiman; librarian reviewer Marci Peschke; reading consultant Elizabeth Stedem. (Shade Books) Minneapolis, Stone Arch Books.*

### *Sam Silverthorne Series*

- 2007 *Sam Silverthorne: Victory*, Pestlazzi, Germany.
- 2006 *Sam Silverthorne: Menace*, Pestlazzi, Germany.
- 2005 *Sam Silverthorne: Quest*, Pestlazzi, Germany.

### *Troy Thompson's Excellent Poetry Book*

- 2004 *Troy Thompson's Excellent Poetry Book*, Kane Miller, USA.

### *Dear Venny, Dear Saffron*

- 2003 *Lieber Venny - liebe Saffron / Gary Crew & Libby Hathorn; aus dem australischen Englisch von Alexandra Ernst und Michael Stehle. German edition. Stuttgart, verl Urachhaus, Austria.*

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- 2000 *Dear Venny, Dear Saffron*, Floris, Scotland.

### ***The Well***

- 1999 *The Well*, Hachette Livre, Paris, France.
- 1999 *The Well*, Franklin Watts, London.
- 1996 *The Well*, Elex Media, Jakarta, Indonesia.

### ***The Bent-Back Bridge***

- 1999 *The Bent-Back Bridge*, Franklin Watts, London.
- 1996 *The Bent-Back Bridge*, Elex Media, Jakarta, Indonesia.
- 1995 *The Bent-Back Bridge*, G&G, Vienna.

### ***Mama's Babies***

- 2002 *Mama's babies / Gary Crew* North American edition. Toronto, Ontario, Annick Press.
- 1999 *Mama's Babies*, Mondaroori, Italy.
- 1999 *Mama's Babies*, Annick Press, Canada
- 1999 *Anglamakerskans dotter / Gary Crew*; oversattning Ingrid Warne. *Mama's babies*. Swedish. Stockholm, B. WahlstromsBokforlag.

### ***Angel's Gate***

- 1998 *De bushkinderen / Gary Crew Angel's Gate*. Dutch. Antwerp, Houtekiet, 2001,
- 1994 *Angel's Gate*, Simon and Schuster, New York.

### ***The Barn***

- 1998 *The Barn*, Elex Media, Jakarta, Indonesia.
- 1997 *Bright Star*, Kane Miller, New York.

### ***Tracks***

- 1995 *Tracks*, Gareth Stevens. Milwaukee.

### ***First Light***

- 1995 *First Light*, Gareth Stevens, Milwaukee.

### ***No Such Country***

- 1993 *No Such Country*, Simon and Schuster, New York.

### ***Strange Objects***

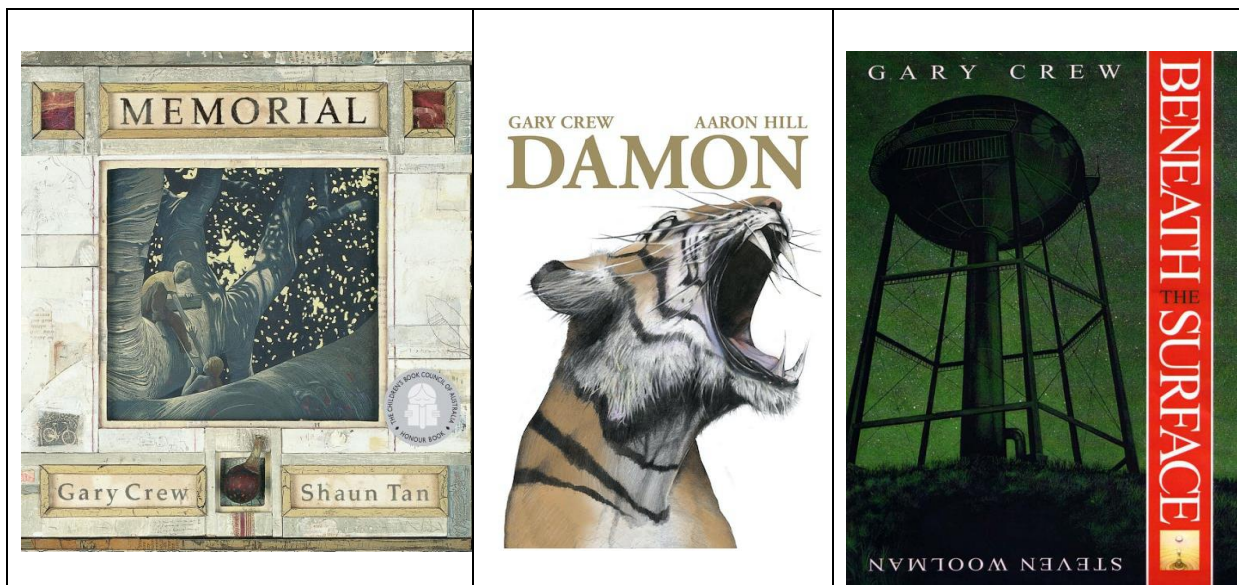
- Film Option Agreement and Assignment; Light Corporation Pty Ltd
- 1990 *Strange Objects*, The Holland Publishing Company, The Netherlands.
- 1990 *Strange Objects*, Simon and Schuster, New York.

### ***The Inner Circle***

- 1986 *The Inner Circle*, New Windmill. (Heinemann Educational) London.

## 8. Ten Most Important Books by the Candidate

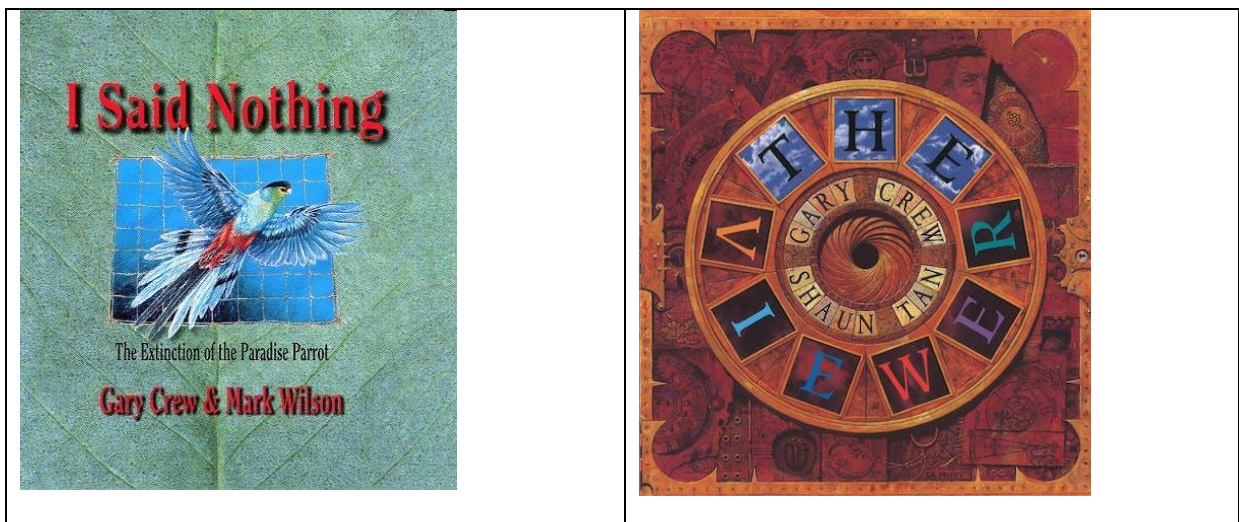
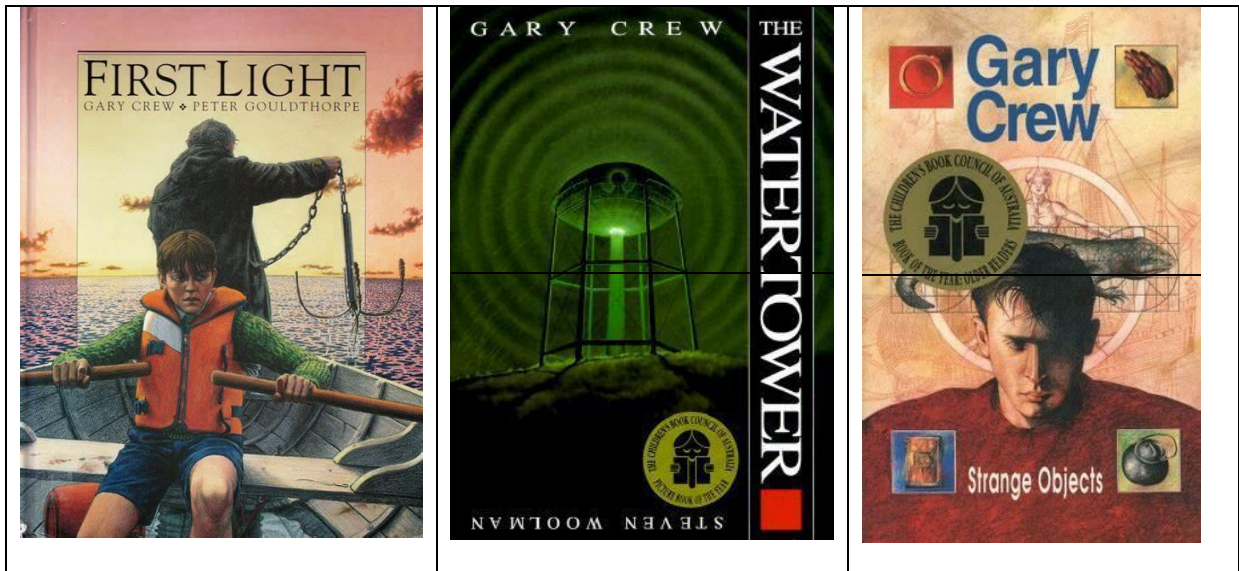
- *Strange Objects*, Sydney, Hachette Australia, 2011; Sydney, Scepter, 2001; Sydney, Hachette Children's Books, 2003; Port Melbourne, VIC., Mandarin, 1994; Port Melbourne, VIC., Mammoth, 1991; Hodder, Port Melbourne, VIC., William Heinemann, 1990.
- *Angel's Gate*, Sydney, Hachette Australia, 2011; Port Melbourne, VIC., Mammoth, 1993; Port Melbourne, VIC., William Heinemann, 1993.
- *First Light* Illustrated by Peter Gouldthorpe. Port Melbourne, VIC., Lothian, 1995, 1993.
- *The Watertower* Illustrated by Steven Woolman. Sydney, Hachette Australia, 2023; Flinders Park, SA, Era Publications, 1997, 1994. [Reprinted 10 times.]
- *Memorial* Illustrated by Shaun Tan. Sydney, Hachette Australia, 2016, 2015; Port Melbourne, VIC., Lothian, 1998.
- *I Said Nothing: the Extinction of the Paradise Parrot* Illustrated by Mark Wilson. South Melbourne VIC., Lothian Books, 2003.
- *Beneath the Surface* Illustrated by Steven Woolman. Sydney, Hodder Headline, 2005, 2004.
- *Damon* Illustrated by Aaron Hill. Sydney, Lothian, Hachette Australia, 2011.
- *The Viewer* Illustrated by Shaun Tan. Sydney, Hachette Australia, 2020; Sydney, Hachette Australia, 2012; Port Melbourne, VIC., Lothian Books, 2003; Port Melbourne, VIC., Lothian Books, 1997.
- *The Story of Eva Carmichael: the wreck of the "Loch Ard"* Illustrated by Paul O'Sullivan. Ulladulla, NSW, Harbour Publishing House, 2018.





## 9. List of Five Books Sent to Jurors

- *Strange Objects*, Sydney, Hachette Australia, 2011; Sydney, Scepter, 2001; Sydney, Hachette Children's Books, 2003; Port Melbourne, Vic., Mandarin, 1994; Port Melbourne, VIC., Mammoth, 1991; Hodder, Port Melbourne, VIC., William Heinemann, 1990.
- *First Light* Illustrated by Peter Gouldthorpe. Port Melbourne, VIC., Lothian, 1995, 1993.
- *The Watertower* Illustrated by Steven Woolman. Sydney, Hachette Australia, 2023; Flinders Park, SA, Era Publications, 1997, 1994. [Reprinted 10 times.]
- *I Said Nothing: the Extinction of the Paradise Parrot* Illustrated by Mark Wilson. South Melbourne VIC., Lothian Books, 2003.
- *The Viewer* Illustrated by Shaun Tan. Sydney, Hachette Australia, 2020; Sydney, Hachette Australia, 2012; Port Melbourne, VIC., Lothian Books, 2003; Port Melbourne, VIC., Lothian Books, 1997.



## 10. Published Reviews of Works

The following is a list of **ten reviews**, two of each of five books, copies of which are contained in this dossier in **Appendix B**:

**Crew, Gary *Strange Objects*, Sydney, Hachette Australia, 2011; Sydney, Scepter, 2001; Sydney, Hachette Children's Books, 2003; Port Melbourne, VIC., Mandarin, 1994; Port Melbourne, VIC., Mammoth, 1991; Hodder, Port Melbourne, VIC., William Heinemann, 1990.**

‘[Review] *Devil's Own, The* (Deborah Lisson – a two novel comparison study with Gary Crew's *Strange Objects*)’ *The Literature Base* Vol 1, No 3, August 1990, pp 26–28.  
Freeman, Pamela ‘Essay: *Strange Objects*’ *Reading Australia* 2014  
<<https://readingaustralia.com.au/essays/strange-objects/>>

**First Light Illustrated by Peter Gouldthorpe. Port Melbourne, VIC., Lothian, 1995, 1993.**

Hunter, Linnet ‘[Untitled review: *First Light*]’ *Viewpoint: On Books for Young Adults* Vol 1, No 4, Summer 1993, p 38.  
Cheetham, Mandy ‘[Untitled review: *First Light*]’ *Magpies: Talking About Books for Children* Vol 9, No 4, September 1994, p 32.

**The Watertower Illustrated by Steven Woolman. Flinders Park, SA, Era Publications, 1997, 1994. [Reprinted 10 times.]**

Jameyson, Karen ‘*News from Down Under Turning Heads*’ *Horn Book Magazine* March/April 1998, pp 243–6. [This review of two Australian works includes coverage of *The Watertower*]  
‘[Review: *The Watertower*]’ *Kirkus Reviews* January 1, 1998  
<<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/gary-crew/the-watertower/>>

**I Said Nothing: the Extinction of the Paradise Parrot Illustrated by Mark Wilson. South Melbourne VIC., Lothian Books, 2003.**

Davey, Graham ‘[Untitled review: *I Said Nothing: the Extinction of the Paradise Parrot*]’ *Reading Time: The Journal of the Children's Book Council of Australia* February Vol 48, No 1, February 2004, pp 31–32.  
Barnard, Neville ‘[Untitled review: *I Said Nothing: the Extinction of the Paradise Parrot*]’ *Magpies: Talking About Books for Children* Vol 19, No 1, March 2004, p 31.

**The Viewer Illustrated by Shaun Tan. Sydney, Hachette Australia, 2020; Sydney, Hachette Australia, 2012; Port Melbourne, VIC., Lothian Books, 2003; Port Melbourne, VIC., Lothian Books, 1997.**

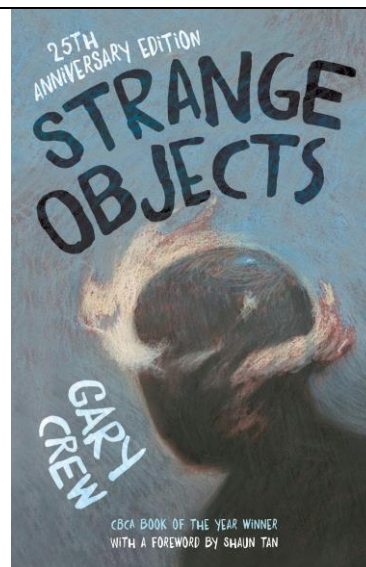
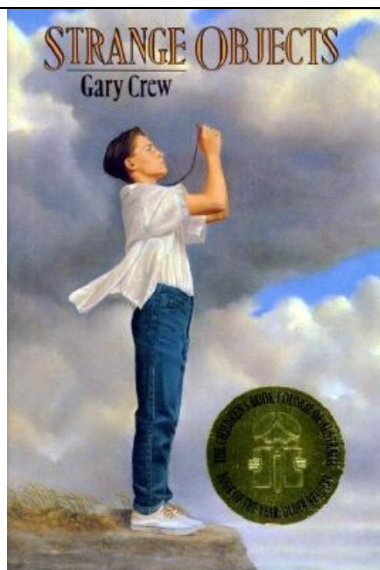
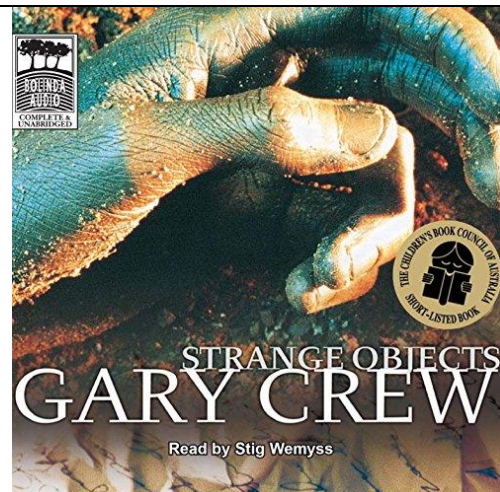
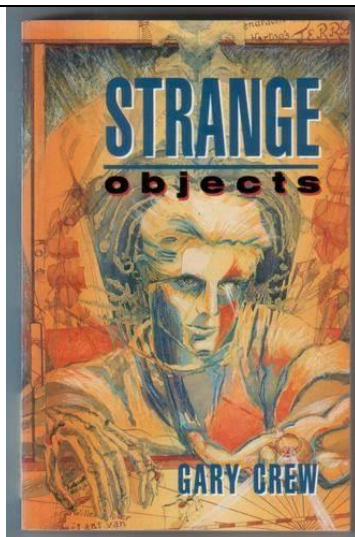
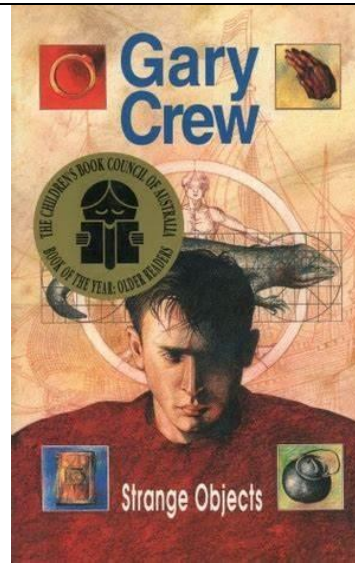
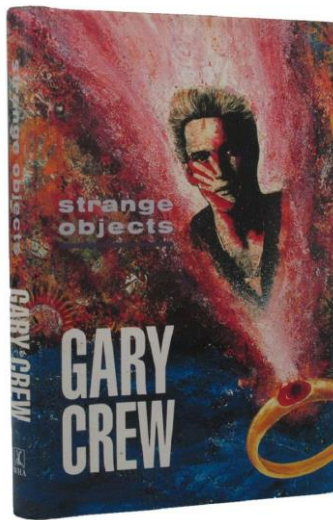
Pantaleo, Sylvia ‘[Review: *The Viewer*]’ *CM Review* Vol X, No 20, June 4, 2004  
<<https://www.cmreviews.ca/cm/vol10/no20/theviewer.html>>  
‘[Review: *The Viewer*]’ *Publishers Weekly*  
<<https://www.publishersweekly.com/9781894965026>>

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## 11. Reproductions of Selected Book Covers

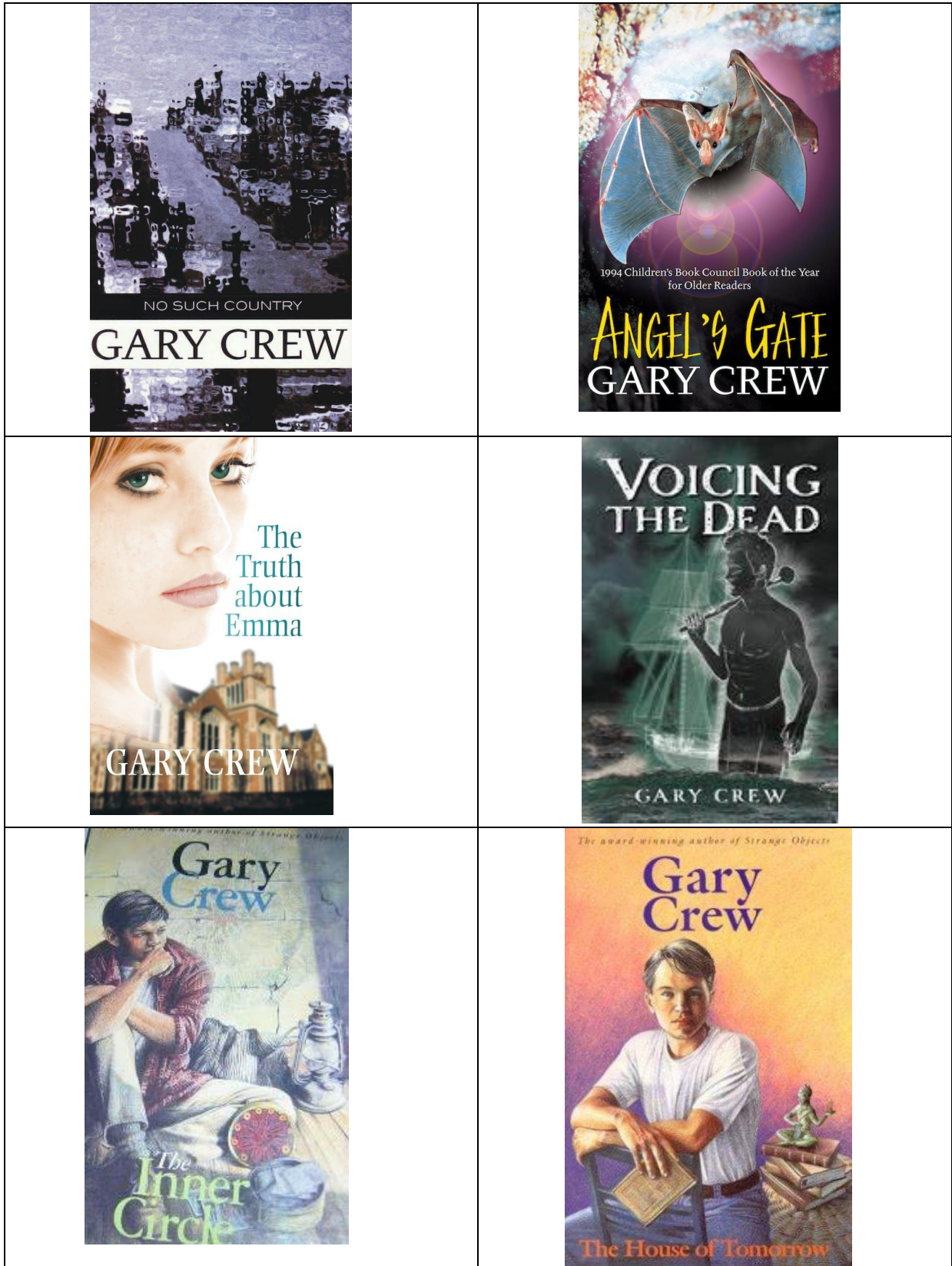
### Editions of *Strange Objects*:



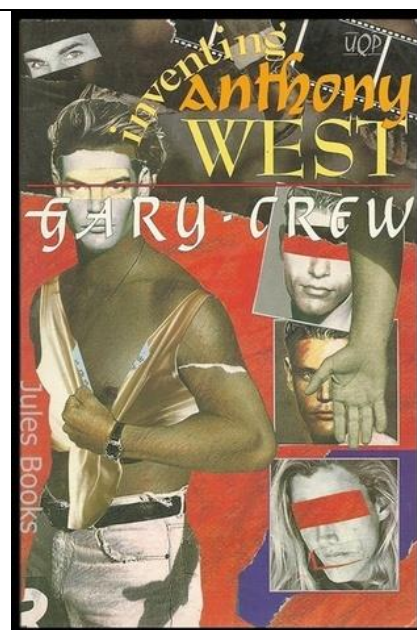
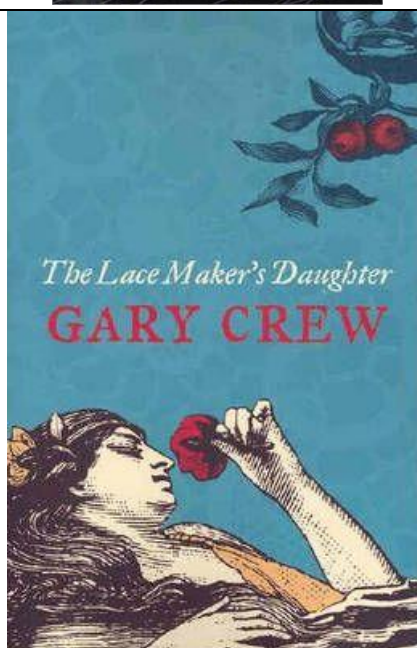
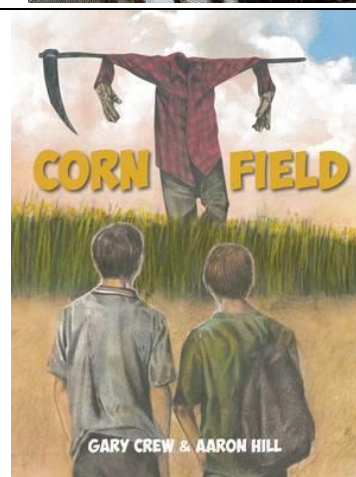
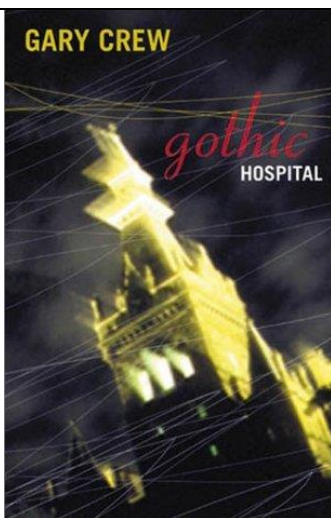
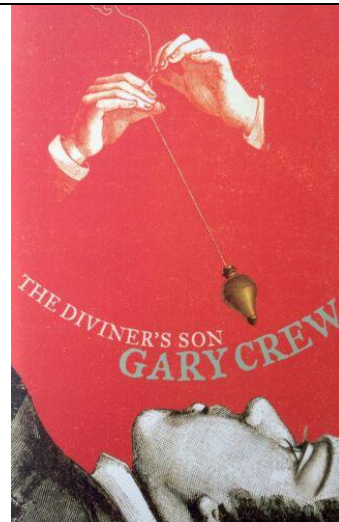
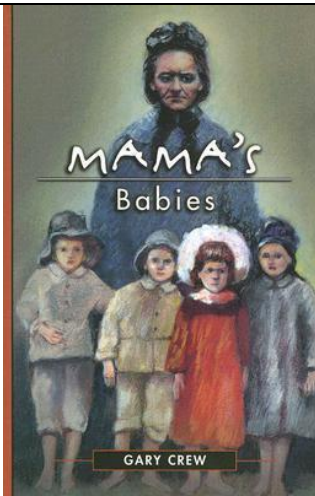
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Other Novels:

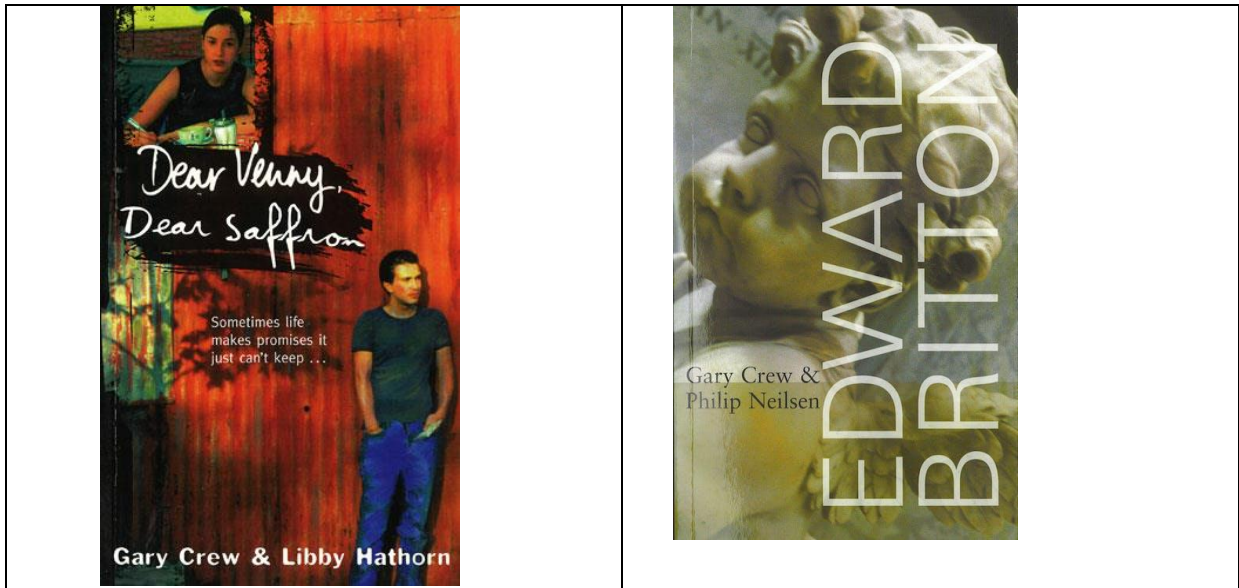


Novels (Cont.):

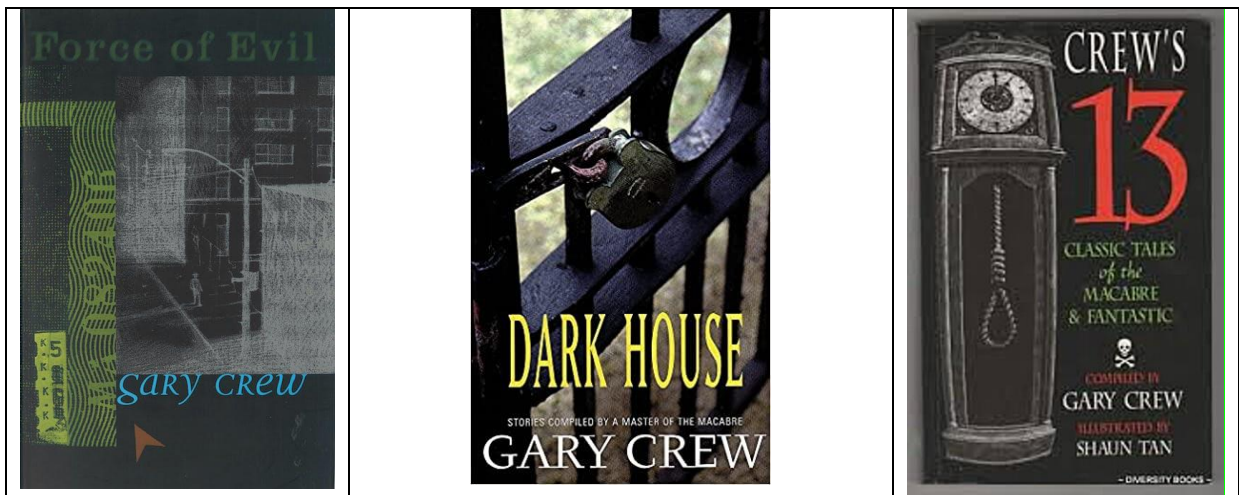




**Novels in Collaboration:**



**Collections:**



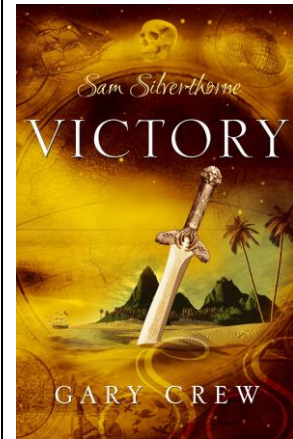
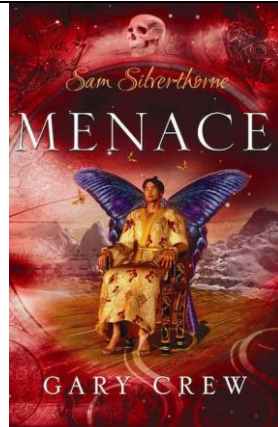
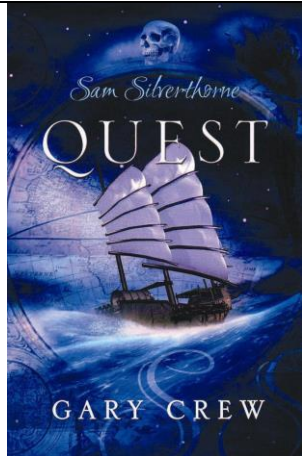
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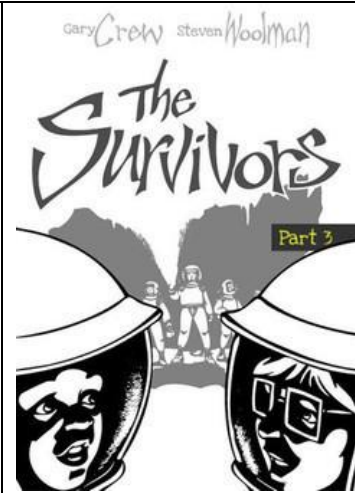
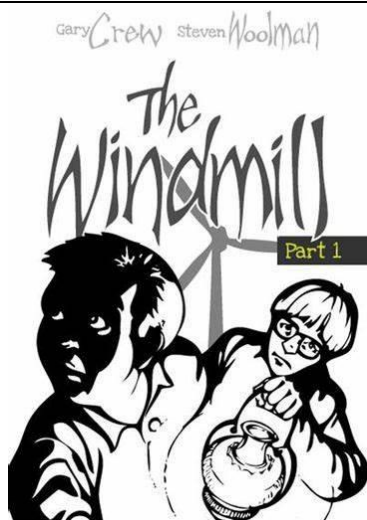
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Series:

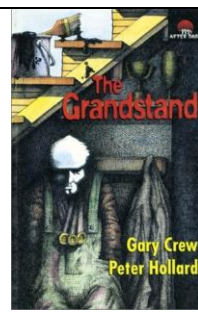
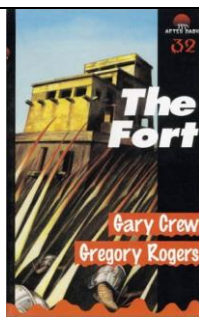
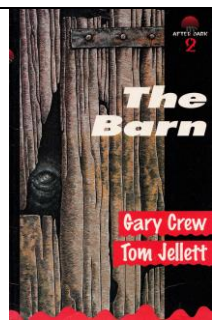
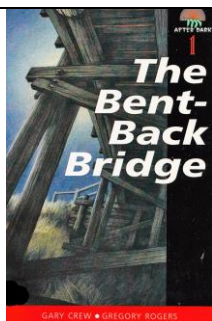
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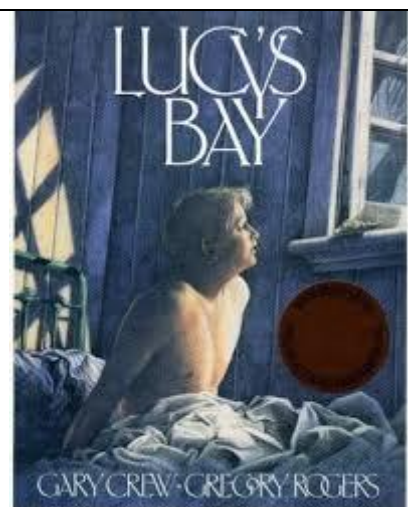
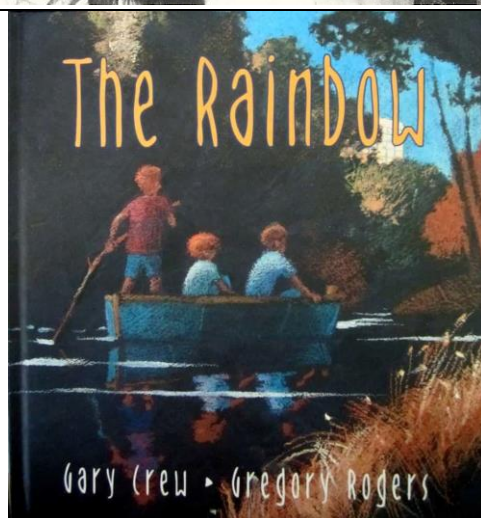
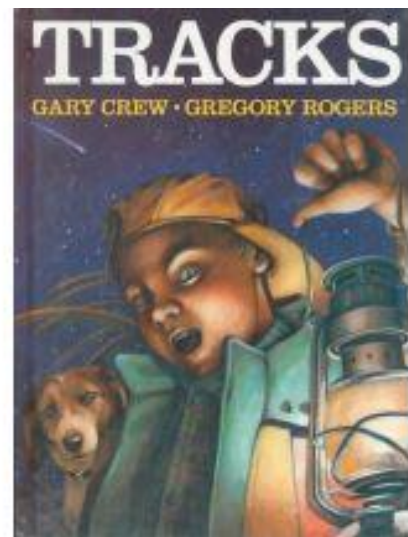
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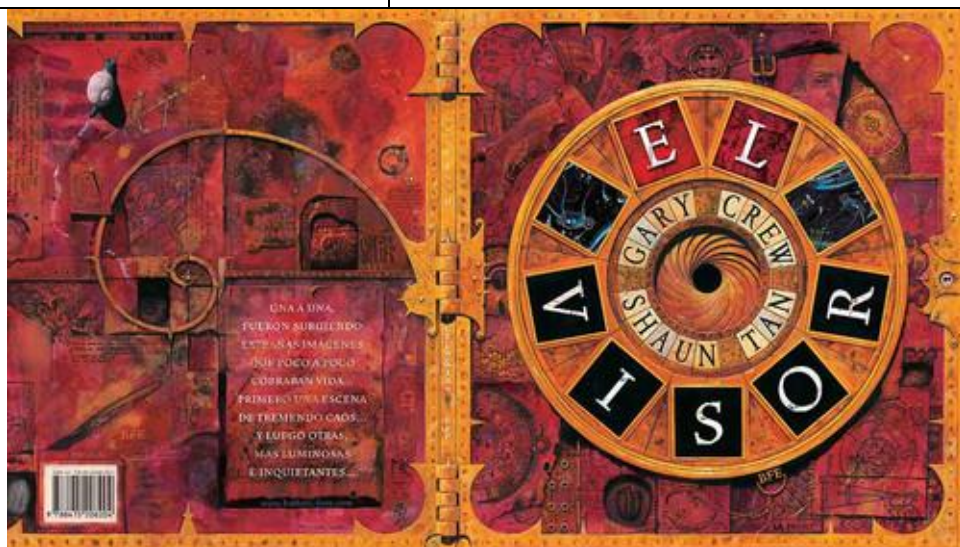
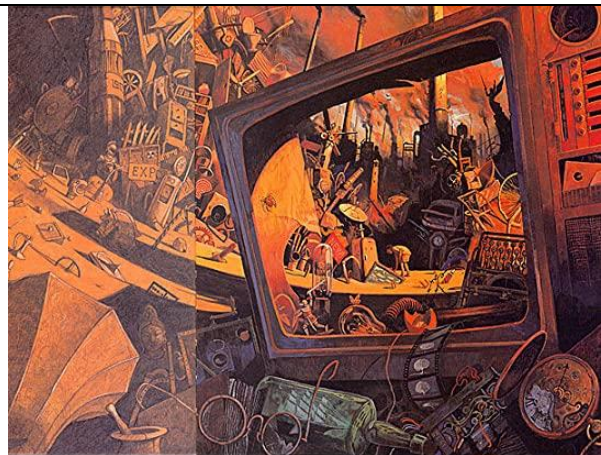
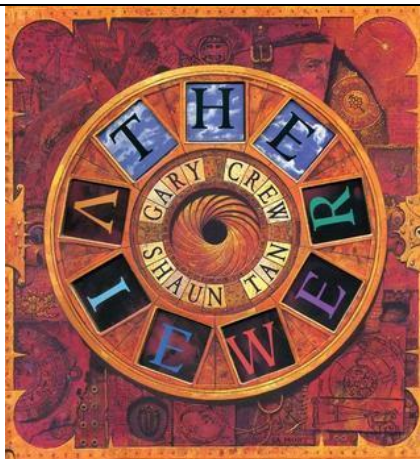
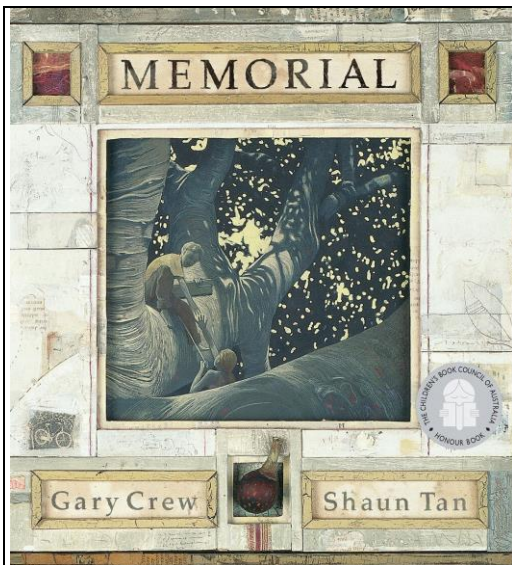
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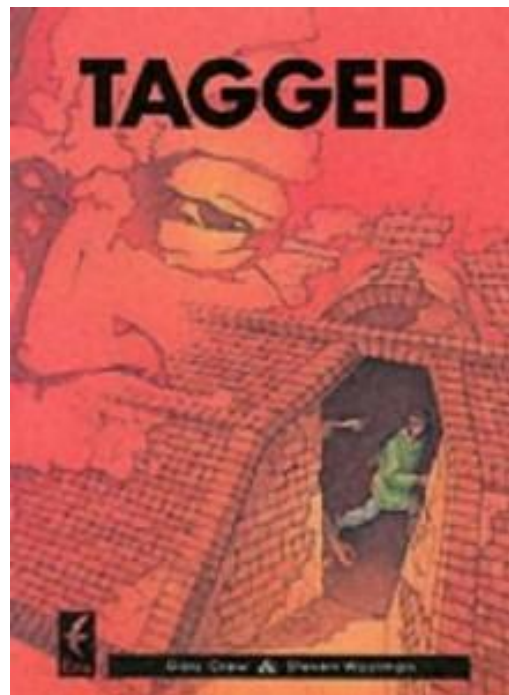
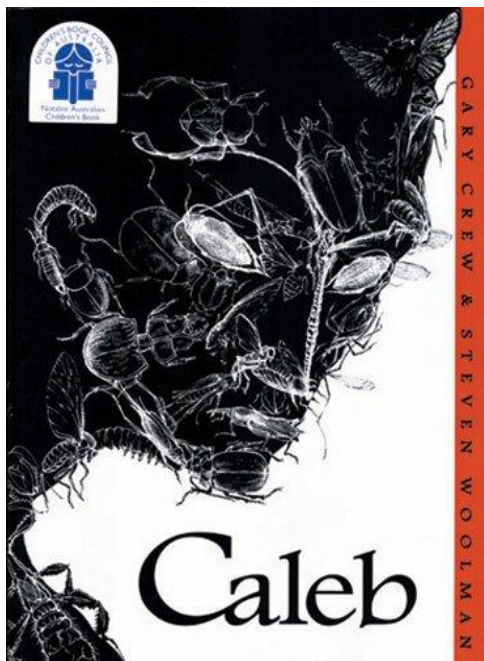
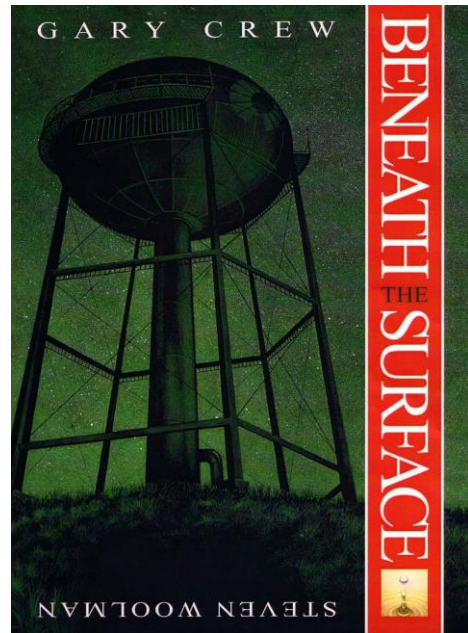
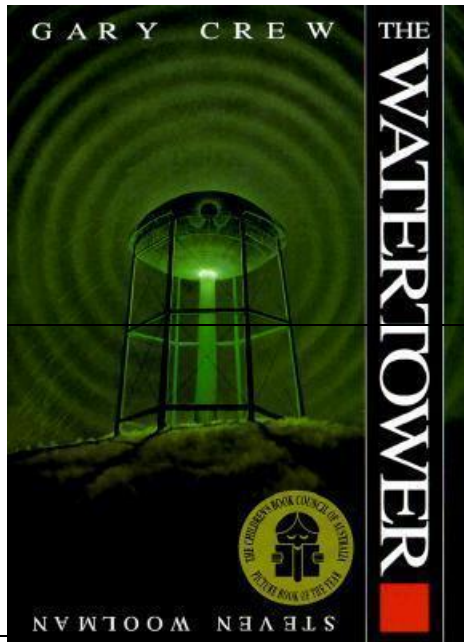


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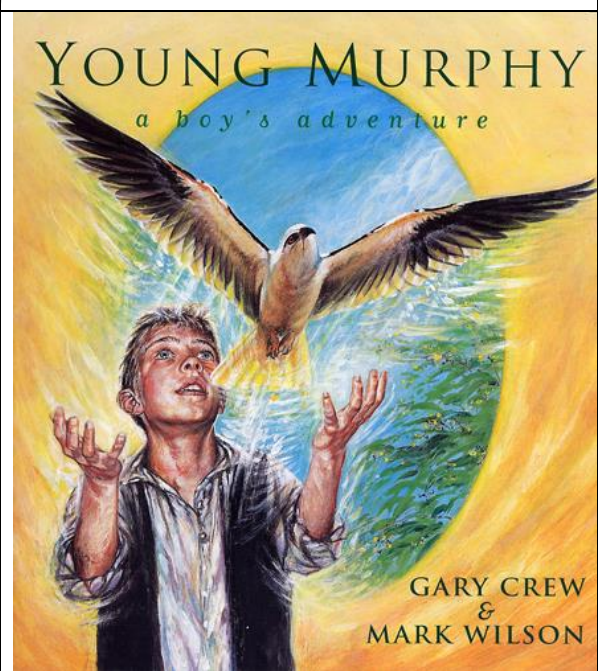
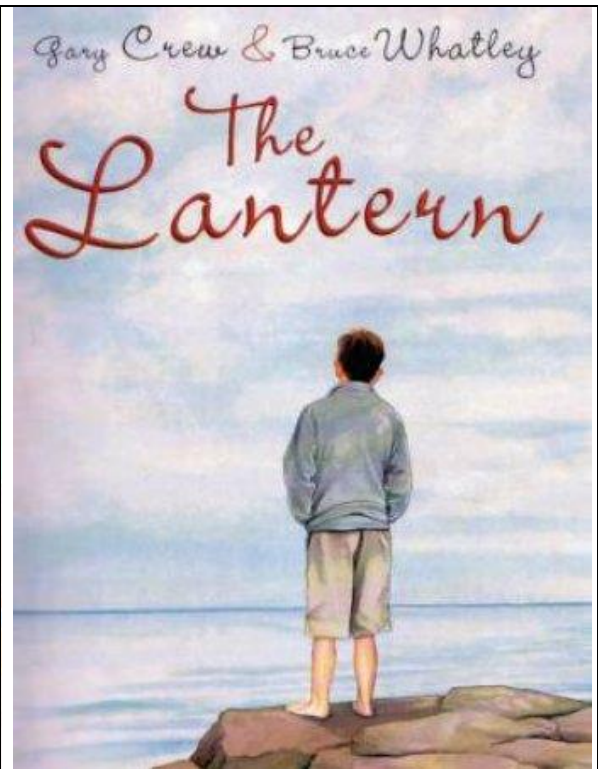
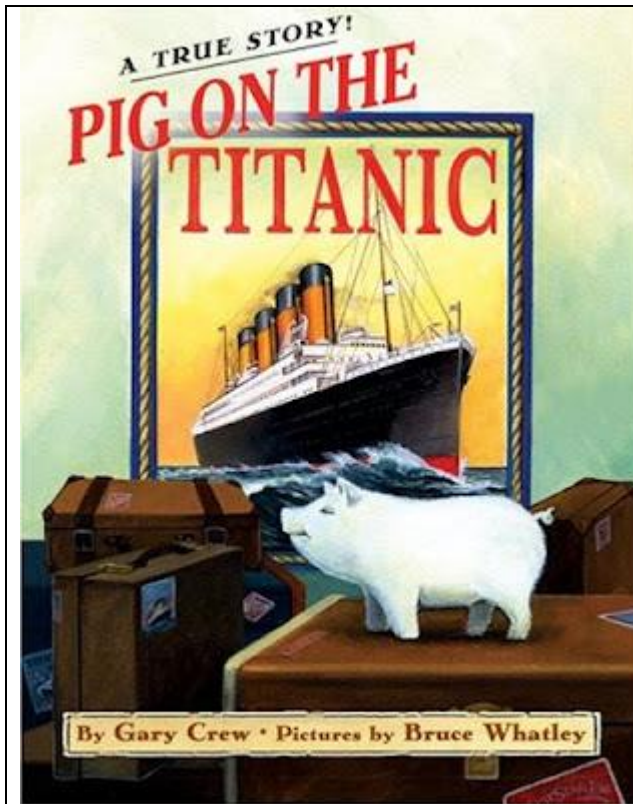


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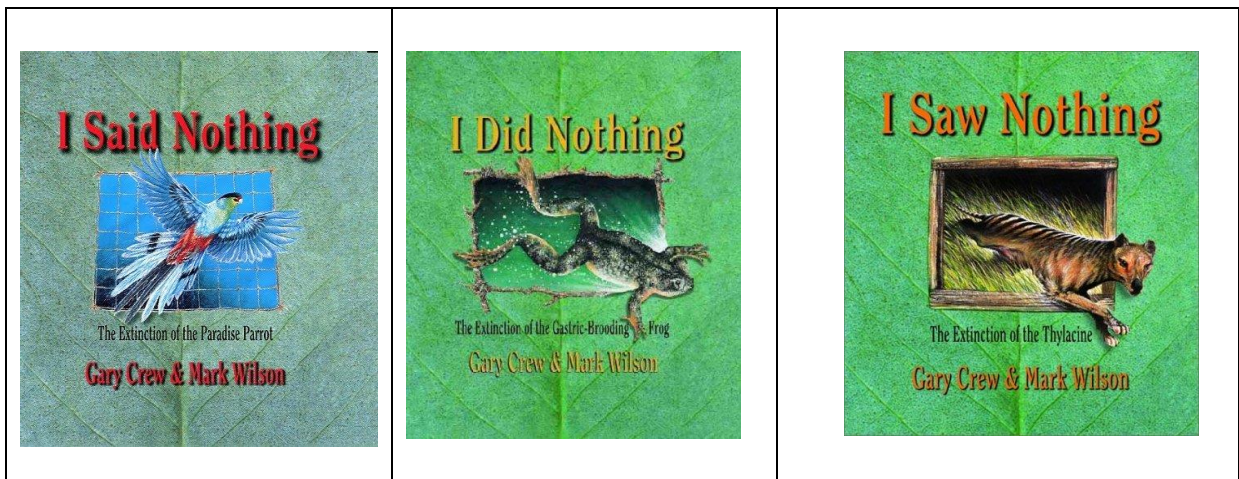
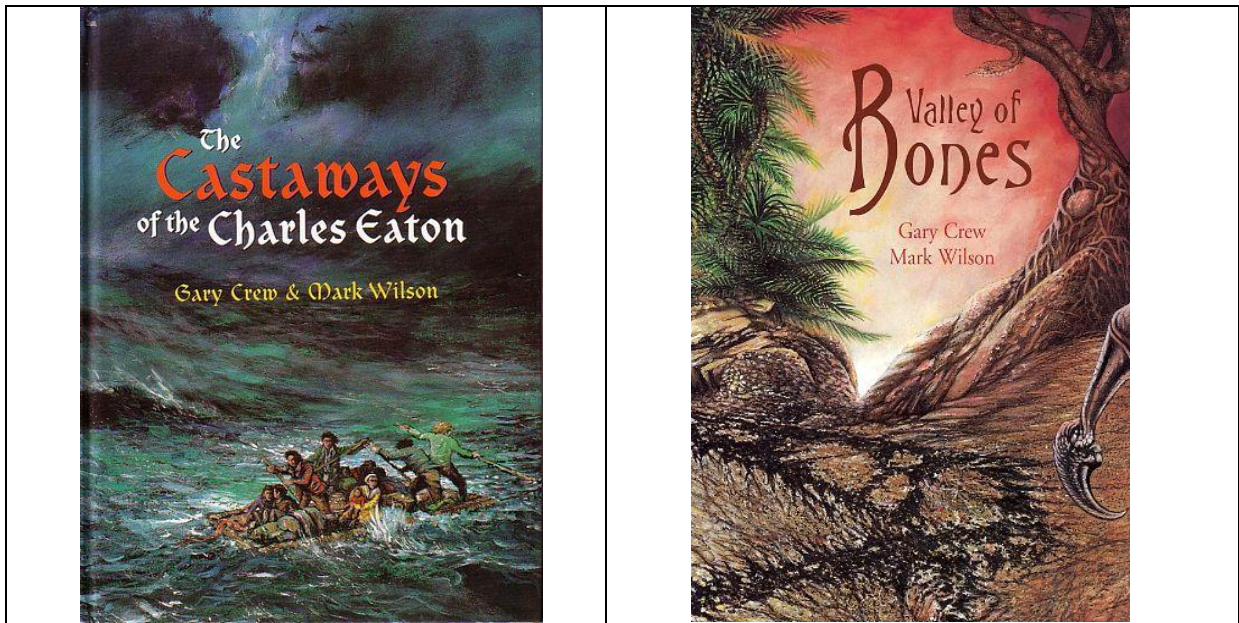
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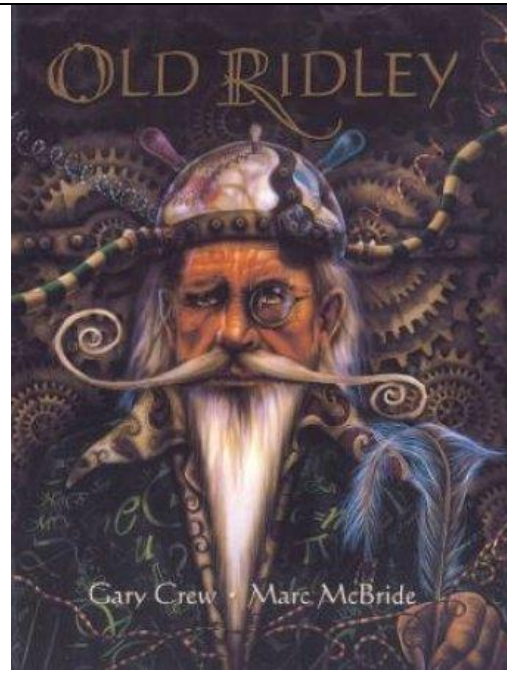
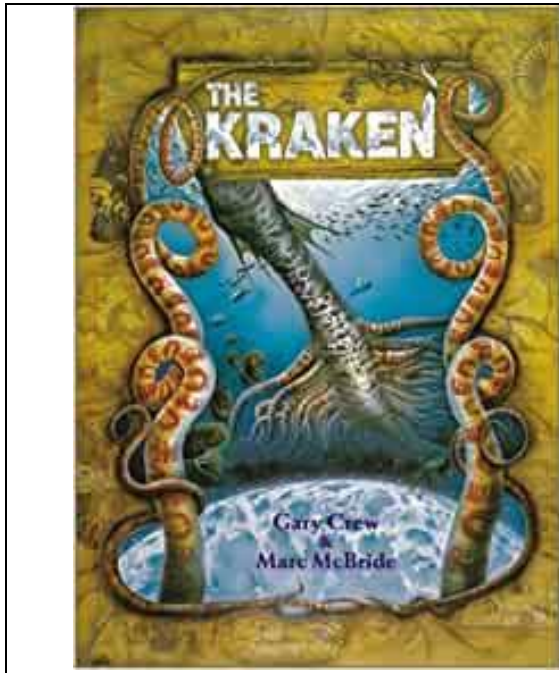




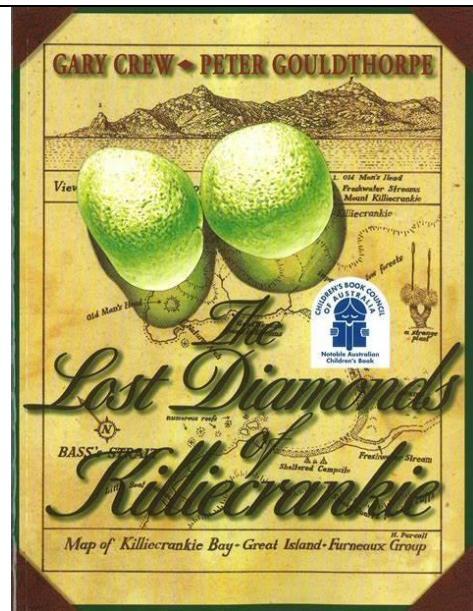
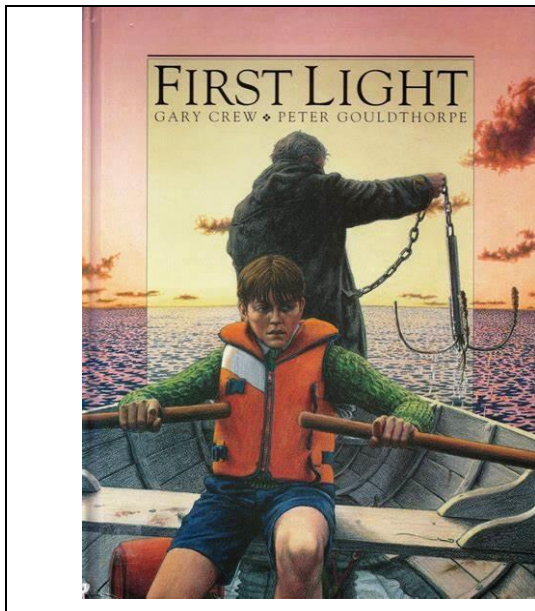
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With Marc McBride:

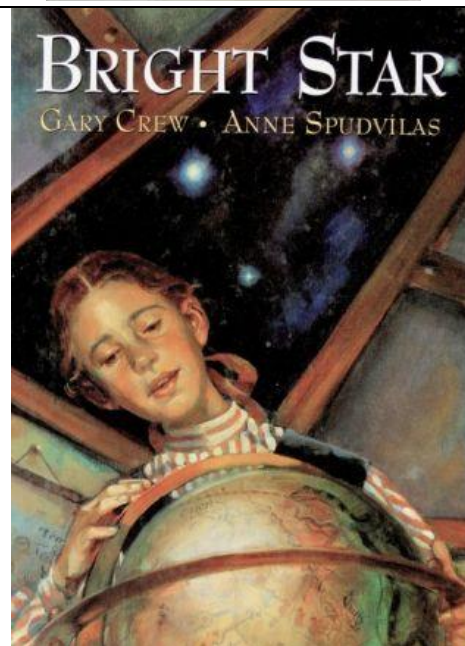
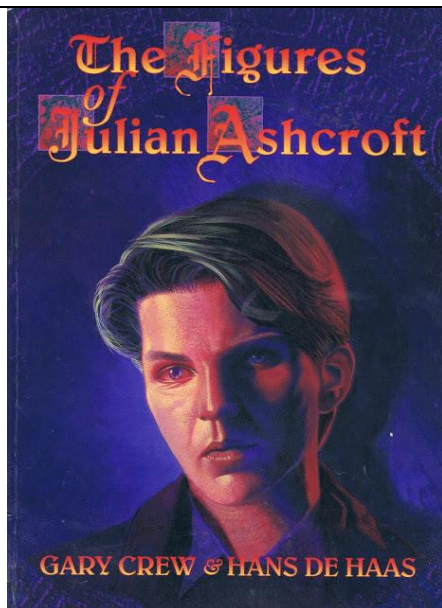
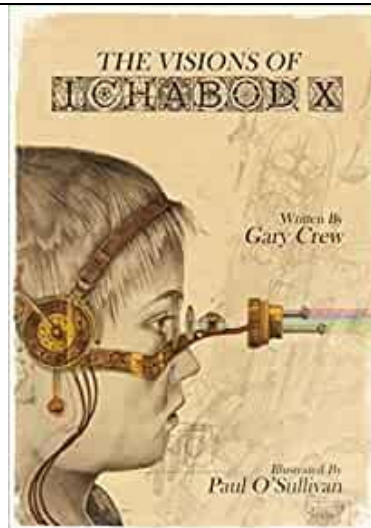
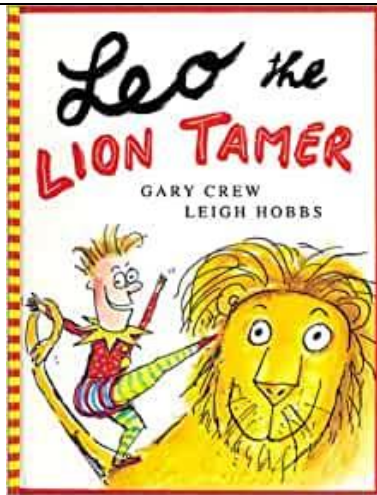
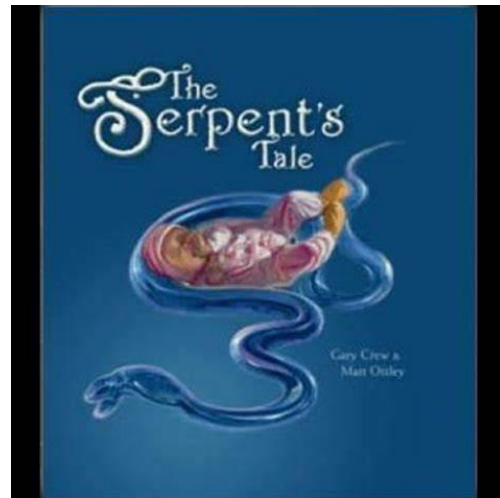
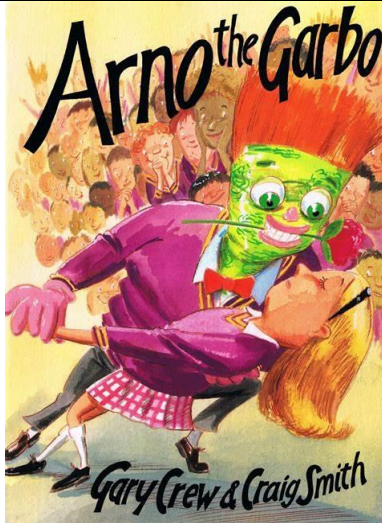


With Peter Gouldthorpe:



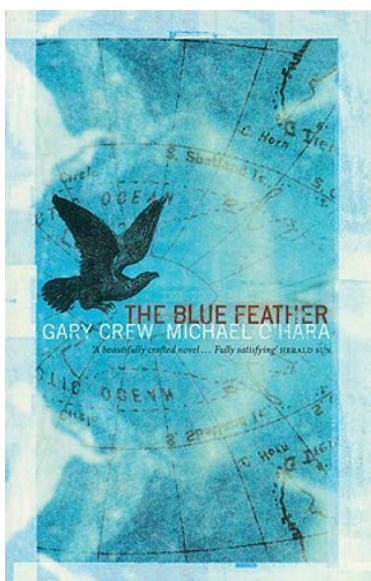
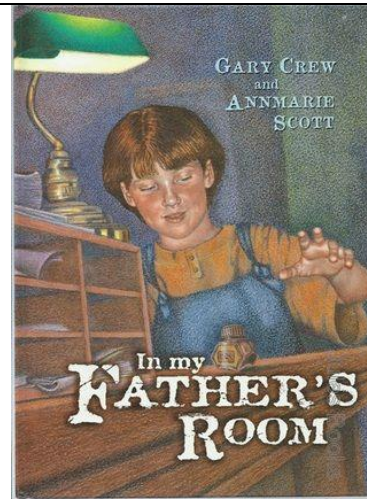
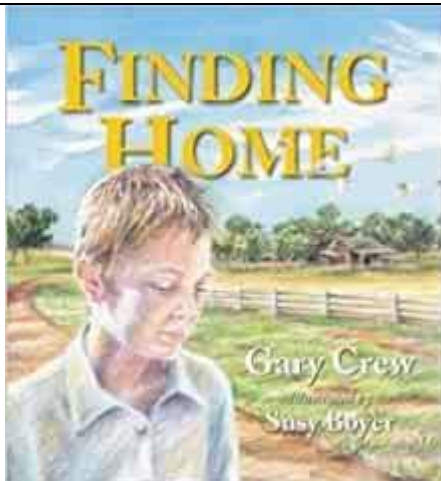
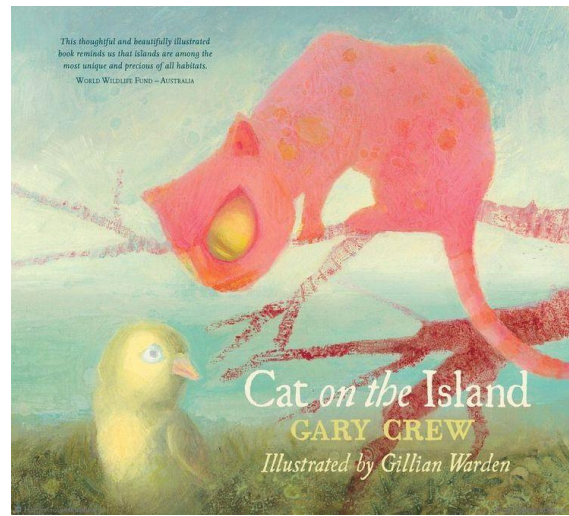
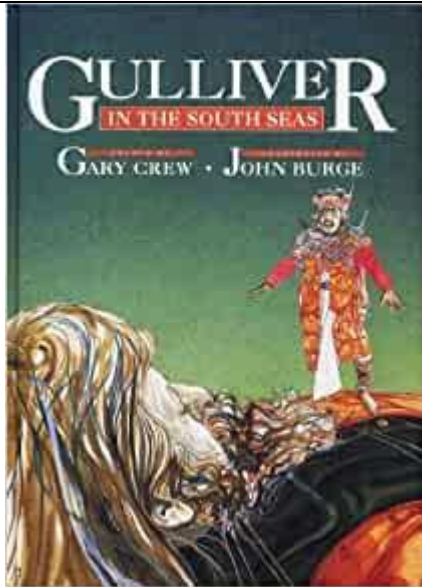


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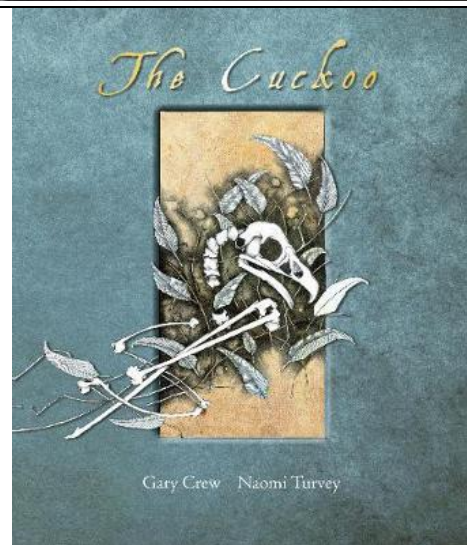
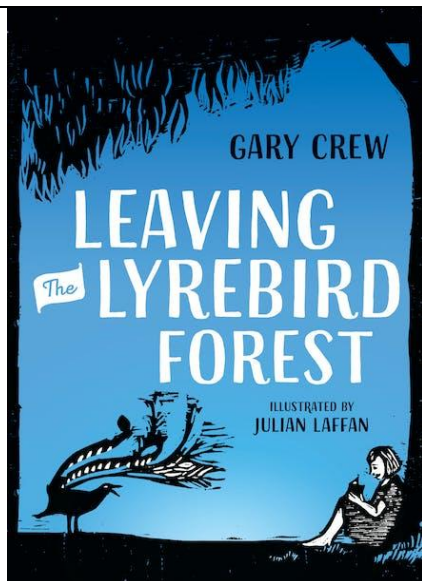
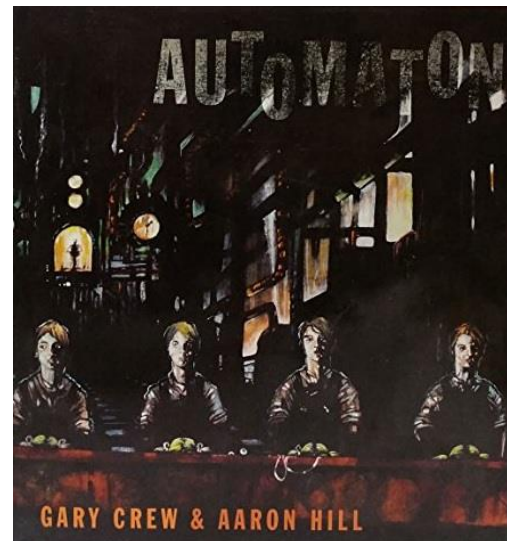
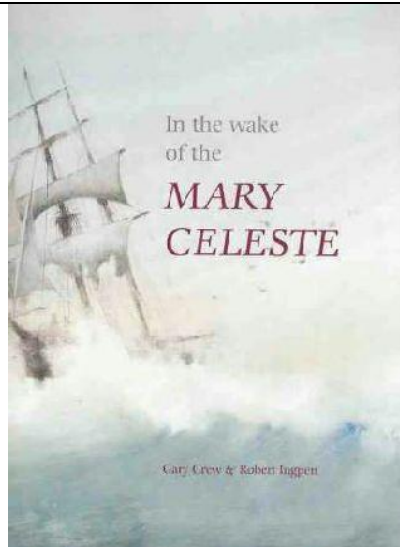
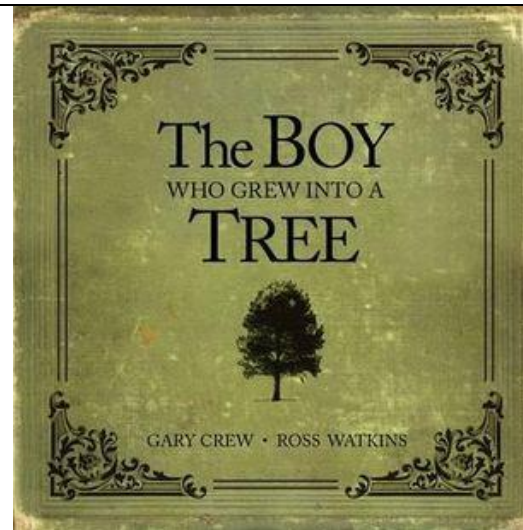
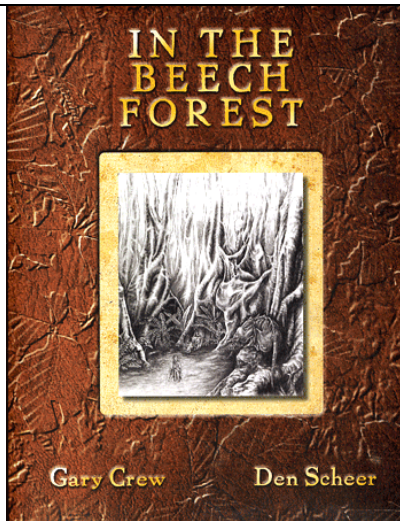
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IBBY Australia Nomination for Hans Christian Andersen Award for Writing 2024: Gary Crew



And with: Den Scheer, Ross Watkins, Robert Ingpen, Aaron Hill, Julian Laffan, Naomi Turvey



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## Appendix A. Articles

Mills, Alice 'Writing on the Edge: Gary Crew's Fiction' *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature* Vol 8, No 3, December 1998, pp 25–35.

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### Writing on the Edge: Gary Crew's Fiction

Alice Mills

Gary Crew is a prolific writer of literature for adolescents and younger children, distinguished by the darkness and mystery of his themes and by the exceptionally wide range of literary forms in which he writes. His teenage novels range from the contemporary social issues of *The Inner Circle* to *Strange Objects'* mixture of historical recreation, horror, social realism and the supernatural. His collaborative picture story books are still more diverse, from the quirky retelling of book I of *Gulliver's Travels* to the study of guilt and grief in *Lucy's Bay*; from the comic-book melodrama of *Tagged* to *First Light*'s account of a fishing trip in which almost nothing seems to occur. Crew has ventured into satire with his send-up of teen romances in *Inventing Anthony West*, and into earnestly moral tales of talking animals. Only in his short stories is he predictable, favouring a novice policeman as his main character and mysteries that border on the macabre.

With a few exceptions like the talking animal books, each of which has a happy ending, almost all Crew's works of fiction are characterized by doubt. Whatever the format of his books, they rarely offer consolation; rather, they disquiet. It is often unclear whether characters are eccentric or extraordinarily cunning, or mad, or in touch with an alternative, equally valid reality. Crew's novels and short stories tend to finish with no resolution of the narrative, the fate of the main characters uncertain, the mysteries unsolved. During the second half of the twentieth century it has been common for teenage literature in the Western world to present grim themes and dubious or disastrous outcomes. Literature for younger children, however, is still dominated by the formulaic happy ending, as it has been throughout the twentieth century. Crew repeatedly denies the readers of his collaborative picture story books the reassurance of a straightforwardly happy ending, so much so that these books are frequently categorized in libraries as teenage fiction also. While he has won an impressive list of literary awards, his books have also been attacked on the grounds that they are too difficult, demanding and black for an audience of young children (Haigh 1991, p. 1).

For those readers who can relish uncertainty and bleak endings, Crew's works offer the sophisticated pleasures

of explanations that confound the problems they fail to explain, of margins never quite established and boundaries never decisively crossed. Crew rarely produces fantasy fiction as the term is commonly understood; that is, fiction that goes decisively outside ordinary consensus reality. Yet the strange events, characters and objects that he writes about defy realist explanation. If fantasy is understood according to Todorov as the upsetting, rather than transcending, of ordinary consensus reality (Stone 1992, p.31; McKenna and Neilsen 1992, p.21), Crew is one of the masters of fantasy in contemporary Australian literature.

The influence of Poe is evident in his stories of mystery and the macabre. As with Poe, madness and the supernatural stretch and subvert the everyday lives of his characters, who struggle to understand, even to survive, in a world where few can be trusted and little can be relied upon. Crew keeps open the possibilities of rational, realist explanation more completely than Poe: the supernatural may be at work, miracles and demonic possession may afflict his characters, but much can be accounted for as mere coincidence. To keep this span of interpretation open for the full length of a novel is Crew's achievement at his best.

Fiction that takes the form of riddle always tempts its readers to provide answers and force the indeterminate into definite form, to choose either a commonsense or a supernatural solution for each mystery, to decide if a puzzling character is trickster, madman or demon. At his least satisfactory, Crew himself succumbs to the pressure to explain and reassure his audience. At his strongest, he brings to the reader's notice the human need for a satisfactory story, the human need to make sense of the world. The power of his fiction derives not from meeting such needs but from playing upon them.

Crew's first novel for adolescents, *The Inner Circle*, is his most straightforward. Two Australian teenagers, the white Tony and the Aboriginal Joe, meet and transform one another's troubled lives. The book traces their psychological and social development. Alternate chapters are recounted by Joe and Tony, (a technique that foreshadows the multiple narrators of *Strange Objects*), but in this first novel both narrators are fully reliable,



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their accounts complementing and confirming each other. There is no reason for the reader to doubt or distrust until the closing pages. By this point the Aboriginal character has found an exceptionally promising career opening in the white world, and the white character has been welcomed into an Aboriginal family; their problems are thus given a sentimentally idealized solution, until in the last pages it is reported that Tony has disappeared.

He is the first of many young male characters in Crew's fiction who behave oddly, uncharacteristically, even disappear mysteriously at the end of a story. Tony's disappearance is not rendered plausible either by anything in his previous behaviour or by direct narration from Tony himself. Remote, distanced by two layers of reporting, the event momentarily opens the possibilities of an emotional breakdown or suicide. In later books such possibilities would be left open, but in this instance the mystery is no sooner posed than resolved. Tony is safe and well and has left in order to discover who he truly is. *The Inner Circle* is (to date) the only one of Crew's novels in which such total reassurance is possible, though at the cost of totally plausible characterization.

The temporary mystery of Tony's disappearance is an aberration in *The Inner Circle*. In contrast, *The House of Tomorrow* abounds in ambiguous clues, secrets and suspicions. Its strength lies in strategic silences. Doubts multiply around and within the main characters, haunted by a past and future that manifest in their dreams, the books they read, the voices they hear. The teacher-narrator, Mr Mac, troubled by dreams of his dead wife and dead baby son, tries to compensate for his lack of family by becoming a father to all his students. During the novel he is forced to acknowledge his inadequacies as a father figure, and he eventually suffers a breakdown. When one of the students is found dead at the foot of a waterfall, it is never absolutely clear whether he has jumped in despair or was pushed. Another schoolboy dies in a fire — or did he too commit suicide?

At the centre of *The House of Tomorrow*'s complicated story is Daniel Coley, a schoolboy obsessed with accounts of the dead returning to speak to the living and claim them. He has 'heard voices' (p.4) — or is this enigmatic comment at the end of his English essay just an exercise

in creative writing on his part? From the moment that Daniel is brought to Mr Mac's attention, the teacher's responses are inadequate. When the boy behaves oddly in class, Mr Mac concludes that he is looking for attention and bullies him into conformity. When Daniel performs superbly in the school musical to please his teacher, Mr Mac barely acknowledges him for fear of being branded homosexual. When the boy keeps a personal journal for Mr Mac as a form of therapy, the teacher first breaks confidentiality, then neglects to read and respond to later entries. When Daniel eventually dies in a fire, the reader is primed to suspect suicide, and to blame Mr Mac's neglect and cruelty.

Perhaps, though, Daniel's death is only an accident. His last communication to Mr Mac is affectionate and grateful rather than bitter (pp.179-180). If the statements in his letter are taken as the entire truth, Daniel's story can be read as a successful rite of passage through the problems of his adolescence, marred only by extreme bad luck. However, after the fire Mrs Coley writes a letter which provides at least one more layer of interpretation of Daniel's life and death. According to her letter, he is not her son but the adopted son of a part-Asian woman and her husband's brother, the man known to Daniel only as Uncle Keith, a soldier missing in action in Vietnam. The boy's obsession with the dead returning to claim the living can now be understood as a sign of his half-conscious awareness of his true parentage; or as a supernatural manifestation, the voices of his dead parents revealing his heritage, summoning him to join them.

If Daniel's death is suicide, none of his rival fathers is blameless. Mr Coley, his adoptive father, tries to mould the teenager into a living death of obedience and repression. Daniel is loved, betrayed and emotionally damaged by Mr Mac, who longs to be the boy's father and yet shrinks from him in his need. If Daniel's voices are understood as ghostly phenomena, his blood-parents are summoning him to join them forever in death. Daniel's story can be read as a failed rite of passage, an ordeal set up by those terrible parents who together bring about his death.

'Terrible parents' is too strong a phrase, though. Mr Mac tries to keep a safe distance from any vulnerability of the heart. Mr Coley may rage and curse his son, but Daniel



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temporarily blossoms in spite of him. Daniel's voices, at first linked to stories of drowning, by the end of the novel accompany visions of earth's wonders in his grandparents' house

... where his Euro/Asian identity is reconstructed — not from the limiting flesh and blood presence of his ancestors but from the dreaming ephemera of moonlight and lace and rafter and lintel and doorpost.

(Crew 1994a, p. 150)

None of these parents, then, can simply be judged instrumental in Daniel's death.

Crew claims that the two main voices, Mr Mac's and Daniel's, are symmetrically balanced (McKenna and Neilsen 1992, p.20), but the teenager's voice is everywhere subordinated to Mr Mac's privileged voice as overall narrator. Daniel's passionate intensity is muffled by a multitude of adult reflections and judgments on his behaviour, reducing any disturbance for readers from the book's themes of shame, grief, love, suicidal despair, obsession and the visitation of the dead.

As Pearce points out (1990, p.54) the calamities of the narrative are partly balanced by images of rebirth. A distressed teacher finds peace in a Buddhist community, another marries happily, and Mr Mac ends the book enjoying his retirement at the beach. His narration concludes: '... but that was years ago ... No. I cannot think of the past' (pp.184-5). Even here, though, Crew's phrasing disquiets. Mr Mac 'cannot think of the past', yet he has done nothing but think of the past throughout his narrative. Is he claiming here, none too convincingly, that his current happiness outweighs all the previous despair and death? Or is he trying to repress his story from memory, with its unsparing evidence of his weakness, cruelty and treachery? The book ends, as it has proceeded throughout, balanced between contradictory possibilities.

Crew's next novel, *Strange Objects*, also abounds in framing devices and troubling themes, but here each new unhelpful clue and contradictory comment intensifies the book's potential to disturb. The difference is partly due to the different outcomes of the main characters' lives. Daniel dies; Joe, Tony and Mr Mac live on in hope; the

fates of *Strange Objects*' Wouter Loos, Jan Pelgrom and Steven Messenger are unknown, but most probably terrible. There is no comfort to be found in the book's two narrators, either. Loos and Steven Messenger are unreliable narrators, their motives for writing down their stories suspect, their truthfulness questionable, Steven's sanity in doubt. Crew invites the reader to pass judgment not only on the narrators but on almost every character in the novel, to speculate on almost every event: to judge, however, is to fall into a guilt trap (see Mills 1993a). In the two narratives and their accompanying commentaries, virtually every character and event is given several conflicting interpretations, each one morally charged. To choose any particular reading — that Steven is a psychopathic killer, for instance, or that Loos is a penitent murderer — is to have that reading challenged within the text or by a telling silence, either of which calls into question the reader's own morality. *The Inner Circle* reassures; *The House of Tomorrow* distances; *Strange Objects* offers little reassurance and no comfortable distance.

The twentieth-century plot of *Strange Objects* begins with the Australian teenager Steven Messenger's discovery of a 'cannibal pot' containing a journal and a mummified hand wearing a ring. By theft or accident Steven acquires the ring, and according to his account it gives him supernatural powers of time travel, levitation and flight. The ring attracts — or generates — a second Steven Messenger, though he may equally well be Steven's schizophrenic hallucination or a manifestation of the ring's seventeenth-century owner, the psychopathic killer Jan Pelgrom. Steven despises, fears and (probably) murders an Aboriginal elder who knows that he has the ring (see Mills 1993a, p.199). Finally Steven disappears: murdered for the ring, perhaps, his dead body eaten by ants, or perhaps supernaturally possessed, or perhaps terrorizing the highways as an insane mass murderer. Almost every event in Steven's story similarly disintegrates into unpleasant, incompatible possibilities. At the very end of the novel his mother reveals that his father died on the road months ago, a fact consistently denied by Steven himself. At this point much of his odd behaviour can be reinterpreted as symptoms of crazed grief; however, this does not explain why he should have

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assembled and posted the package of incriminating documents that make up *Strange Objects*. With the complex, enigmatic character of Steven Messenger, Crew enters fully into the territory between rational explanation, madness and Gothic horror presided over by Poe.

Together with the ring and severed hand, Steven discovers the journal of a seventeenth century sailor, Wouter Loos, cast away on the West Australian coast with the teenager Jan Pelgrom in punishment for their part in the Batavia massacre. Historical records exist for the wreck of the Batavia, the mass murder of its survivors and Loos' and Pelgrom's punishment. The journal itself, though, is made up by Crew, mingling fact and fiction, archaeological, anthropological and geographical detail, supernatural phenomena and the story of what might have happened if Loos and Pelgrom had come safe to shore, had survived long enough to meet the local Aborigines and been accepted into their society. Setting aside the supernatural elements, Loos' journal is a post-colonial text, exposing the prejudices that, like the first (historically attested) European settlers of Australia, Loos and Pelgrom brought to bear on the Aborigines, and the overpowering advantages afforded them by European disease to which the Aborigines had no resistance. Even the ring's supposed supernatural powers, when it bestows a halo upon the murderer Pelgrom, can be read as a parody of Christ's powers to redeem, as preached by white missionaries intent on supplanting Aboriginal beliefs and ways of living.

*Strange Objects'* allusions to earlier English literature are equally destructive of their sources. The ring, so precious to Pelgrom and Steven, alludes to Tolkien's ring without the consolation of Tolkien's moral universe: 'there is a dead end fantasy game or quest that occurs there' (McKenna and Neilsen 1992, p. 22). The fragments into which Loos' journal collapses, resemble the closing pages of Stephen Daedalus' diary in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; but where Joyce's Stephen ends with a triumphant welcome to life, having broken free from the old forms, Loos ends his story of grief and horror by faltering into silence. Crew's allusions to works such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Pied Piper*, *King Solomon's Mines* and *The Coral Island*, 'sending up, or satirising, or

nudging out of of the main stream the dated European fantasy context' (McKenna and Neilsen 1992, p.22) in no way celebrate his European heritage of story. The book's reworking of past literature into a set of dead ends, like its parody of Christian miracle and its refusal of narrative closure, is a post-modern exercise in meaninglessness.

*Strange Objects* undermines not only Western literary and religious traditions but a range of other Western authorities also: the courts, the police, parents, scholars, historians, the printed word. Doubt is first cast on authority in the book's opening pages, purportedly written by a Dr Hope Michaels, Director of the Western Australian Institute of Maritime Archaeology, who ends with an appeal to the reader:

*I trust that any reader who may have information on the whereabouts of Steven Messenger, or of the historic ring, will contact either myself or the police without hesitation.*  
(p.4)

All this is enough, perhaps, to leave a niggling uncertainty in at least the first-time reader's mind that she might really exist, that the story she introduces might be fact, not fiction.

Doubts over the narrative's fictional status extend to the book's extracts from psychology, criminology and history texts and newspaper cuttings. The effect of such doubts is to attack the authority of written texts in general. History, when understood as a single, indubitable account of events, is further attacked whenever one of *Strange Objects'* multitude of voices contradicts another, whenever doubt is cast on the narrators' reliability (Crew 1991c).

As a postcolonial text, *Strange Objects* ridicules and attacks the traditional view of Australian history as seen through European eyes and judged by Judaeo-Christian values. Crew does not, however, disparage oral and pictorial history as practised by Australian Aborigines. He gives a place of honour to Charlie Sunrise, keeper of the Aboriginal sacred site, teller of the old stories. Steven refuses the chance to become initiated into Aboriginal secrets when he (probably) kills the old man (see Mills 1993a). Crew argues that at least one aspect of the book's ending offers hope of a better understanding between the



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ances, when the Murchison District Aboriginal Council invites the local white policeman into their sacred site (McKenna and Neilsen 1992, p.18).

Part of Crew's indictment of Western culture as patriarchal, repressive and murderous is the powerlessness of his female characters. Dr Michaels, observing and analyzing as a researcher, uses her scholarly authority to address Steven. Outside such Western systems of authority, women in *Strange Objects* are almost mute. Like Daniel's mother in *The House of Tomorrow*, Steven's mother finds an occasion to reveal the truth about the teenager's missing father only at the end of the novel when the men have had their say. In Loos' account, a female castaway from a separate shipwreck, Ela, speaks very little, functioning mainly as object for Loos' desire and the rapist Pelgrom's lust. In his treatment of male characters, Crew almost forces the reader into moral discomfort by the excess of contradictory evidence and conflicting judgements. In contrast, the female characters' lack of words could easily be taken for granted. In refraining from any explicit commentary on Ela's muteness and Mrs Messengers's long withheld testimony, the author runs the risk of being understood to endorse the silencing of women.

Ela's dead finger carries the ring across the centuries to Steven Messenger, on a hand severed not by her murderer Pelgrom but by the Aborigines. According to Charlie Sunrise, the seventeenth century Aborigines preserved the dead woman's hand as an amulet to 'keep away evil spirits' (p.15). Despite their intentions, *Strange Objects'* Aborigines transmit the ring's malignities from one white male murderer to another. It would be far easier to accept a version of these events in which Pelgrom himself mummifies Ela's hand and puts it in the cave for Steven to find, but the book's evidence all points (unusually clearly) to the Aborigines. Responsibility is thus put on Pelgrom's victims, Ela and the Aborigines, for providing a literal 'dead hand of the past' (Mills 1993b) to haunt the book's present. The distinction between victim and unconscious colluder becomes very shaky at this point.

Like *Strange Objects*, Crew's next novel, *No Such Country: a Book of Antipodean Hours*, tells of the killing of Australian Aborigines by white settlers. *No Such*

*Country's* atrocity is modelled on historically attested Aboriginal massacres and their temporary concealment in communal silence (Zahnleiter 1991, p.17). Somewhere in tropical north-eastern Australia, close to a fictional volcano, in the fictional town of New Canaan, the white townspeople are collectively guilty of murdering the local tribe of Aborigines, all but one survivor, the pregnant Hannah. The crime is uncovered by a visiting anthropology student, Sam Shadows, and two local teenagers, Rachel and Sarah; their explorations of the community's secret make up much of the book's plot. Sam turns out to be Hannah's son, the last living member of the massacred tribe come to New Canaan to dig up his personal past along with an Aboriginal shell midden.

Most of the story of the massacre and its discovery is plausibly realist. The teenagers who dig up the bodies are as ordinary as New Canaan's repressive society and Sam's mysterious parentage allow, and they struggle with sexual attraction and jealousy in everyday teenager fashion. The long expository section in which Sam reveals his past, however, shifts the book's register from realism to adventure romance. The volcano erupts at the novel's climax in good adventure romance style, freeing the town from its guilty past. This is Rider Haggard territory, full of convenience in the disposal of characters, coincidence and theatricalities on the part of the scenery.

Overlaying the story is a weight of Biblical allusion, amounting to a sustained attack on the Christian church as a colonial instrument of oppression, abuse and murder. The town is tyrannized over by a white-robed Father, punitive, hypocritical, sexually abusive, served by a local lout nicknamed Angel. Biblical references are similarly twisted throughout the book, much as in *Strange Objects*. In *No Such Country*, however, truth can almost always be known, good and evil can be simply distinguished and evil overthrown. Each chapter is named after an incident in Christ's birth and childhood, from 'signs and portents' through 'nativity' to 'massacre of the innocent' and 'in the temple'. Such references function allegorically rather than symbolically; the significance of 'in the temple', for instance, depends on the reader knowing the New Testament. Similarly, only a reader acquainted with the Bible will notice the ironic presentation of Sam as a

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secular Christ, a man of common sense rather than miraculous powers. Sam turns out to be the Father's unacknowledged son. At the novel's end it is the Father, not his son, who dies in atonement for the people's crime — another ironic twist dependent on the reader's knowledge of the Bible.

As allegory, *No Such Country* transposes Christianity's black and white, good and evil, so that the white Angel is the most loutish of its characters, the dark-skinned Aborigines the town's innocent victims. Crew does not pursue a totally rigid set of allegorical correspondences, however. Sam finds a second loving mother in the white director of the boys' home. He is educated, Western style, at university. By the novel's end, having found his racial identity, he chooses to go back to the white-suited scientists' world of Western science (McKenna and Neilsen 1992, p. 19). Not every aspect of the white world, then, is represented as corrupt.

Though it does not simply categorize all white characters as black of soul, *No Such Country's* allegory, like its adventure romance, is morally unambiguous. Characters are either innocent or guilty, loving or incapable of love. There is no doubt about what happens, either. The volcano definitely erupts, the Aborigines are indubitably massacred. Crew moves onto more doubtful ground (Poe territory between madness, lies and the supernatural), where the Father is concerned. This character cannot simply be allegorized as a figure for the corrupt church; still less, as Crew claims, as 'a paradigm of apparently ageless Empire' (McKenna and Neilsen 1992, p. 22), for he always exercises spiritual, not secular, authority.

Whether as con-man, megalomaniac or God, he is curiously peripheral to the story. He is said to dominate the townspeople's lives, but he does not (according to his *Book of Hours*) instigate the massacre. In the course of the narrative he does little but lurk threateningly, behaviour far less shocking and fascinating than Pelgrom's murderous antics or Steven Messenger's experiments with death. Ultimately the Father's disturbing ambiguities are swallowed up in *No Such Country's* mixture of adventure romance and allegory (and so the closed ending of those literary genres prevails over the open-endedness of the Father's post-modern presentation). Equally well,

his death functions as a sign of divine retribution. The lava that literally swallowed him splits 'like the tongue of a serpent' (p.202), a simile which suggests both the devil come to claim his own and the Aboriginal Rainbow Serpent taking revenge. These possibilities are incompatible, but they are not as disturbing as the multiple readings of Steven's fate in *Strange Objects*, partly because this man's final fate is known, partly because he is a remote figure for most of the book, not its narrator, skulking in the margins that in this novel never threaten to take over the map.

In *No Such Country*, conflicts between good and evil, sinner and innocent, black and white, are mainly fought out between men, with women as their silent victims and colluders, helping to bury the murdered Aborigines and then enduring the Father's private visits. Halfway through the book, Sam recognises another force, that of the planet: 'a strength that is [God's] equal, yet not so cold; a closer, warmer god of earth. A woman, even? A woman bedded-down deep in coals of fire?' (p.96) From the sea's depths comes a monster that terrifies Angel for the rest of his life. From the earth's core comes the volcanic eruption that destroys New Canaan's bonepit, and with unconvincing suddenness heals the town's guilt. Crew has commented on the Freudian implications of the book's symbolic landscape, in particular the phallic cone of the volcano, that 'is symbolically the white father' (McKenna and Neilsen 1992, p.22), penetrating the upper air as the spire of the Father's church (a tottery erection) feebly imitates it below. In so far as the Father has been the instrument of engulfing (not piercing) retribution, it is symbolically feminine. The contest between patriarchal authority and female anger, between the Father and the teenager Rachel, between Rachel and Angel, cannot be won by the book's female characters in their own right, with their own bodily strength and will-power. Their anger takes symbolic form in the lava that flows and engulfs the Great White Father and his Angel. Sarah and Rachel are the most fully developed and sympathetic of Crew's female characters (so far), less fully contained within the patriarchal order than their mothers, less fully silenced than the mothers of *Strange Objects* and *The House of Tomorrow*. Though they defy the Father long before the volcano erupts, it is only by the symbolic



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killing of their patriarchal tormentor, enacted guiltlessly by the volcano rather than by their hands, that they can find freedom.

Three years later, in the novella *Inventing Anthony West*, Crew reconsiders the relationships between man and woman, again in terms of patriarchy and female rage, and again one literary genre overpowers another. *Inventing Anthony West* is the most accessible and playful of Crew's longer works of fiction, parodying the conventions of the teenage love story and horror film, but its denouement is much more sinister than the Father's death and the town's instant redemption in *No Such Country*.

Two teenage girls, stuck indoors for a weekend, amuse themselves by creating their ideal male teenager, 'Anthony West', from cut-out magazine images. Kate's ideal is intelligent, slim, perhaps a writer; Libby's is athletic, able to wield an axe. In turn the two girls daydream about meeting this image in the flesh; but daydream turns to nightmare when Anthony West proves a coward, betrayer and patriarchal bully. His intellectual version abandons Kate in a crypt and the athletic version leads Libby towards ritual death inside a volcano. The girls wake in horror and eventually decide to burn the doll, but they succeed only in charring its paper hands.

At the start of the book it seems as though Kate and Libby are half seriously practising witchcraft, but Crew retreats from his story's potential horrors, explaining it all away as bad dreams. Then, in the final short chapter, back at school, the girls meet their new neighbour — Anthony West — his hands burnt and bandaged. Parodied romantic fiction gives way to Gothic horror — or is this to be explained rationally as mere coincidence, or psychologically as an external projection of Kate and Libby's combined inner rage, the two teenagers functioning as each other's doubles? Has female sexual desire, female rage, been powerful enough to manifest and mutilate a lover supernaturally? Will the flesh and blood Anthony prove as unpleasant as the dream-figure, and are the girls' nightmare relationships about to recur in their waking world? What has been a slight, amusing, clever send-up of both *Frankenstein* and popular escapist fiction ends with a touch of grue, all the more powerful because of the previous explanations that it was nothing

but a nightmare.

Between *No Such Country* and *Inventing Anthony West*, Crew published *Angel's Gate*, an orthodoxly realist novel with a reliable narrator and a fully resolved murder mystery. *Angel's Gate* is also a psychological study of the murdered man's two children, who flee into the Australian bush and become partly feral. *Angel's Gate*'s teenagers attempt to be wild with limited success. The feral children are captured and imprisoned within the welfare system, while the doctor's teenage daughter attempts her own mild form of wildness, seeking out a part-time job and enjoying her boyfriend's company in defiance of her father (one of Crew's least effectual patriarchs). 'They get us all sooner or later' (p.2) is her comment when the first of the feral children is captured; but at the novel's end she continues to defy her father and subvert the future he has chosen for her (see Davison and Scutter 1993 for contrasting reviews of this text).

Of all Crew's longer works of fiction, *The Blue Feather* is the most consoling and the least ambiguous. (According to Sharyn Pearce (1997), its hope and promise are due to a process of collaboration with Michael O'Hara.) The troubled teenager Simon is an habitual runaway who is regularly recaptured by welfare officers, but 'they' do not get him in the end. Simon is sent for rehabilitation to a sanctuary for raptors, to work for its owner, Greg. Simon's habit of cocking his head to see (to compensate for the loss of one eye), his sense of being trapped and longing to run, are very similar to the behaviours of the damaged, caged birds of prey. When Greg and his former lover, the photojournalist Mala, invite him to a wilderness trip in search of a giant bird, he is simultaneously being invited to go in quest of his own healing and to undertake a rite of passage from adolescence to manhood. The expedition searches for visible, photographable evidence of a nest or food-remnants to determine whether the bird is mythical or exists in ordinary consensus reality; at the same time they are tested spiritually, required to trust, believe and surrender. They end by finding nests for themselves, Greg and Mala together, Simon with a new mother figure. The quest is almost fully successful for all three.

For a while, though, *The Blue Feather* hints at horror. One of Simon's eyes is missing, and he does not reveal

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until late in the book ‘how, or why, or by whom it had been gouged, cut or poked from its socket’ (p.14). Such phrasing (misleadingly) suggests a history of child abuse, and Crew and O’Hara may be alluding throughout the novel to another Simon, in Keri Hulme’s *The Bone People*, victim of horrific physical abuse. Mutilation for *The Blue Feather*’s Simon serves (more convincingly than for Hulme’s Simon) as a means to psychological and spiritual — but not physical — healing for himself and the adults who care for him. In Crew’s earlier novels, long-withheld truths like the secret of Simon’s missing eye are told by mothers when their sons have disappeared or died, too late to make a difference to their lives. In this book, Simon himself manages to voice his own truth, to live through his initiation ordeals, to return after disappearing from camp and to find his own means of integration into everyday life.

Simon slowly learns to trust, to admit his needs, to ask for help, to acknowledge and use the gifts he is given — a backpack, a compass, water-bottle, balm, knife and feather. His ordeals run closely parallel to the hero-quest stages in Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (as cited in the epigraph). Like a thousand other heroes, he reluctantly accepts the call to adventure, then finds helpers along the way. He crosses a threshold from the normal everyday world into a symbolic landscape where his honesty and strength of character are tested, where he must suffer psychological death, passing through a labyrinth and entering an underworld. A flurry of allusions to resurrection, both Biblical and classical, surrounds the final revelation about the birds, indicating that they bring spiritual rebirth as well as psychological healing and initiation. How the characters see, and how they interpret what has been seen, marks their development in healing and grace. The scientifically minded Mala, like Doubting Thomas, needs to see with her physical faculties in order to be sure; Greg (echoing the New Testament) can believe without seeing, and it is one-eyed Simon, in the tradition of blind seers like Teiresias, who has the fullest vision of the birds.

*The Blue Feather*’s use of symbolism runs the risk of becoming sentimental. The quest is quickly accomplished, the helpers very helpful, the symbolism spelled out, the

happy ending predictable. There is, however, enough toughness in the text to keep it from sentimental excess. For all their symbolic weighting as eagle, albatross, phoenix, constellation of stars and Holy Spirit, the giant birds have attacked and killed men. The quest follows a path from one death to another. At the happy ending, Simon still has a glass eye and his history of problems with welfare agencies is unresolved. The giant birds — if they exist in the everyday world — are in danger of being shot, or poisoned with radiation sickness, or caged and put in a zoo. The book’s ending is not altogether consoling, nor does it offer complete narrative closure.

There is a curious mixture of freedom and spiritual determinism in *The Blue Feather*. Greg is scrupulous in allowing Simon freedom to choose, but Simon cannot understand his own willingness to stay at the sanctuary, to keep Greg and Mala company on their trek, to pursue his quest for the giant bird, to accept guidance. Towards the end of the book, spiritual guidance blurs into spiritual compulsion, potentially as lethal for Simon as the forces that (probably) possess Steven Messenger, whisper to Daniel Coley, erupt in *No Such Country* and animate the cut-out doll in *Inventing Anthony West*. Whatever directs his quest — and the epigraph from Campbell invites an archetypal reading — proves benevolent, but is far from safe.

Simon’s quest has mythic resonances. In Crew’s next book, *Mama’s Babies*, the heroine Sarah is more of a fairy tale character, a Cinderella whose substitute mother forces her into household slavery. The book’s first page reveals its straightforward plot, the murderous career of an 1890s baby farmer, sentenced to death as the result of a girl’s testimony. Sarah’s story is told almost entirely in realist terms, until in the midst of her ordeals she is visited briefly by a phantom in the form of her mother by birth. In so far as Sarah is a Cinderella figure it might be expected that her mother’s spirit would aid her in sentimental Victorian style, but the phantom neither aids nor threatens her. The episode seems an odd venture into the supernatural when every other aspect of the story is explicable within the boundaries of ordinary consensus reality. This loving mother reappears as flesh and blood at the baby farmer’s trial, and then claims Sarah for a



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happy-ever-after life of aristocratic pleasure, with no discussion of her ghostly manifestation. In this book, then, Crew does not so much cast doubt on the boundaries of consensus reality as momentarily defy them, with little effect on the plot or characters.

Most of Crew's short stories and novellas deal with the darker possibilities of spiritual and paranormal visitation. Their plots mainly concern mysterious crimes and strange deaths. As in *Angel's Gate* a novice policeman is often the chief suspect, but only in three stories, 'The Last Cabinet', 'Self Portrait' and 'A Step Behind', is the solution within the boundaries of ordinary consensus reality. ('The Last Cabinet' may also be read as an unpleasant reworking of *Snow White*. See Mills in Bradford, 1996) In most of the other stories, supernatural forces pull characters towards their death: by way of their fascinating oddity in the relatively cheerful 'Face to Stony Face'; through an almost Dickensian, sentimental promise of union with a loving heavenly family in 'Madonna of the Streets'; by way of hoax telephone calls in 'The Fourth Call from Jindra'; by ghostly re-enactment of an old crime in 'The Staircase'; by ghostly invitation in *The Well*; by an invitation to stay overnight in *The Bent-Back Bridge*; by *The Barn*'s lure of the prehistoric. These stories are well-crafted variations on Gothic horror and the macabre, each avoiding formula with its clever final twist.

*The Well*, *The Bent-Back Bridge* and *The Barn* are the first three books in the After Dark series of 'stories to make your hair curl'. Edited by Crew, After Dark is marketed as a competitor to the American Goosebumps series, for children who have gained some independent reading skills but need the encouragement of short books with short chapters. Each book includes full-page black and white illustrations. While for many of the later After Dark volumes the illustrations are integral to the work, modifying the verbal text, providing crucial clues, for Crew's three novellas they are an enjoyable extra. *The Bent-Back Bridge* was first published as an unillustrated short story and here, in particular, the words stand well alone.

*The Bent-Back Bridge* reworks Norse legends about trolls under bridges, and specifically 'The Three Billy Goats Gruff'. Janet, the plump schoolgirl from whose

point of view the story is told, is a solitary victim, lured to the bridge at night by the promise of friendship. No other human being, no guile on Janet's part, will protect her from the shape shifter who has taken the form of Lola, a new girl at school, to offer friendship and an invitation to stay overnight. Janet's wretched school life is sketched out, her size, unattractiveness, habit of cheating, neediness, her complete vulnerability to any offer of friendship. The shape-shifting monster under the bridge mimics her victim physically, as another schoolgirl, and morally, as a thief. 'Friend,' Janet cries out as the monster tears at her life (p.45) — or is this word spoken by the monster in final mimicry of Janet's hunger for love?

Hunger for love, hunger for the kill, are the motivating forces of *The Well* also. As in several of Crew's novels, an unpleasant family truth is finally revealed by a mother. Adam and Seth's grandmother is forced to admit that her son, their father, had a twin brother who died at the age Adam and Seth are now. Tom committed suicide when his father died, believing the other twin to be their mother's favourite. Seth, Adam's twin, is drawn to the well in which Tom died, in which his livid ghost manifests to lure the boy to his death. It seems as though the grandmother's love breaks the malign pattern, saving Seth, until the story's final description of the boy's 'cold, wet lips' and 'stony tongue' (p.48). Seth may be alive, but only as the living dead.

Carter, in *The Barn*, rejoices in the prehistoric life he discovers in the swamp. This eleven year old city-sophisticate furiously resents his parents' move to the country until he comes to identify with two predatory dinosaurs in the barn, a pair as much out of place in the twentieth century as he is at the local school. To Carter, the prehistoric creatures mean a secret power that can sustain him through all the embarrassments and humiliations of his new life: the same promise, in fact, as Lola seemed to offer. *The Barn* ends with Carter's jubilation, leaving to the reader's imagination any horrors to come.

Carter experiences the safe thrills of disobeying his parents and viewing prehistoric creatures. Crew's fiction is rarely so safe, or so reassuring. The power of his work is not usually emotional, as in *The Bent-Back Bridge*, for



although his characters often suffer, attention is drawn to the puzzles and ambiguities of their lives rather than their emotional crises. Conventional horror fiction sets up puzzles and ambiguities, withholding the revelation of the murderer's identity, of the monster's physical form, to intensify suspense, but always with the guarantee of a revelation to come. The distinctive post-modern quality of Crew's writing at its best is its excess of answers that amounts to no answer at all, its refusal of the grand revelation, its celebration of doubt.

Crew's fascination with inadequate fathers takes the forms of rivalry among his father figures, uncertain parentage, attacks on patriarchs and the death of their many-fathered sons. In a fictional universe where there are too many fathers, mothers are generally passive, inadequate, silent guardians of the family secret. *Mama's Babies* explores a fairytale fictional universe where there are too many mothers, the missing good mother and the sinister substitute mother who withholds the secret of the daughter's true parentage. In such worlds as these, with too many parents, the adolescent's rite of passage to womanhood or manhood is in danger of collapse, through rape or murder, and ordinary consensus reality is in danger of collapsing into psychotic or supernatural nightmare. To move from this confused and doubtful arena into the world of fantasy quest, as in *The Blue Feather*, is a relief that Crew rarely affords his readers. Instead, he insists upon the exasperating, exhilarating uncertainties of writing on the edge.

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## The Ambiguity of Hesitation in Gary Crew's *Strange Objects*

by Michael Stone

### Abstract

Gary Crew's novel *Strange Objects* won the Australian Children's Book of the Year Award in 1991. It is an intriguing novel composed of many genres, all of which contribute to another — the fantastic — which centres upon the state of mind of Steven Messenger, the main character.

None of the problems which arise from his behaviour can be satisfactorily answered to give a single logical explanation of what this book is about, so if Todorov's theory, in which he is concerned to define the nature of the fantastic, is applied to this novel then *Strange Objects* must be placed in Todorov's category of the Pure Fantastic, which includes such works as Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades* and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Black Cat*.

Two critics who basically accept Todorov's theory but with some elaboration and qualification are Christine Brooke-Rose and Rosemary Jackson. Brooke-Rose emphasises the concept of ambiguity; "the complexity and subtlety of the pure fantastic lies in its absolute ambiguity", while Jackson suggests that as well as looking at the poetics of form, the politics should be considered as well. Jackson also wishes to lay more emphasis on psychoanalysis in constructing a theory of the fantastic than Todorov does, and she believes the fantastic subverts the text and in doing so

becomes an influential instrument for social change.

These concepts are appropriate in discussing Crew's novel and placing it in Todorov's category of the "Pure Fantastic".

In the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, the genre of the Fantastic is described as "a mode of fiction in which the possible and the impossible are confounded, so as to leave the reader (and often the narrator and/or central character) with no consistent explanation for the story's strange events".<sup>1</sup>

Tzvetan Todorov in his book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (first published in French, 1970 and translated, 1973),<sup>2</sup> argues that fantastic narratives involve an unresolved hesitation between the supernatural explanation available in marvellous tales<sup>3</sup> and the natural or psychological explanation offered by tales of the uncanny,<sup>4</sup> if that hesitation is unresolved and Todorov's example of this is Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, then the novel in question must be placed into his category of the "Pure Fantastic".

Before proceeding further, it may be helpful here to consider Todorov's theory in the diagrammatic form that he devised.

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Uncanny	Fantastic Uncanny	Fantastic Marvellous	Marvellous
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Christine Brooke-Rose in her book, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, sets out this diagram and explains it clearly.

The pure fantastic is represented by the central line — a frontier between two adjacent realms. If the supernatural eventually receives a natural explanation, we are in the fantastic-uncanny; if the events are not supernatural but strange, horrific, incredible, we are in the uncanny (with the accent on the reader's fear, not on his hesitation). On the other side of the line, if the supernatural has to be eventually accepted as supernatural, we are in the fantastic-marvellous (with accent on wonder). Presumably, then, on the left of the line, in the fantastic-uncanny, not only is the reader's hesitation resolved but his fear is purged; whereas on the right of the line, in fantastic-marvellous, this fear is turned to wonder.<sup>5</sup>

Critics have suggested other books which might be placed in the Pure Fantastic category in addition to *The Turn of the Screw*. Brooke-Rose suggests Edgar Allan Poe's *The Black Cat*, Rosemary Jackson, Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Stanislaw Lem, W.W. Jacobs' *The Monkey's Paw*.<sup>6</sup> Pushkin's *The Queen of Spades*<sup>7</sup> in many theorists' estimations is also viewed as belonging to this category. Dostoyevsky had commented on this novel once describing it as the epitome of the art of the fantastic.



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He stated that "when you have read it through you cannot make up your mind whether Herman had a vision or not. Did this vision come out of Herman's nature or was he really one of those who are in contact with another world. That's art for you".<sup>8</sup>

Todorov's book when first published aroused immediate interest. While his theory was rejected by some, it was greeted with enthusiasm by others who wished to develop, refine or moderate his ideas.

Neil Cornwell in his book *The Literary Fantastic*<sup>9</sup> draws attention to two critics, Christine Brooke-Rose and Rosemary Jackson, who basically accept Todorov's ideas and he explains how they elaborate and qualify his work.

In *A Rhetoric of the Unreal* (1983), Brooke-Rose seizes upon the notion of hesitation and points out the ambiguity that is involved in this moment when the reader has the choice of different explanations of an action or event. Brooke-Rose states that "the complexity and subtlety of the pure fantastic lies in its absolute ambiguity".<sup>10</sup>

Commenting on Todorov's distinction of "pure fantastic" from "uncanny" or "marvellous" she writes:

*If the only feature that distinguishes the pure fantastic from the uncanny and the marvellous is ambiguity,*

*which in turn is shared with some non-fantastic fiction, we must either emphasise (as Todorov does) that this ambiguity concerns only the supernatural (thus in effect falling back on the supernatural as basic element), or treat such other non-"fantastic" texts as a displaced form of the fantastic.*<sup>11</sup>

The key elements for the fantastic texts are hesitation, ambiguity and the supernatural.

In *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981)<sup>12</sup>, Rosemary Jackson, while basically accepting Todorov's formula wants to extend it beyond the poetics of the form to create an awareness of the politics of the genre.<sup>13</sup> She also wishes to place more emphasis on psychoanalysis than Todorov does so as "to stretch Todorov's ideas into a more widely based cultural study of the fantastic".<sup>14</sup>

Jackson also sees the fantastic as the outlet for the exclusions, and the taboos, the estrangements and the alienation of bourgeois society. She believes that

*fantastic literature points to or suggests the basis upon which cultural order rests for it opens up, for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality, on to that which is outside the law, that which is outside dominant value systems.*<sup>15</sup>

Jackson's argument then is one that views the fantastic as a subversive influence for social change.

Gary Crew's novel bears out Todorov's theory with Brooke-Rose's and Jackson's modifications. There are frequent moments of hesitation where absolute ambiguity prevails. There is a mixture of genres contributing to the fantastic giving credence to Dostoyevsky's remark that "the fantastic must be so close to the real that you almost have to believe in it".<sup>16</sup>

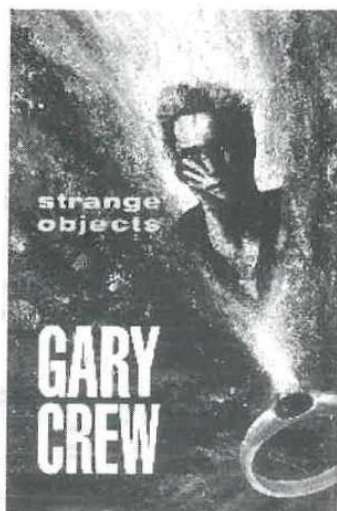
As well as exploring the forms of the fantastic the novel gives meaning to Jackson's ideas on politics, psychoanalysis and subversion as part of a theory of the fantastic. The Aboriginal way of life is valued and beliefs and customs are given meaning in scenes that demonstrate rather than explain. Female characters are shown positively in the same manner. Psychoanalysis comes into play in an attempt to understand the minds of the characters especially that of the leading one. The text itself may be viewed as explaining a society as well as an individual, for events and detail reveal flaws in both. While the text upholds what is good it is subversive in the sense that it lets the reader know that individuals and the society they belong to are far from perfect.

What kind of a novel is **Strange Objects**? It is composed of numerous genres culminating in that of the fantastic. It is an adventure novel where action comes thick and fast. It is a quest novel with two searches, past and present, symbolised by the idea of

the Shining Hills. There are no chapters; just items made up of letters and documents, so its form is epistolary. It is also an historical novel based on careful research and the facts uncovered from the past give the book a mixture of fiction and fact.

The reader is also presented with a thesis about how the first Europeans brought with them a cultural baggage that influenced their way of seeing the new land. These people were influenced by tales of explorers to the Americas, the conquistadors and the hearsay of buccaneers. Early Dutch explorers we are told, referred to the natives as Indians as the myths of El Dorado were transported to Australia. Crew debunks a few myths for us including the cannibal one by recording there is no evidence that the Australian Aborigine ate human flesh; yet we know this happened amongst white men from stories told by escaped convicts, trying to survive in the bush.

The book too, has a dark side with its aspects of the horror novel. The leading character's surname is Messenger but for whom is he a messenger? The town is isolated, desolate and nondescript. Its name is Midway, but midway to where? The school the boys attend is Hamelin High but who is the piper calling the tune? The novel deals with the dark forces of human nature with all the trappings of the Gothic.



Original cover for the hardback edition of *Strange Objects*.

Another genre the author of *Strange Objects* is preoccupied with is that of social realism; here he is concerned with the effects of white civilisation upon the Aborigine as well as the effect of a harsh and strange environment upon the white settlers, past and present.

Jackson's notion of subversion is especially brought out in the author's attitude to the Aborigines in the book. Their way of life is shown to have values which have meaning for their culture and their survival. When Loos and Pelgrom reach the camp, weak and starving, they are fed but once their privations are overcome, they are expected to share in the food gathering process. Loos' and

Pelgrom's values are shown to be inappropriate to the black man's culture when Loos scares the food supply, believing he can do the job better than the natives, because he has a gun and Pelgrom commits sacrilege by running through the body of the dead whale.

Loos and Pelgrom bring civilisation to the natives in the form of toy soldiers with movable arms and legs, whose movements the natives copy, incorporating these into their dances, thus unwittingly preparing themselves for future confrontation with the Europeans.

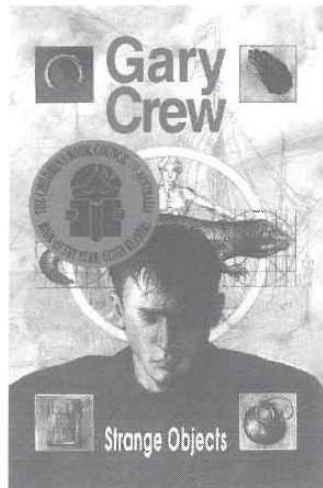
The image of civilisation in the form of an article of clothing — the white stockings fluttering like hundreds of white spirits — brings terror to the natives whose ultimate future is to accept the wearing of clothes. When the wind catches a stocking Pelgrom describes it as a flag to march under. These stockings though never given away are not found in the pot when it is discovered by Steven. They should be, but their disappearance gives credence to the comment by Dr Michaels about Pandora's box. The stockings might be seen to symbolise the ills of white civilisation being let loose upon the natives. The pot's other contents represent the dubious benefits of civilisation to natives: the gold ring, the written book which strongly opposes the long tradition of the Aborigines' oral culture and a dead white girl's hand.

Crew, himself, sees his book as a



novel of colonial discourse intended to challenge the reader to examine what happened in Australia's past and to re-assess the forces that shaped this nation and the effect the white invasion has had on the original inhabitants of this country. At the conclusion of the novel, the Murchison Aboriginal Council is re-empowered to deny, or approve, white access to what little remains of their land — even although the request is to view the bones of a white man.<sup>17</sup>

These different genres provide enough material for a single discussion of each one in its own right, but they all make a significant contribution to that of another — the fantastic — which centres upon Steven Messenger, the main character of the novel. Is the novel concerned with the disintegration of his personality or is he just plain evil, a person controlled by forces outside himself? Is he a disturbed character unbalanced by the death of his father which he refuses to face, or is he just a person seeking identity, a loner growing up in a small desert outback town which he sees as stifling? At the end of the novel does he really disappear as a result of malignant forces or does he stage manage this himself? None of these questions are satisfactorily resolved, there is always doubt or some fact which cannot be accounted for, so **Strange Objects** becomes a candidate for Todorov's category of the Pure Fantastic where there is no consistent explanation for a story's strange events.



Revised cover design for the paperback edition of **Strange Objects**.

Nothing in the novel is what it seems. Everything is open to question. We, the readers are not sure how authentic the Messenger documents are or even if they were sent by Messenger himself to Dr Michaels. Hesitation and ambiguity centre upon objects such as the ring and the relationship between characters.

The ring appears to be a symbol of evil in the hands of a disturbed person such as Jan Pelgrom of the past and Steven Messenger of the present. It seems to find its way to the young and vulnerable, someone disturbed or in a weak state of health. The 17th century boy murderer is seen as a figure of intense evil and the 20th century one may be following in his

footsteps, but whether the ring is responsible or whether there is something askew in their personalities already, is not clear.

The ring may be seen as symbolising the greed of white civilisation for when it is in Aboriginal possession and covered with wax, it seems to have no power. The gold and ruby of its make-up have no value for the Aborigine; Charlie, the Aborigine, is adamant his people do not want the ring. It seems to be capable of evil only when its wearers are greedy or selfish but the ring seems to manoeuvre itself towards characters like these. We are not sure if Steven Messenger stole the ring from the mummified hand; he tells us it must have fallen off when Kratzman waved the hand about and it rolled into his sleeping bag. Because Steven tends to "lift" things we cannot be certain which is the true explanation. We are also uncertain as to whether the ring itself created Steven's double or whether he did this through his own mind, believing in some power of the ring. He is "a dreamer of dreams", a phrase from the epigraph, who is warned that he "must take care not to stir up (strange objects) or meet, the wrong ones" in the great abyss. With the ring he becomes self assured and this could be explained by a supernatural power on the part of the ring or as he himself says, the ring gives him something fixed and concrete to hold onto for the first time in his life. If the ring has come innocently into his posses-

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sion, he, as finder, still can't bear to return it even though he knows it to be a valuable historical treasure; a dilemma of ethics many others would find difficult to handle.

How the ring came into Jan Pelgrom's possession in the 17th century is explained vaguely. Pelgrom says he had it from a Spaniard. Later Loos finds he can't remember the full explanation Pelgrom gave of how he came by the ring. While these remarks can be interpreted in a sinister way and are reinforced by Pelgrom's jealous guardianship of the ring, again he is like Steven Messenger in suddenly owning a valuable possession that gives him self-esteem. But he does give it away freely to Ela and when he does he seems just as dangerous, as he stalks the camp at night, feared by all until his death from fever.

Certainly there is something frightful about Pelgrom who has taken part in murder and rape and who threatens Loos with an axe on two occasions, although Loos lets us know he always has the upper hand because of his musket and physique. If Loos is to be believed Pelgrom's fears, complaints and whines are not admirable. If Pelgrom was so frightful why did Pelsaert set him free when he showed no mercy to the other mutineers and murderers? Explanations about his youth, or that Pelsaert wanted to furnish a companion for Loos might be suggested but none can be given with any certainty.

We are not sure how psychopathic Pelgrom is or whether it might be explained as "folie à deux", "madness together". Gary Crew uses one of the documents in the book to point out that the *Batavia* madness was similar to that of Jonestown 1977, when 900 men, women and children, followers of Rev. James Warren Jones, echoed their leader and committed mass suicide.<sup>18</sup>

The definition of a psychopath as inadequate, introverted, trying to form one or two possessive relationships is strained to fit Messenger and Pelgrom, especially the latter. Both characters may be inadequate; Steven is introverted and appears to be trying to form an intense relationship with Kratzman but this is not so in Pelgrom's case.

When Loos realises the mountains nearby are similar to some in the Americas he believes he will find wealth beyond compare. The idea he says, "beats constantly in his brain" and the boy's unwillingness to help him in the search causes frustration, leading him to accentuate the boy's shortcomings, thus revealing himself as not the long suffering keeper he sets himself up as.

It is difficult to see what each pair of characters in this part of the novel thinks of each other as real feelings are hard to discover. Steven scorns Kratzman for reading *Playboy* magazines left behind at the motel but as he supplies these it is difficult to believe he doesn't

look at them himself.

Loos' and Pelgrom's story can't be completed. What happened after Pelgrom tried to retrieve the ring and failed? We presume Loos was last to die and it was he who placed Ela's hand in the pot. We can only surmise what took place between her death and the hand becoming mummified and later removed.

The partnership of Steven Messenger and his friend Nigel Kratzman parallels the earlier one of Wooter Loos and Jan Pelgrom. Each pair, Messenger and Pelgrom, Loos and Kratzman are similar in appearance, age, height and colouring. Loos and Kratzman are the good guys saddled with unwilling, unhelpful and unco-operative partners. We see a great deal of Steven through his own eyes with very little comment on Steven from Kratzman.

The relationship between Loos and Pelgrom is discovered through Loos' eyes only. The two professors who edit the diary describe Loos as a person of "great humanity". Against this view is that of a sceptic who writes to a newspaper where this journal is being serialised, pointing out that the academics are accepting the word of a condemned murderer, who in the diary states he is building up his self-esteem so that he may be well thought of for posterity. Is Loos genuinely rehabilitating himself or is he creating an idealised image of himself? That is a question which can't be answered for certain.



In time Loos and Pelgrom disappear into the vastness of the Australian continent. The same might be said of Steven and Nigel who vaguely head off in opposite directions, north and south respectively. Steven's view of the landscape suggests that further sightings of either of them will be difficult. Midway is no place to build a monument to human existence. The hotel sign continually flashes "Vacancy". The grey sea blasted by the wind smashes the cliff so hard that one night he expects the units will tilt and sink slowly into the sand. The roadhouse and even Highway One he believes will vanish forever, undermined or swallowed by the sea beneath.<sup>19</sup> The landscape here is harsh and is at odds with human endeavour, especially white struggles of Loos and Pelgrom of the past, and Steven, his mother and others around them in the present show.

Minor characters in the novel are ambiguous. The scientist Dr Hope Michaels whose name suggests she is on the side of the angels could be on the side of the keepers or owners of the ring, if the ring is seen as an instrument of evil.

Her name may be a red herring, a game the author is playing. She appears to know the ring is missing before all the others but the reader hesitates as this could be deduced through her scientific training. She flatters Steven by telling him he gave the two murderers "their lives

again, you gave them to us". (p.54) She is talking about the service he is doing history, but the remark is ambiguous. She tries very hard to get the ring back from Steven but are her motives pure? Is she doing this in the interests of science or for another power? She also flatters him in likening him to James Dean, a figure he begins to model himself on. Dr Michaels classifies Steven as schizophrenic, something she has very little evidence for, and it is a judgement she is not trained to make. If the Messenger documents are authentic then we can believe in Dr Michaels as a reputable archaeologist but if not, well the link to antiquity can suggest another possibility. When she hears of the discovery of the pot, she comments ambiguously that this may be another Pandora's box. (p. 24)

Steven's friend Nigel Kratzman is ambiguous too. We see him through Steven's eyes and Dr Michaels'. Steven sees him as weird and untrustworthy, a boss boy who is always making rules. Kratzman is associated by Steven with the principal of the school when he assumes the place in the Staff room vacated by that man. Dr Michaels describes him as a fine-looking, mature young man, happy in his present trade. His energies and dreams go into restoring a car wreck and ultimately he goes south to do a mechanics course which Dr Michaels tells us has been very successful.

While he has many positive aspects

of character there are others that suggest a sinister side; Steven sees him as preoccupied with spying on people; we are told he terrorised a school group with the mummified hand; his morbid description of the dead body and the suicide could account for Steven's dreams of blood; he stops Steven killing a bird but he has supplied the material for building the slingshot.

Kratzman looks after himself. He distances himself from his friend at a time his friend needs support and he shows little sympathy towards Steven who has recently lost his father. Kratzman has never had a father we are told so his behaviour here could be sympathetic or unsympathetic. He leans towards the latter.

Nigel Kratzman never offers help willingly and expects to be paid for what he does, even if the payment consists of old Playboy magazines.

His taking of Steven and the Aborigine, Charlie Sunrise to the secret place is made through a desire to see what is in it for himself. Like Steven he seems to have no friends but he is a manipulator of people and his coming across as a mature pleasant young man could be seen as part of his manipulative skills. At the end of the novel we learn his name is only a pseudonym because he does not want to appear under his own name in the published papers. This lack of real identity adds to his shadowiness as an "ordinary" character.

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It is hinted at in the book that other things as well as the ring went missing when the pot was opened in the cave. If this was so, Nigel Kratzman would just as likely be a suspect as Steven Messenger. The ambiguity of this relationship draws the reader's attention back to the protagonists of the early period. Is Pelgrom as bad as Loos makes out?

The hesitations which make this novel *Pure Fantasy* in Todorov's terms centre upon the character of Steven Messenger. Are the documents true in revealing an unbalanced personality or are they created carefully and constructed by him to leave a situation and a town he finds unbearable in order to discover his own identity? Like Kratzman who has to go south to find himself, Steven must go north. He is like his father who was always travelling north, not staying in one place long, always looking for something better. The south in Australia is more secure, the north still unknown and adventurous. The character of each boy leads him to seek fulfilment by travelling in opposite directions that are symbolic for each, though Steven is cynical about his quest. "I wonder what will be there when we reach the top? Disneyland?" (p. 26)

There are cases of people wishing to escape a difficult situation, simply disappearing. Steven's background is not all that stable as the ambiguous treatment of his mother as a character shows. Does he want to get away from her? She is friendly with the truck drivers

who pass through the town but we don't know how friendly. She doesn't get on with the only other woman at the motel. We don't know why and this complicates the relationship between the two boys. We suspect the relationship with her husband was not strong but we later learn that Steven's father has been dead for six months at the time these events are happening. Against this Steven tells us she only remains in the town to get him some high school education.

Because Steven never admits to the death of his father in a road accident we could explain some of the events as a result of a shock or the product of an unbalanced mind — his dreams of standing in blood for example — but they can also be described as a fictional account of a planned disappearance. When he finds the ring he has the wherewithal to leave. One of his first questions to the police sergeant looking for it is, "Is it gold?" and his second, "Is it worth money?" (p. 23)

The Messenger documents have been constructed by their owner and who is to believe Steven's statements about knowing names and events before they were told him. All the events could have been learned from newspapers and placed in a different order in the scrapbook after the events.

Everything that Steven tells us exists in fiction — and we know he is a reader — dreams, spacships, rings which glow in the dark and

people being lifted into shafts of light. There is a strong flavour of alien culture in his writings. The landscape hints of aliens — and people have even reported sightings. The area is isolated, backpackers and campers are at risk. There is a history of unexplained disappearances in the region. Stories of the hitchhiker and the homicidal maniac are told by the school groups. If you meet this person on the highway — don't stop. Gothic touches abound with meat ants eating a body, bones and all, that had been left on their nest.

These ideas become part of the Messenger documents — they are even presented in a Star Wars Project book with the caption "A Life pod lands on the barren surface of Tatoonie". Messenger reads a great deal of material left behind by truck drivers who pass through Midway. Some of this is at the newspaper, comic and magazine level but not all, the range is large and possibly there are Stephen King novels. He has an interest in science and tends to find out about things which interest him, such as the meaning of the fabled El Dorado. He comments on the inadequacies of the school and local library. Amongst his documents are photocopies from learned books that he has looked up (Items 9, 10, 22).

Steven can be seen as disadvantaged in an area where mediocrity and settlement for a peaceful if not dreary existence hold sway. When it is suggested that he looks like



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James Dean he seizes upon this cult figure to build his own image either in dream or reality. First he notices this figure in the daylight in school uniform, then gradually he appears in jeans and then more definitely in a red top and white jeans. This figure he says he sees, may exist only in his own mind.

His experiments with the Life Form (a lizard in a wire cage left on an ants' nest) can be seen as a way of planning his departure from Midway. He originally calls this a LIFE FORCE but decides that name is too bookish, but this again can be interpreted as a Freudian slip as Steven searches for a more meaningful and perhaps forceful life. His careful research and labelling the parts of the lizard reveal either a cold-blooded approach or one that is rational and scientific. The lack of fingerprints found on the belt buckle retrieved from the ant's nest makes his disappearance more ambiguous.

Steven's character has so many ambiguities that are open to varying interpretations that it is difficult to label him sinister. We know he is a loner who is orderly and perhaps over tidy. He takes pride in his hands and is a little obsessive about them but at the same time he is capable of delicate work with them; he has constructed a wire model of the Eiffel Tower.

Steven values his privacy and doesn't like his belongings touched. He sleeps away from others on a school excursion but only moves

away after Kratzman talks unceasingly about cars. He is capable of racist remarks but so are many others and when some of his actions are analysed, such as moving away from Charlie Sunrise's dirty trousers as they sit together in the truck and being repulsed by his twisted hand, these could be actions that arouse feelings of dislike in people whether they be black or white.

Steven also says he hates other kids, but how true is this and how deep is the remark? He is scornful of his classmates who took days off to strip an engine as Kratzman did, or pretended to be sick using the trauma of the mummified hand as an excuse. Because of his weak chest and asthma, he seems to have difficulty in being part of a group and asserting himself. His attempt to fire shots at a gull is a temptation easily yielded to by many others and even his systematic killing of the lizard for the perfect skeleton can be seen as the need to gain scientific knowledge and not killing for its own sake. If he plans his own disappearance this way, it would be an essential part of his preparations.

Whatever happens in this novel, no clear answer can be given for other possibilities are also evoked.

The ring to Steven is not necessarily a force for evil although the reader is guided to this interpretation by linking him with its previous owner, 17th century Jan Pelgrom. These two have age in

common and in moments of anger and intensity, a halo effect is created around their heads. But in the novel the author suggests this may be explained scientifically so that it is not necessarily a supernatural phenomenon. They are characters who are seen as complaining and cowardly but this is only told us by characters who are building their self-esteem at the expense of others. Both Steven and Jan are responsible for the death of others. Jan Pelgrom, whatever his part in the *Batavia* killing, brings destruction to the Aborigines through his influenza. Steven pushes Charlie Sunrise against a rock and he breaks his skull. Steven says this was self defence as Sunrise had tried to take the ring from him. This may be hard to believe but it is possible. Throughout the story both Steven and Kratzman have been circumspect of the Blacks and in terror of their camp. Black deaths in the novel can be seen as an ongoing effect of black and white civilisation attempting to come to terms.

Steven finds the ring early in the story at a time when he is anxious about his father taking "contracts that are further and further away" and "stay(ing) away longer too" (p.27). His father has been gone for weeks, much longer than usual and has possibly been killed in a truck accident, an event the reader learns later that Steven is unwilling to face. He also feels that pressure will be on him to pack up and leave when (if?) his father returns. The ring to the boy is a kind of security,



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something to hold on to. "No matter what happens, I'm going to have this. I'm going to keep it until I'm ready to give it up" he says (p.27).

As the restoration of the car was to Kratzman, so was the ring to Steven something secure. His comments about wanting "to be out of the blood, safe inside the white light of the ring" (p.52) do not have to be taken literally but are happenings in his dreams and the blood a reference to his father's death as could be the red light of the ring as he looks at the flashing red motel sign reading vacancy (p.56). The many references to blood throughout the novel suggest the awfulness of the father's death that Steven is unable to come to terms with.

Steven also realises that he cannot give up the ring because it makes "dead people come alive" (p.56). Hope Michaels puts this thought into his mind when she suggests to him that he "woke Wouter Loos and Jan Peigrom from a long sleep. You gave them their lives again" (p.54). The ring has given Steven Messenger a legendary identity, the image of James Dean, and the name of a mysterious girl, E.L.A, two icons readily sought by teenage boys. Perhaps he believes the ring might bring back his father too. In view of the strength he gains from the ring, he says, "there was no way I was giving that ring back . . . If I gave that ring back everything would stop" (p.56).

When he describes the ring as a

circle of pure gold, something that is perfect, this may be a condition he wishes for himself. At the inquest we learn from his mother that the ring was not responsible for his dreams and screams in the night which she says began six months before finding the mummified hand, at the time of his father's death in the rig accident. As Steven has not faced up to his father's death the ring becomes a more positive force in the story even perhaps helping him come to terms with this and develop a more grown up identity.

Even so his final remark when he says, "Up north I could wear the ring every day, on my hand, right out in the open, then I would find out what we can really do", is one that remains ambiguous. (p.177)

Messenger's final disappearance establishes the novel in the Pure Fantasy area. Nothing has been seen of him for three years, just unconfirmed sightings. But are these sightings Steven, his clone or just someone who looks like him. Some questions remain unanswered: How was Steven able to describe the sink hole if he wasn't there? and how did he get home from the Aboriginal site in an impossible time? and was it him on the highway outside his home three days after his mother said he had left?

By this time Steven Messenger has passed into the myths of the area along with the vanishing hitchhiker and the other legends of the

Murchison area.

Did he plan his disappearance himself or was he a victim of some evil force, its messenger abroad in the vast spaces of Western Australia? Or was he disturbed, on the way to being a psychopath as his counterpart in the 17th century was believed to be? Another unresolved question in the novel is the linking of Steven and Nigel to Water Loos and Jan Peigrom by Charlie Sunrise when he believes the cave drawings of the past represent Steven and Nigel. Is this merely superstition or has he secret knowledge that links to the past?

Because of the ambiguity of its hesitation there is no place for Gary Crew's novel within Todorov's definitions of the marvellous or the uncanny, so it must be placed in the category of the Pure Fantastic with other significant novels Todorov's term applies to.

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#### Footnotes

1 Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Oxford University Press, 1990, p.81.

2 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, tr. R. Howard, Ithica, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1975.

3 Chris Baldick in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 129 describes the marvellous as follows: A category of fiction in which supernatural, magical or other wondrous impossibilities are accepted as normal within an imagined world clearly separated from our own reality. The category includes fairy tales, many romances, and more science fiction among both other kinds of fantasy with "other worldly" settings, like J.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Modern theorists have distinguished marvellous tales from those of the uncanny in terms of the explanations offered for strange events: in the marvellous, these are explained by magic, while in the uncanny, they are given psychological causes.

4 Chris Baldick (above) defines the uncanny as follows: The uncanny is a kind of disturbing strangeness evoked in some kinds of horror story and related fiction. In Todorov's theory of the fantastic: the uncanny is an effect produced by stories in which

incredible events can be explained as the products of "the narrators" or the protagonist's dream, hallucination or delusion. An example of this is Poe's *The Tell Tale Heart* (1843), in which the narrator is clearly suffering from paranoid delusions. In tales of the marvellous . . . no such psychological explanation is offered and strange events are taken to be truly supernatural.

5 Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, especially of the Fantastic*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp.64-5. Also quoted Cornwell p.36.

6 Neil Cornwell, *The Literary Fantastic: From Gothic to Postmodernism*, London, Harvester, 1990, p.36.

7 Cornwell, p.23.

8 Cornwell, p.23. Also quoted Jackson, p.27.

9 Cornwell, p.14.

10 Brooke-Rose, p.229. Also quoted Cornwell, p.14.

11 Brooke-Rose, p.65. Also quoted Cornwell, p.14.

12 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, London, Methuen, 1981.

13 Jackson, p.6. Quoted in Cornwell, p.15.

14 Jackson, p.7. Quoted in Cornwell, p.15.

15 Jackson, pp.3-4.

16 Cornwell, p.23, p.223. Also quoted Jackson, p.27.

17 Gary Crew, "Strange Objects" in *Reading Time*, Vol.35, No.3, p.12.

18 Gary Crew, *Strange Objects*, Melbourne, Octopus, 1991, pp.42-3. Group hysteria: A condition where the insanity of one person seems to affect the mind of another or several members of a group. If the person who first caused the problem is removed, those who have been affected usually revert to normal behaviour patterns.

19 Crew, p.25, p.26.



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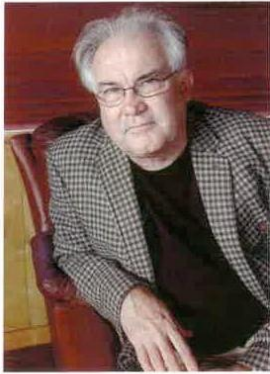
He has written on the novels of James Aldridge and has recently edited *Children's Literature and Contemporary Theory*, published by the New Literature Research Centre, Department of English, University of Wollongong.



ADVOCATE FOR Children's Literature:

Gary Crew

by Leonie Tyle



Gary Crew is as complex as the fiction he writes for young readers. His work is shaped by his fascination for post colonial literature, history and his own past. He wrote in *Magpies*, 'I know I cannot entirely abandon my own past. Once I would have longed to; I would have given anything to at least redress, at best forget, the forces that shaped me — but, as I grow older, and more confident in my art, I am not so certain... A writer who cannot remember must produce lean fare. And surely a children's writer who cannot remember is no writer at all.' He has the ability to take snippets of our history and transpose them back into beautiful and confronting fiction.

Gary's contribution to Australian children's literature is three fold. He changed the nature of young adult literature by taking it to darker and more intricate places than ever before. His journey into picture books saw the development of books specifically aimed at older readers, once the sole pre-

serve of the very young. And finally, he has mentored some of this country's finest writers and illustrators who acknowledge their debt to him and his encouragement and at times his harsh criticism.

Maurice Saxby in *The Proof of the Puddin'* wrote of Gary, *His novels epitomise young adult literature in Australia to date. They combine popular appeal with intellectual, emotional, psychological and spiritual substance.*

*Strange Objects* is the book which changed YA fiction in this country. It was a novel which forced the reader to confront some of the ugly truths of colonisation. In *Reading Time* Gary wrote, the book is intended to challenge the reader to examine what has happened in our past, to reassess what forces shaped this nation — and the effect the white invasion had on the original inhabitants of this country. By far my favourite Crew novel is *No Such Country*, a masterpiece shaped by Christian metaphors, references and symbols. Gary loves the composition of language. In these two sentences we get a feel for his rhythm and nuances which create the beauty and evil of New Canaan.

*Contained by a border lush with exotic vegetation there now appeared the zigzag backbone of a mountain range and prominent among its peaks a solitary volcano sprouted stark and symmetrical arcs of red and orange and yellow, terminating in a sea of cobalt so dense that it appeared to support, rather than wash the shores, of this awful place. And from the surface of the sea, creatures emerged. Not primordial lizards and familiar to the inhabitants of the age of science, but monstrous things, fanged and webbed, and some were head up and some were tail up, but none were quite correct there, since all seemed stuck in or glued on to that slab of blue.*

Other young adult books which pushed those early boundaries include, *Angel's*

*Gate*, *Gothic Hospital* and *Mamma's Babies* to name just a few.

His greatest achievement to date is his ground breaking picture books for older readers. In collaboration with Helen Chamberlain at Lothian Books they pushed every publishing boundary in Australia. This relationship was special right from the start. Gary wrote,

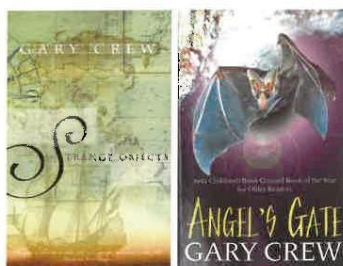
*I first met Helen as the editor of the reprint of my second novel *The House of Tomorrow*. We have been the greatest friends ever since, with each driving the other to greater heights. I have to say that Helen has a perfect editorial eye (her motto: 'Less is best') and a perfect aesthetic eye (plus an awesome visual memory). What a combination! Ours has been a great and rewarding friendship. A wonderful adventure in writing.*

James Roy commented on Gary's picture books,

*An observation I'd make is that the CBCA had to make room for him, to some extent. I really believe that the 'YA' picture books he did with Peter Gouldthorpe, Steven Woolman and Shaun Tan challenged our understanding of picture books so greatly that they became too difficult to judge against the more traditional picture books. How can you compare an Alison Lester or a Bob Graham against a Crew/Tan or a Crew/Woolman? They're entirely different animals. I also think that Gary's picture book texts paved the way for innovative books like *The Arrival* and *Requiem For a Beast*. Someone has to pave the way, to shove aside convention, and in Australia, through the nineties, it was Gary Crew.*

Gary has the ability to visually conceive and construct alternative ways of looking at the world and guiding and inspiring illustrators is one of his skills. He claims that,





*the role of the illustrator is not to verify or confirm the print text, rather it is to complement it and yet extend the text, giving the narrative a greater resonance, while respecting the integrity of the book as a work of art.*

I was privileged to publish his first YA picture book about death, *Lucy's Bay*, in 1992. Gary's love of drawing and design encouraged and empowered illustrator Gregory Rogers to extend the text by developing a visual narrative way beyond Gary's original conception. *Lucy's Bay* again demonstrates Gary's love of language, *Pure white sand swept down to the sea. Broken shells of every form lay like lace upon its edge.*

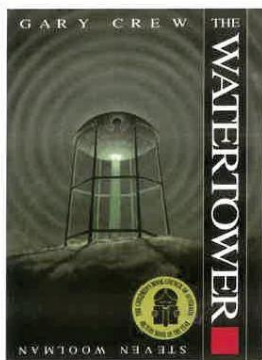
He discovered Shaun Tan and worked so well with Steven Woolman that the deeply psychic *The Watertower* is one of Australia's most loved and pondered picture books for older readers.

The other most significant contribution to literature Gary has achieved is his ability to mentor new writers and illustrators. Some of these have included Anthony Eaton, James Roy and JC Burke. He has done this in numerous ways, through master classes and mentorships held at Writers Centres, as series editor with Lothian and at the request of publishers as in the case of James Roy at UQP.

Anthony claims,

*Gary was, without a doubt, one of the most intrinsic factors in the foundation of my writing career. When he agreed to masterclass my first novel, *The Darkness* with me, little did I know what an intense, incredible experience I had let myself in for.*

*"Don't be precious!" has been Gary's catchcry since the day I met him. Don't think of your writing as art, think of it as words on a page: words that you, as a writer, need to polish, to craft, and to view through an unemotional lens, in order that you might be able to bring out their full potential. It's a confronting experience, being told this. For some, no doubt, it's the first and possibly hardest test of their mental atti-*



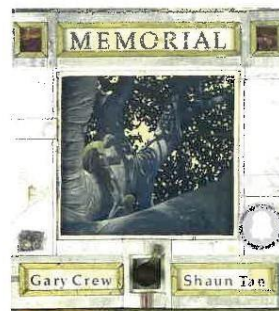
*tude to writing and the writing industry. I am certain that there are many people out there who might not appreciate the frank and direct appraisal of their writing that Gary offers, but to this day, it's a philosophy I continue to apply to everything I write.*

*When I think of Gary, I tend to think of him as a craftsman — an artisan in the old sense of the word: an uncompromising master of his trade, and of his tools. In this case the trade is stories and the tools are words, and I consider myself extraordinarily lucky to have had the opportunity to learn from such a master. He has had an extraordinary impact upon the field of children's and young adult writing in this country: books like *Strange Objects* and *No Such Country* are masterpieces of post-modern narrative and allegory, and were among the first to demonstrate to me that writing for young people didn't just mean writing kid's stories. These books showed me that the application of sophisticated writing techniques and narrative approaches isn't just something that can be done in children's and young adult fiction, but something that should be done.*

*Even though I like to think that in the decade since I first met Gary I've developed my own style, voice and philosophy of writing, it's fair to say that, in many little ways, I still sense the impact of Gary Crew in many aspects of my approach to my chosen career.*

James Roy continues,

*All I'd say is that when he edited my first book, Gary almost stopped me writing then and there. What he had to say felt so savage. But I swallowed my pride and pushed on, mainly because his reputation was so huge. To most other editors I might have said "Who the hell do you think you are? There's advice, and then there's just plain rude." And maybe that was his plan — to see if I could cop it. To see if I was tough enough. Fortunately I was, and the*



*changes he suggested — some of them enormous — not only improved that first book out of sight, but taught me skills and principles that I still recall when I write, thirteen years later.*

Jane Burke also commented on her experience of being mentored by Gary.

*Gary's words of encouragement really made the difference to me. I suppose it gave me the confidence to keep writing the manuscript and believe that it was actually okay.*

*In the end the biggest thing Gary did was to take the manuscript to Helen Chamberlain. It was published, *White Lies* (CBCA notable 2003) and all worked out okay but I suppose it was a bit of a gamble for Gary, as he was my mentor and by default associated with it.*

Gary Crew's contribution to Australian children's literature is huge. As a writer of confronting accessible teenage fiction, his brilliant transformation of picture books for older readers and his influence on a whole generation of writers who acknowledge him as their mentor, muse and at times harasser has been remarkable and under acknowledged. He will never give up on his crusade of writing innovative picture books for older readers and continuing his collaboration with new and creative illustrators. He will always challenge himself and delight and confront his readers. He continues to evolve publishing his first adult novel *The Children's Writer* later this year. Gary Crew is an icon of Australian children's literature. His work will be treasured and loved by many generations of young readers to come.

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## Appendix B. Reviews

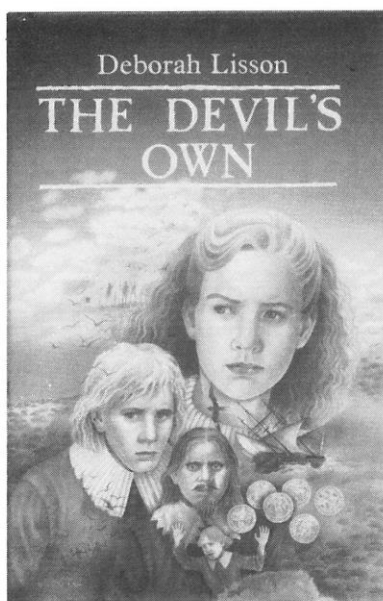
*[Review] Devil's Own, The (Deborah Lisson – a two novel comparison study with Gary Crew's Strange Objects) The Literature Base Vol 1, No 3, August 1990, pp 26–28.*

# THE WRECK OF THE *BATAVIA*

## A TWO NOVEL COMPARISON STUDY

In 1629 the Dutch vessel *Batavia* was shipwrecked on the Houtman Abrolhos off the coast of Western Australia. Some 250 people found themselves fighting for their lives in more ways than one on these barren islands.

The account of the wreck and its survivors has been well documented and the events are of the nature of highly exciting, very brutal fiction. The captain, Francisco Pelsaert, with several men, set off for Indonesia in an



open boat to gain assistance. Meanwhile, Jeronimus Cornelius, who had already gathered a group of men together before the shipwreck to mutiny and seize the treasure on board, now began with this group systematically to murder the remaining passengers and crew.

He began by persuading the people to go to different islands to live on the excuse that they had a better chance for survival this way until the return of Pelsaert. He and his men then set out to murder the smaller groups of people, hoping that by the time Pelsaert arrived back, he and his band would have killed everyone and could then overpower the rescue group and make off with the treasure.

When Pelsaert returned with a rescue ship the tables were turned by the few remaining survivors and Cornelius and his band were tried and executed on the spot.

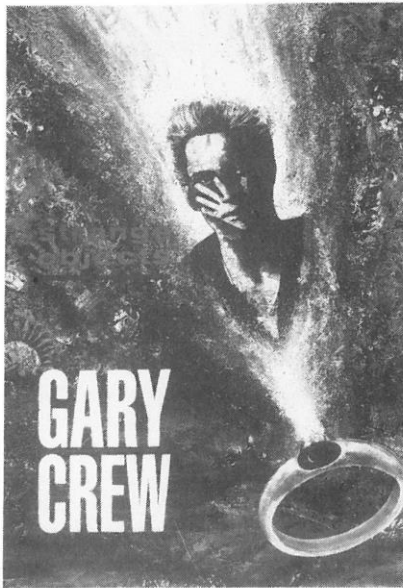
These events have now become the source of two novels which interestingly have come off the press a few weeks of one another: **Strange Objects**, by Gary Crew is published by Heinemann Educational Australia, and **The Devil's Own**, a first novel by Western Australian Deborah Lisson is published by Walter McVitty Books. The two would make a valuable resource for comparative studies in literature.

Historical fiction is not a popular genre, but both of these novels, by the use of modern day protagonists, begin firmly set in the present. Readers are thus led gently from present time into the past. **The Devil's Own** is a time slip novel, while **Strange Objects** is a much more intricately structured piece of work which defies categorisation.

**The Devil's Own** follows a reasonably straightforward and well-known path in the time slip field. It is prefaced with a quotation which is actually the oath of the mutineers from the *Batavia* and is the source of the book's title. The first two chapters are then composed of alternating passages, one of events at the time of the *Batavia* wreck (these passages in italics to differentiate them) and the other of Julie Dykstra, a Dutch Australian, and her family on holidays in the Houtman Abrolhos. There is no link between the two concurrent passages, however, Julie, not getting on well with her family, does catch glimpses of a face on one of the islands. This is to prove to be of a character from the past. Julie then slips into the past to become part of the events in the final days of the *Batavia* slaughters and eventual rescue before she makes the necessary slip back to her own time.

**Strange Objects**, Gary Crew's third novel, has a much more involved structure. It is an ambitious and impressive work. It also begins with a quotation. This is from one of Lovecraft's stories and is also the source of the title, but leads us into the knowledge that this is not a story of normal, everyday events. We then are given an introduction by Dr Hope Michaels, Director of the Western Australian Institute of Maritime Archaeology,

explaining that she was left a project book by 16 year old Steven Messenger who has disappeared. This project book is filled with diary entries and cuttings from various sources. Most of the remainder of the book is composed



of these pieces. So the structure is that of a collage of newspaper articles, diary entries, transcripts of radio interviews, academic statements, extracts photocopied from books, and so on. Readers must construct the narrative for themselves from all of these pieces.

The narrative concerns Steven Messenger who discovers a “cannibal” pot, containing a mummified hand and a diary, in a cave. Scientific investigation prove the diary to be that of one Wouter Loos who was one of the *Batavia* mutineers, but for some reason was set adrift rather than hanged, together with a teenage member of the murderers, Jan Pelgrom. Loos had kept the diary for his remaining days while trying to survive with Pelgrom on the inhospitable coast. Much of the time they spent with Aboriginal tribes.

The two narrative lines of Messenger, affected strangely by his theft of a ring from the mummified hand, and of Pelgrom, the teenage murderer, run concurrently through the novel.

Parts of the papers presented to the reader are of real events, and it is indeed difficult to distinguish the factual from the fictional. Footnotes and quoted books add to the blurring of the lines between real and imagined, and while there are events in the novel of the fantastic, the reader is drawn into the conviction that this has all really taken place.

The complexity of the structure is carefully managed by Crew so that the events are clear and for the reader it is all a fascinating and engrossing read.

Because the two novels are so different in structure and style yet based upon the same events, it can be of value to take them with students to see how two authors have treated the same inspiration. Lisson remains with the events on the islands; Crew virtually ignores them and uses the two castaways, who are not mentioned by Lisson at all. The result is that, oddly, in Lisson’s novel the factual basis seems unreal, whereas in the Crew novel it is difficult at times not to consider the fictional element as being factual.

The two novels, while both fiction, would appear to have been written with different purposes in mind. Lisson’s is predominantly written as an entertainment, whereas Crew’s is making comment.

The Lisson novel gives the chance for discussion on the contrast between present day and past, and a character who must survive in both milieux.

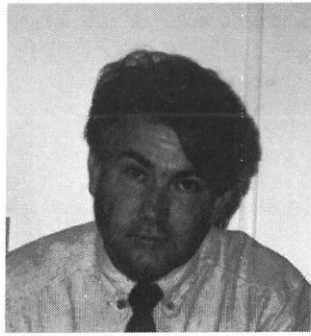
The Crew novel lends itself admirably for detailed discussion, for there are carefully placed commonalities between the two “stories” which make nice contrasts: Aborigines feature in both threads and we see them before whites and after; the two teenage boys, Pelgrom and Messenger, have much in common (in fact, it is disturbing to come to grips with the slowly dawning realisation that Messenger, the protagonist, whom we expect to be the “good guy”, is, in fact evil, and we keep rejecting the notion waiting for some confirmation that we are mistaken). The novel is also one which by its structure, its storylines, and its mysteries makes the reader want to talk it over.

Objects that bear a power feature in both novels: a rosary in *The Devil’s Own* and a ring in *Strange Objects*. The ring plays a major part in the Crew novel and bears with it the power, like that of the ring in Wagner’s ring cycle or of the ring Bilbo Baggins stole from Gollum in the Tolkien series, of gradually destroying its bearer.

#### Suggested Activities

- Research the historical facts of the wreck of the *Batavia* and the geographical area in which the novels are both set.
- Chart comparisons and contrasts between the two novels. Both novels have teenage protagonists. One is male, one is female. Both have objects of power. One is positive, one is negative. And so on.
- Discuss the common elements between the two threads of *Strange Objects*. What points is the author making by linking the two stories in this way?





Gary Crew

- Crew and Lisson both have had to consider language style. Crew has to write in various styles to suit a variety of documents and narrative forms. How has he achieved them? Lisson has to overcome the difficulty of presenting speech in both modern and past times. How does she do this? Compare the spellings of historical characters'

names in the two novels.

- How are time links and leaps achieved by Crew? While it is not a time slip novel, there are occasions where "contact" of a sort is made. Has the author chosen an appropriate method to do this, why has he done it, and is it successful? How are the time slips achieved by Lisson? Are they successful? How are time slips made in other novels, e.g. **Playing Beatie Bow**? How do authors overcome the problems of speech, clothing and knowledge when characters find themselves in other times?

- Compare the family life of both protagonists with their reactions towards it. Julie's family is caring and involved with one another while Julie seems to be at odds with them; Steven's mother appears to be unconcerned about her son.

- Crew makes interesting observations about the way people "see" or interpret their surroundings according to the ways in which they have been brought up. Loos, for example, can only see Australia and its inhabitants according to his European background, e.g. he is always frightened of being eaten by the Aborigines whom he sees as cannibals purely because of his background. Messenger also has preformed ways of seeing and interpreting. Examine the ways in which the two characters interpret their surroundings according to these sets, and discuss them in relation to the ways in which people react according to set predilections.



Deborah Lisson

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An article by Sharyn Pearce on Gary Crew and his novels, which may be found in **Papers**, Vol. 1, No. 2, discusses **Strange Objects** in connection with Crew's other two novels.

Freeman, Pamela 'Essay: Strange Objects' *Reading Australia* 2014

<https://readingaustralia.com.au/essays/strange-objects/>

The wreck of the Dutch ship *Batavia* on the coast of Western Australia in 1629 has been a source of inspiration for many Australian writers. Its story of mutiny, wreck, murder, rape, barbarism, and subsequent rescue and justice is both horrible and fascinating, combining as it does the worst of human nature with a challenge to the 'received' history of European exploration of Australia.

After the wreck, the commander, Francisco Pelsaert, took the long boat and sailed for help, leaving a junior officer, Jeronimus Cornelisz, in command. Most fictional accounts of the wreck concentrate on the violence and cruelty of the crew, under Cornelisz, towards the marooned passengers. Over 100 men, women and children were killed before Pelsaert returned to rescue them. Most of the murderers were executed, but Pelsaert allowed two, a young boy, Jan Pelgrom, and another man, Wouter Loos, to be marooned on mainland Australia. Loos's fictional journal forms a thread in *Strange Objects*.

In the year that *Strange Objects* won the CBCA Book of the Year Award, another book about the Batavia wreck was shortlisted for the same award – Deborah Lisson's *The Devil's Own*. Whereas Lisson's book is a straightforwardly told time slip story about a young girl finding herself caught up in the *Batavia* horrors, Crew has chosen to give us multiple accounts, intersecting possibilities, and unresolved questions.

*Strange Objects* circles around the story of Stephen Messenger, the 16-year-old who finds Loos's journal in a small 'cannibal pot', along with the long-mummified hand of a white girl and a golden ring. One of the conceits of the story is that Messenger has constructed a scrapbook which contains, not only his own account of the consequences of his find, but also newspaper clippings, radio interviews, letters from a prominent archaeologist and from a schoolmate/neighbour of Messenger's, as well as Loos' translated journal as it appeared in an Australian newspaper.

The result of these multiple storytelling modes is that there is no one 'truth' represented. The lack of a single authorial voice allows doubt, and the details of both timelines are described, contradicted, reaffirmed and questioned again, leaving many possibilities for the reader to choose among.

One of these possibilities is related to the 'magic' effect of the ring on both Pelgrom and Messenger, the two young and probably mentally ill boys of the two timelines. In my personal correspondence with Gary Crew this year, he said, '... as an historian, I am not impressed by the fantastic (that's just a red herring...), because I simply believe that all possibilities are on

the table and one day we may know more' but to my mind this balance of possibilities puts the book firmly in the tradition of the literature of the fantastic. Tzvetan Todorov, in *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1975), has defined the fantastic as:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know....there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. (p. 25)

Todorov suggests that if the author chooses the first solution, the novel belongs in the category of the uncanny; if the second, then it belongs in the category of the marvellous. But if an author maintains the uncertainty; if readers are left to decide for themselves the truth of the situation, the novel belongs in the category of the fantastic. (Perhaps the best known example of this in English is Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, which would be an excellent companion text for *Strange Objects*, as would Lisson's *The Devil's Own*.) *Strange Objects* neatly fits Todorov's criteria. (In quantum physics' terms, the novel remains in a superposition of states.)

The uncertainty is magnified by the fact that Messenger is an unreliable narrator. What is unclear is *how* unreliable. While his understanding of other people is obviously flawed, and his interpretation of other people's actions towards him breathtakingly self-centred, it's not clear whether everything he describes actually happens, or whether his problems with people are symptoms of an underlying mental illness, exacerbated by grief at the death of his father – which is only revealed at the very end of the book.

Loos, the other main narrator (through his journal) may also be unreliable – not through any mental incapacity, but through hunger, exhaustion and a profound cultural dislocation as he interacts with a group of local Aboriginal people.

Both of these narrators recount seemingly magical experiences associated with the ring, which belongs to Pelgrom in 1629 and which Messenger finds and claims for his own in 1990. But are these experiences real, imagined, or part of an untold history for which we have no current evidence?

According to Crew (again, this comes from our correspondence this year), 'The gold ring was meant as a motif/trope to suggest the alien's (Europeans') lust for gold. This is echoed in Pelgrom's mistaken belief that the quartz crystal he finds is a diamond. The same idea was suggested in



Favenc's earlier *Marooned on Australia* (1867) – which I read after I wrote *Objects* (had no idea it existed!) – yet also based on the Batavia wreck – which has strong links to Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* and their attendant (colonial) wealth.'

Fantastic literature resists the temptation to declare either/or. There are three ways to approach it: decide on a 'reality' (eg Messenger is mad/Messenger is sane and therefore the magic is real); disbelieve all realities (eg everyone is mad, everyone is lying); or combine realities (eg Messenger is mad but reports truthfully on what he sees and experiences.

His mental illness may be a combination of pre-existing condition (Asperger's/psychopathy?) plus denial of grief. Perhaps this mental state, so close to Pelgrom's, may explain why the ring 'chose' him. So it is possible to accept all the readings, and this is what makes *Strange Objects* a challenging and engrossing book; each reader will come to their own conclusions about what has actually happened, and some rare readers will be prepared to enjoy the novel without coming to a conclusion.

*Strange Objects* is constructed through parallels, with identical themes being explored in both time frames via matched characters. Messenger and Pelgrom are the most obvious pair: both young, both troubled, both profoundly self-centred, both obsessed with the ring, both inclined to violence and, ultimately, both killers. We do not discover what happened to either of them after their disappearances; after they commit murder, they disappear from their respective narratives, Pelgrom immediately, Messenger within days.

Crew uses Messenger to give us insights into Pelgrom – the parallels between them are close enough that we may assume that what is true of one is true of the other. Paranoia, unfeeling cruelty, unthinking violence, are coupled in both cases with a sense of being outcast; in Pelgrom's case, literally, both from his ship and, later, from the tribe, and in Messenger's case physically and socially, in his isolated home and his lack of friends.

We are given hints early about Messenger's obsessive and anti-social traits. In his first journal entry, where he describes the school camp on which he found the cannibal pot, he slips away to the cave where he finds the pot. 'None of the others saw me move; I was in the dark, well outside the bright ring of firelight.' Later, this is echoed in Pelgrom's haunting of the indigenous tribe: 'Each night he comes, calling softly, about the camp, outside the firelight'. In the end, both achieve a kind of metamorphosis, described by others as having in some ways escaped mortal bonds without dying (of course, the 'truth' of this is contradicted and left unexplained, inviting the reader to decide for themselves).

The parallels continue. Messenger and Pelgrom both have foils; a good, solid, strong male with a conscience and compassion for others. In

IBBY Australia Nomination for Hans Christian Andersen Award for Writing 2024: Gary Crew

Messenger's case, it is his schoolmate and neighbour Nigel Kratzen (a pseudonym he chose for himself, we discover, as a joke. Kratz means 'scratch' in German.) For Pelgrom, it is Loos, the writer of the 17<sup>th</sup> century journal who is marooned with him.

There are other parallels: Loos' sled and Kratzen's ute, for example. Ela, the European girl who has been marooned from an earlier wreck, and Charlie, the contemporary indigenous elder, are less obvious parallels until they are both murder victims – then we can see that they both acted as the guide to indigenous life to their respective 'boys'.

Although Ela's relationship with Pelgrom is far more intimate and intense than Messenger's with Charlie, they serve the same narrative function. It is notable that both have trouble with English; their communication with Messenger and Pelgrom/Loos is partial and prone to misinterpretation.

Ela is the only active female presence in the book and has no female parallel. There are two others: Messenger's seldom-seen mother, and Dr Hope Michaels, 'Director of the Western Australian Institute of Maritime Archaeology.' Dr Michaels is the most sympathetic of the experts whose assessments are sprinkled through the text, but she does not appear 'on stage'. Messenger's mother appears rarely and briefly; she is mostly at work or speaking from another room. The book, in relationship terms, is about boys and men; this is emphasised when the truth about Messenger's father's death is revealed towards the end of the book. It's important to note that, despite the lack of female characters, the book is not sexist. Rather, it reflects a truth: that women are often peripheral to the lives of young men, especially when they are placed in physical isolation from girls.

Along with isolation, racism is a constant presence in the story. Messenger is casually, thoughtlessly racist, less from personal conviction, one gathers, than from an unexamined acceptance of the local culture. Pelgrom is terrified of the local tribe, believing them to be cannibals (a belief, the notes from various historians remind us, which was widespread at the time and may yet linger). Loos, while more thoughtful and open-minded than Pelgrom, is still a man of his time and is completely unequipped to deal with the radically different social structure of an indigenous tribe. He just doesn't understand what is happening around him – and yet, he does not try to learn the language in order to understand better. Even positive characters like Nigel Kratzen are afraid of the 'mission' as a place of violence and intimidation.

As one of the contesting 'experts' notes about Loos' journal: 'they [Pelgrom and Loos] brought with them a way of seeing the landscape and its inhabitants which had been heavily influenced by tales of explorers or

conquistadors and the hearsay of buccaneers and fellow sailors'. As readers, we are constantly reminded of our own preconceptions, about racism, scholarship, European exploration and, over and over again, the construction of history and the nature of 'truth'.

'Truth' is complicated in *Strange Objects* because Crew presents the world through the eyes of people who either have a specific agenda (the police, the historians) or whose perception may be compromised by illness, both mental and physical.

Messenger is the perfect unreliable narrator – in denial about his own circumstances, with some kind of mental impairment (Asperger's syndrome? Sociopathy? Paranoid schizophrenia?) which prevents him from accurately assessing others, and perhaps influenced beyond all this by the effects of the golden ring. We distrust him; but we are given no way to decide how *much* of what he says is false.

Loos, on the other hand, is a narrator we instinctively trust. But his circumstances make him unreliable. He does not understand local culture. By the end of the story he is hungry, dehydrated, frightened, probably dying and possibly delusional. Between the two of them, and in spite of the 'expert' assessments of their journals (which Crew makes mischievously contradictory), readers are left to make their own truths, their own personal history of the cannibal pot and its contents.

In the end, Crew seems to say, this is what history is: a patched together account of failed perceptions, misunderstandings and impossibilities, made anew by each person who considers it from their own, particular viewpoint.

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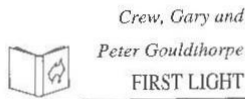
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**Hunter, Linnet '[Untitled review: *First Light*]' Viewpoint: *On Books for Young Adult*, Vol. 1, No 4, Summer 1993, p 38.**



Lothian, 1993

ISBN 0-850-915-67-8 \$19.95

In the tension between the weight of the deep, dark, dragging sea full of unknown lurking horrors and the soaring flight of a bird in the clear light of the sky at dawn, Crew and Gouldthorpe have found the metaphors to carry the story of a father and son's differences, and grant that old tale a new breadth and depth.

The bare bones of the story is a simple fishing trip. The father demands that his reluctant son leave the construction of his beloved biplane and accompany him on the more 'natural' outdoor pursuit of fishing. Through the stunning artwork we are carried immediately into the world and character of the boy; we see by his expression and posture his resentment and distaste for the expedition, we share his view of his father as a shadow between himself and his own way of being. The father's face is not shown; each illustration is composed so that we view his back, his hulking shoulders, hear his ordering voice, see his hands cutting a squid for bait by the blood red marker buoy light. The final revelation of the father as a fairly normal, kindly looking man comes both as a relief and a shock, and occurs at the climax of the story when the pair experience a reminder of what can lurk beneath the surface.

The reader has been made aware of this throughout the book by Gouldthorpe's inspired use of cutaway cross-sections to expose the hidden things; the wiring within the wall, crabs and mangrove roots in the shallow waters, squid and rays in the deeper ones. The images are dramatic and resonant with old fears. As in *Lucy's Bay* the facing of these fears leads to a dissolution of tension upwards into the lightness of the sky, symbolised here by a swooping seabird, the span of its pale grey wing echoing the description of the biplane of the first page.

This illustrator's gift for portraying the intensities of all emotional levels of the story, filling the gaps which Crew is clever enough to leave in his writing (since this is a picture book). The result is a work which gives the reader a sense of empowerment, of change, of possibility. Together the creators have realised in word and image the first light of a new beginning, the surface of the water made palpable in the rays of the rising sun, the start of a new way of seeing for both men.

[LH]

# Extending Readers

Once children's reading skills are established and have become so natural that they are unaware of the actual reading process they will tackle anything, so long as it interests them. Difficulty now becomes that of content and concepts rather than reading. This is a crucial stage, for now that children can read they need books that will keep them interested so they are readers by choice. It is vital that they are kept interested if they are to become lifetime readers.

Many will still read easier material and this should not be discouraged for it is a means of relaxing in a pleasant manner with reading.

Books reviewed in this section are arranged from easier content and concepts and young characters to the more difficult books with older characters.

**The Second-Hand Tongue and Other Hilarious Stories**, Garry Hurlle, ill. Steven Axelsen, Margaret Hamilton Books, 0 947241 38 8, \$8.95



This collection has as its *modus operandi* the idea that the storyteller is telling his audience a series of yarns. These are tall tales of the classic Australian variety. And yet they are also very contemporary, with lots of topical asides. There is a moral tone to many of the stories; each has a strong message, most predominantly that we should all "go back to basics". The latter is nowhere better expressed than in *The Prime Minister's Tree* where the conclusion asserts that "world leaders should climb trees occasionally" as an aphorism recommending that we all should let our collective hair down whenever we can.

The stories are characterised by nice little twists of fate, too, in such stories as *Real Cool Mouse* where a mouse challenges the top shearers in the country to a shearing competition, forgetting that his size might make him vulnerable even if he wins the contest. Hurlle's experience as a well-published author for this age group is demonstrated in the tight structure, and concise text which is ideal for its readership and contains evidence of an author who values drafting and editing his work. The volume is a good supplementary reader for the upper primary level and for anyone who likes a good yarn.

Robyn Sheahan

**Timesnatch**, Robert Swindells, Doubleday, 0 385 40410 7, \$18.95

After years of research and experimentation, Harper Rye has invented an apparatus that can return in time and bring back into the present the species that have died out in the world of 2039 AD. Her children, Frazer and Kizzy, share in the excitement of bringing back small creatures such as butterflies and newts, but inevitably, Harper's discovery leads her and her children into difficulties with the military forces that would like to make use of the apparatus for their purposes, with people who would like to bring much-loved relatives and entertainers back to life, and finally with people who would like to see the return of Adolf Hitler. What began as a project to enrich the world by restoring its extinct species becomes a struggle to fend off the competing claims of the state, extremist organisations and individuals, and to retain some control over lives under unwelcome surveillance by the media or the state. The fast-moving plot is believable and extends over 49 short chapters so that readers can take the tale in amounts as large or small as they can comfortably manage.

Swindells' story never becomes oppressive, but it raises sharply the moral and practical problems of scientific development the world is facing today. The novel depicts, in the lives of ordinary people, some of the choices faced by scientists forced to make public a discovery that can be put to bad

use. Though the setting is 45 years hence, it is little different — perhaps too little different — from the England of today and the language of the young protagonists is that of contemporary English school pupils of 10 and 13. Characters divide readily into good and bad, with the good scientist and her children struggling against the bureaucratic authority of the Ministry of Defence and the destructive stupidity of neo-Nazis. Not a novel, this, for those who like their physics in careful details, but an enjoyable read for upper primary and lower secondary pupils who enjoy suspense without terror.

John Murray

**Black Belt**, Nicole Plüss, Angus & Robertson, 0 207 18360 0, \$8.95

Fabio Nardo's whacky, slightly concussed cartoon figure on the cover gives no hint of the sensitive, moving story contained in Nicole Plüss's novel. The story is written in the first person, in a journal format, as the hero James strives towards his brown\* belt in karate. We share James' infatuation with Allison, as well as the helpless frustrations he endures as he is forbidden to retaliate against two boys who attack his handicapped sister.

As his karate Sensei attempts to lead him into a form of understanding and acceptance of his circumstances, James slowly develops the wisdom to cope and grow in his own right. The range of themes dealt with here include family relationships, growing and life changes, dealing with handicaps and bullying. The author knows her subject well and her descriptions of the karate training sessions and fighting bouts, in particular, make highly compelling reading.

I wish this warm, touching and positive book a long and healthy shelf life!

Russ Merrin

\* Despite the title, the main character is, in fact, striving towards his *brown* belt. On the last few pages, he begins the mental preparation for his next challenge, the *black* belt.

**First Light**, Gary Crew, ill. Peter Gouldthorpe, Lothian, 0 85091 567 8, \$19.95

In the early dawn, a boy and his father go fishing. The boy is an unwilling partner; the father is taciturn, determined that the boy

should follow in his footsteps and enjoy adventurous pursuits. Out in the dinghy on the dark sea, an unexpected crisis brings the pair together and leaves them with the promise of a new understanding of each other's needs.

Powerful illustrations combine photographic clarity with a sense of underlying menace which suggests emotional tension. The resentment which binds man and boy is mirrored in the omniscient presence of the sea. As the tension between the pair diminishes, subtle changes in the colour tones reflect the approach of a new day and, metaphorically, a new beginning for father and son. The text is graceful and skilfully understated so that the significance of what takes place in the story can be fully appreciated.

This picture book is a beautiful example of harmonious design and execution. As literature it adds to our understanding and experience of human relationships. It must be added to the increasing number of fine picture books which should be readily made available to all age groups to avoid languishing unread on "junior" fiction shelves.

Highly recommended for upper primary, secondary and public library collections.

Mandy Cheetham

**The White Guinea-Pig**, Ursula Dubosarsky, Viking, 0 670 85825 8, \$14.95



In her previous novel for young readers, *The Last Week in December*, Dubosarsky uses a young girl's guilt and inner conflict over a theft to present a realistic inner voice and a quirky assemblage of real characters. In *The White Guinea-Pig* she again presents eccentric-yet-ordinary characters stumbling through life, doing the best they can with what comes their way. Geraldine is 12 and desperately wants an animal to love. Paul, the bright blue budgie, the fish and Milly and Martha the guinea pigs are not great successes because they are unable or unwilling to return Geraldine's increasingly frustrated devotion. Life is further complicated by a large white guinea-pig foisted upon Geraldine by another child at school and which disappears from the backyard cage and thereafter makes brief appearances in the garden and haunts Geraldine's dreams.



Jameyson, Karen 'News from Down Under Turning Heads' *Horn Book Magazine* March/April 1998, pp 243–6. [This review of two Australian works includes coverage of *The Watertower*.]

## Paperies and Trash Cans



I love paper. It doesn't matter where it comes from as long as I can touch it. This causes my boyfriend no end of consternation. "Don't touch that!" he'll screech as I spot something sticking out of somebody's trash container. "You don't know where it's been!" For me, it doesn't matter where it's been, as long as it inspires me.

My love for paper started when my mother, who was a secretary at Ford Motor Company, "borrowed" some letterhead paper for me to draw on, since sketchpads were beyond her financial means. I was thrilled, and the paper seemed extra special since it was stolen. I pictured the Big Ford Bosses somewhere, happily assured that their employees were using the paper for official use. Meanwhile, I sketched, cut, and folded my way into other worlds with it.

Now I make most of my own paper. But I still need inspiration. So I go to places like Kate's Paperie in New York City, where I live. Kate's is one of those *very* fancy-schmancy downtown stores that charges you twice as much so you can tell people you shopped at a "paperie." All the paper samples are large sheets draped over wooden dowels, lining the walls like huge squares of toilet paper for dignitaries. Once I made the mistake of walking up to one of these samples to feel the paper's texture. A chorus of frowns was hurled at me from my fellow shoppers. Apparently, I was supposed to merely *contemplate* the paper from a distance, like Martha Stewart contemplating a new color of paint meant to enrich the lives of Kmart shoppers.

When I feel like being totally bohemian, I go to Pearl Paint in Chinatown. Pearl Paint is the largest discount art supply store in the country. It's like a six-story rat's nest painted like a barbershop pole. The paper floor is crowded and claustrophobic. The help behind the counter seems to have every area of soft tissue on their heads pierced and adorned with rings. But Pearl Paint is like Kate's Paperie in one

very special way: nobody really wants to help you at either place (at Kate's I'm not rich enough; at Pearl I'm not grungy enough).

But it doesn't matter where I am at or what I'm doing or who I'm doing it with, interesting paper (even from a trash can) makes me want to sing! (Although you don't want to hear my singing. Trust me.)

—Robert Sabuda



## News from Down Under Turning Heads

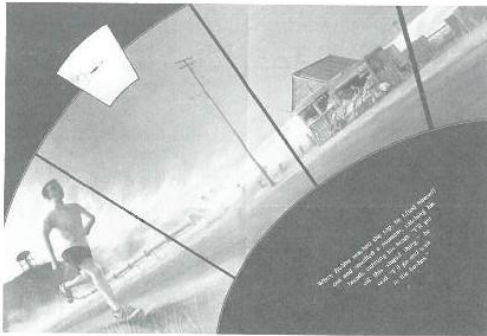
BY KAREN JAMEYSON

Picture books for older readers. The topic is a hot one in Australia, particularly in regard to the Book of the Year Awards. Should this art form be judged shoulder to shoulder with the more traditional picture book for a very young child? Who reads these books, anyway? As the controversy whirls on, however, the books in question continue to be published in greater numbers, with a range of results.

Mixed public reactions frequently accompany award decisions. But when a picture book for older readers was named the 1995 Picture Book of the Year by the Australian Children's Book Council, there was, according to one critic, downright "hostility." That book, however, *The Watertower*, written by Gary Crew and illustrated by Steven Woolman, continues to attract interest—and readers. Crew, a prestidigitator of words, has managed to work his magic successfully on a variety of reading levels, with a number of his books receiving widespread critical acclaim (his novel *Strange Objects*, for instance, was the Australian Children's Book of the Year in 1991 as well as an Edgar Allan Poe Award for Mystery Fiction nominee in the U.S.). *The Watertower* turned heads from the moment it was published—literally as well as figuratively. That's because, to begin with, the reader must actually turn the book on its side to read it and then continue to turn it as the story progresses (or doesn't, depending on your interpretation). According to one advocate, a high school English teacher, this actual turning/handling—along with the tantalizing clues to the story—is what hooks her student readers, particularly the less enthusiastic ones.

Both Crew and Woolman like to make their readers work. They understand precisely how much explanation their audience needs, and *The Watertower* strains readers' abilities nearly to the breaking point. So this story of the boys Spike and Bubba going for a





secret swim in the rusty old watertower in their outback town has another strand of plot looped around it, one that is related somehow to the watertower, what goes on there, and the fascination it holds for the townspeople. But author and artist provide no definitive information—only enigmatic visual and textual clues. Although the illustrations do depict the startling blue of the outback sky and the characteristic dusty red of the soil, the general darkness of the pages—black is the predominant color—underlines a malevolence seemingly at work, somewhere, somehow. And an incomplete circle placed at the top of the watertower appears repeatedly in the illustrations: in eyes, on hats, on glasses, in windows, in the shape of the paintings, in the design of the book overall. Just one piece missing, the creators seem to be taunting over and over. Just one more bit of information and you'd understand. But, as it is, unanswered questions hover in the air, leaving readers to argue, debate, muse, and ultimately reach their own verdicts about what happens. And now that Crocodile Press is publishing an edition in the northern hemisphere, American readers can make up their own minds. (Although the cover—which portrays the watertower at the center of pulsating waves, lit up with an eerie green light that highlights its flying saucer-like shape—gives readers a pretty good hint. Think Tripods.)

Among other recent picture book titles more appropriate for, if not aimed specifically at, older readers than the traditional audience is Tonby Riddle's *Great Escape from City Zoo*. The book nudges

Illustration by Steven Woolman from *The Watertower*. © Era Publications 1994, 1998.

its way through age barriers as nimbly as its escape-artist characters scale the walls of the zoo. The basic story of the "extraordinary events" surrounding the getaway of an anteater, an elephant, a turtle, and a flamingo from the City Zoo can be followed by a young reader without difficulty. After their escape, the foursome get themselves some disguises—the turtle cuts a fetching figure in his sailor suit—and begin to make their way in what is essentially a larger zoo: the world of human beings. In the meantime, the real zookeepers stay "hot on their trail." Any slip-up means it's back behind bars (where, incidentally, any recaptured animal is greeted as a celebrity by the other inmates).

This fundamental story inspires smiles of satisfaction in its own right. But other forces are at work. It's not just the understated, wry humor that the more mature reader will respond to, although that offers plenty of appeal (the anteater fainting outside a taxidermist's window with its "You snuff 'em—We stuff 'em" sign; the elephant succumbing to the lure of a public fountain). The book's most obvious visual distinction is its black-and-white art-

work: a "silver screen treatment," says the author-artist, in keeping with his desire to give the title the appearance of a 1930s adventure film. Armed with a bottle of India ink and three brushes, he went to work, watering down the ink to achieve the subtlety of different shades. From those shades and from his restrained lines ingeniously emerge a bounty of visual references to twentieth-century popular culture. In one illustration, for instance, the four escapees stride across a road in a formation instantly recognizable to fans of the Beatles and the *Abbey Road* album in particular. Another portrait is strongly reminiscent of a moment from the 1930s film version of *The Grapes of Wrath*. With an Annolik sense of the world and its



Illustration from *The Great Escape from City Zoo*. © Tonby Riddle 1997.

picturesque components, Riddle has tucked in many other sights as well, including King Kong, the Loch Ness monster, and Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*, along with what are perhaps less familiar references, such as Bugsy Seigel's Pink Flamingo Casino and paintings by Magritte, Mondrian, and de Chirico.

"It is not intended," comments Riddle "that the story rely upon people being able to spot the references." But he hopes that the allusions imbue the work with a "larger-than-life quality," shaping it into a "twentieth-century legend." And, obviously, the more recognition, the more surprised moments of enjoyment. Riddle—a successful cartoonist as well as an author-artist—has stated emphatically that he writes for "the fun of it" rather than for a specific audience. If that narrows his readership, well, so be it.

But it doesn't!

When he fastens his subtle visual panorama of popular culture references onto the wings of a disarmingly simple text and plot, the result soars straight and true right across age barriers. So while the book is not intended for fledgling readers, they're bound to appreciate its story on the simplest level. It's not a book strictly for older readers the way *The Watertower* seems to be. *The Great Escape from City Zoo* is a book that just is—gently clever, exquisitely designed, rich with allusion. It also seems likely to find itself a devoted audience. And among the lucky ones are bound to be a dedicated cache of older readers.

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Critic and reviewer Karen Jameyson is currently on the editorial staff of the *New South Wales School Magazine*.

## Erasing Pictures



I was asked recently to describe the way I paint pictures for picture books. I was very surprised by this request because I thought that by now every soul in America had either read about, heard, or seen me and my amazing little art demonstration, in which I show exactly how I make the pictures for my books. I think it much better to see me do this first-hand, but welcome the opportunity to offer a brief description of this highly unusual way of making pictures! You must first understand that I don't actually paint the images for a picture book. The images are made with an eraser. Yes, a magical little piece of kneaded rubber is my tool of choice. After coating the paper, board, or canvas with a "wash" of very thin oil paint or chalk to make a background, the picture is created by erasing the shapes of the lighter areas of the subject or image I wish to make. It is fascinating to watch the images emerge from the background as I work the eraser across the surface of the canvas until what appears is a completely rendered picture in black and white, lacking only color. Colors are then applied by "rubbing" various media (acrylics, watercolors, pastels, or oils) onto the erased image. The process is evolving, as I try to do something different with each new story or project.

—Floyd Cooper



[Review: *The Watertower*]’ *Kirkus Reviews* January 1, 1998

<<https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/gary-crew/the-watertower/>>



# THE WATERTOWER

BY GARY CREW & ILLUSTRATED BY STEVEN WOOLMAN · RELEASE DATE: FEB. 20,  
1998

For older readers, a genuinely eerie picture book, which Crew (*Bright Star*, 1997, etc.) and Woolman have constructed as a kind of puzzle. The haunting watertower sits outside of town like an egg on legs, or like a lurid green broken spaceship. One blisteringly hot summer day, Spike and Bubba decide to go for a swim inside the watertower, where the cool water beckons. Bubba is uneasy; when they emerge, he discovers his pants are gone, and sends Spike home to fetch another pair. What happens then, as the hyperreal illustrations focus on the tower and the town, is unclear, but one of the pair of boys is transformed, and he is not alone in that transformation. The broken circle logo on the watertower appears on many pages, a clue to an alien presence or some more earthly invasion of the quiet little town. It may be hard to coax middle graders back into a picture book, but they will certainly give themselves a shiver or two in these pages. (Picture book. 9-11)



**Davey, Graham** ‘[Untitled review: *I Said Nothing: the Extinction of the Paradise Parrot*]’ *Reading Time: The Journal of the Children’s Book Council of Australia* Vol 48, No 1, February 2004, pp 31–32.

**\*\*CREW, Gary** (text) **Mark Wilson** (illus.)  
*I Said Nothing – The Extinction of the Paradise Parrot* Lothian, 2003 unpagged  
\$26.95 ISBN 0734405596 SCIS 1144049

What does it take to realise that the extinction of any living species is a tragedy? Do we need to be utterly convinced that the end is just around the corner before we act? What we need is Gary Crew’s compelling Extinct series alerting us all to the dangers of being unobservant and inactive.

This is the second title in the series and tells the story of the Paradise Parrot through the eyes of young Harry. We are shown what lead to the extinction of the birds and how young Harry reacts at each step of the food-for-thought story-message. The book is beautifully designed, and the illustrations add much to the meaning of the text and interpretation of the story.

The first book, *I Saw Nothing: The Extinction of the Thylacine* introduced a wonderful sense of intrigue and dilemma that this book has further upcoming titles will match the excellent style and authenticity of the first two in the series. GD

**Barnard, Neville ‘[Untitled review: *I Said Nothing: the Extinction of the Paradise Parrot*]’ *Magpies: Talking About Books for Children*, Vol 19, No 1, March 2004, p 31.**

NEW BOOKS NEW BOOKS NEW BOOKS NEW BOOKS NEW BOOKS NEW BOOKS NEW BOOKS NEW BOOKS  
NUMBER ONE ~ MARCH 2004

tion relating to mans’ fascination with flying on each page of this book. Where relevant, Burgemeestre has included Australian data in the work which must have been a relief when he came to find a word for Q (good old QANTAS to the rescue). This format of bite sized bits of information makes the book suitable for reluctant readers as the text per topic is contained in only a few paragraphs. Yet, capable readers will learn a great deal from this book too. Special mention must be made of the illustrations in this work. Burgemeestre has taken the relatively unusual approach of using dioramas to present the visual information—this approach was in homage to the museum displays from which he learnt so much. The approach makes for a visually attractive book and the reader is drawn to the painstaking detail required by the technique. Each page is so visually arresting that the text is almost relegated to a supporting role.

This is an innovative approach to a theme that could easily have been rendered as dry as the Simpson Desert. While it focuses on flight, the book could also prove useful in many ‘science’ related topics as well as being a wonderful springboard to artistic activities. Overall, a very successful title. Bravo Mr. Burgemeestre.  
*Neville Barnard*

**I Said Nothing: The Extinction of the Paradise Parrot**

Gary Crew, ill. Mark Wilson, Lothian Books, 0 7344 0559 6 \$26.95 Hb

Paradise Parrots were last seen in Queensland in 1927 following a reply from a farmer to naturalist Alec Chisholm’s advertisements requesting information about the bird. Chisholm visited the area and confirmed that there was a pair of the rare birds there—possibly the last pair on the planet. The dramatised version of events is told in the first person through the eyes of Harry, a young boy who, in the story at least, is the son of the farmer. Crew lets the story of the extinction speak for itself, without excessive agonising or moralising. The parrots died mainly because sheep ate the native grass that constituted the birds’ only food. In short the parrots died out through loss of habitat... and that is caused by human activity and careless disregard for the environment. It is a powerful message made more so since no-one is blamed or painted as the villain. By avoiding demonising any sec-

tion of the community responsibility is shared by everyone. The teaming of Crew with illustrator Mark Wilson is effective. Full page colour illustrations are interspersed with ochre toned images. They not only set an atmospheric tone for the text and lend it support, but are well and truly worth examination by themselves. Environmental issues are often presented in books, but rarely as subtly as this. The unspoken but clear message is that, while it is too late to save the Paradise Parrot, it may not be too late to save other species. The simple prose gives this work a wide range of readers. Although it may just be out of the comfort zone of infant readers it would sit comfortably on middle to upper primary shelves. Given the quality of the artwork it may be useful in lower high school grades. It is a book worth talking about with children.  
*Neville Barnard*

**I Did Nothing: The Extinction of the Gastric-Brooding Frog**

Gary Crew, ill. Mark Wilson, Lothian Books, 0 7344 0507 3 \$26.95 Hb

For the final book in the extinction trilogy Gary Crew has turned his attention to a frog which he points out in the epilogue was known to Science for barely eight years. Following the receipt of an embalmed Gastric-brooding frog by a museum’s frog expert, the researcher/narrator and his young assistant, Zeek, seek out and speak to the sender, Cory Wells. His tale is a sad one. As a teenager he was an unwilling participant in the discovery and wanton killing of a female frog (the one he later embalmed) and its young. The researcher gives up hope of ever finding the frog; Zeek affirms that unlike Cory Wells he will not be too scared to do anything. Nor will he give up hope that a gastric brooding frog may yet be found.

It’s a lovely affirming note on which to end the series.

Mark Wilson’s illustrations, like the others in the series, add an emotional depth to the stories.  
*Bette Hansen*

**Guess What Happened at School Today**

Jez Alborough, Collins, 0 00 713630 7 \$24.95 Hb

This collection of poems about daily school life features many

familiar characters and many familiar themes, and yet Alborough, best known for *Where’s My Teddy*, somehow manages to make them fresh and new. Beginning with a poem about arriving late for school the whole day is explored through the eyes of different children and their individual experiences. I love the poem about recognising a teacher out of school while shopping at the supermarket: *How stomach churning, foot squirming, embarrassingly bad, to have Miss Chadwick see me there, out shopping with my dad.* These poems will keep primary school aged children laughing, and keep adults laughing as well. Alborough has used collage—a style of illustration new to him—to great effect here, echoing the playful energy of the poetry and the children in them. Highly recommended to get kids reading poetry and enjoying language.  
*Lucinda Dodds*

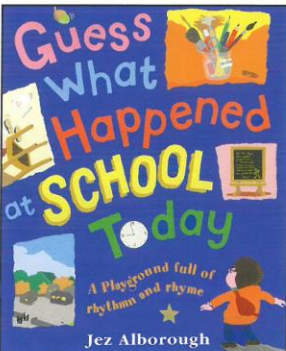
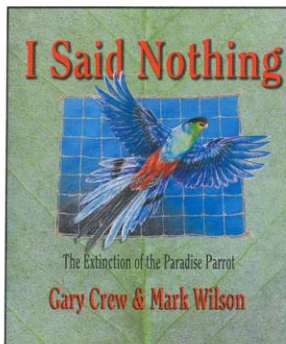
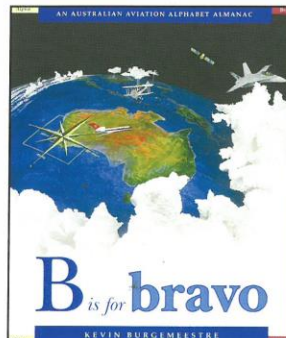
**Tadpole’s Promise**

Jeanne Willis, ill. Tony Ross, Andersen Press, 1 84270 069 3 \$27.95 Hb

This unlikely love story shows the inevitability of change, especially when the participants are a tadpole and a caterpillar. Despite his vow never to change for his beautiful rainbow caterpillar, her shiny black pearl (the tadpole) is dismayed to find that first he grows legs, then arms and finally drops his tail. With each development, the caterpillar accuses him of breaking his promise. Thoroughly disillusioned at her faithless lover, she cries herself to sleep on the willow branch. Needless to say the inexorable metamorphosis for both takes place leading to the equally inexorable consequence. The reader can see the outcome looming for this ill-fated romance long before it happens. As for the lovers, neither of them knows what happened. The grim humour of the situation will be readily apparent to older readers.

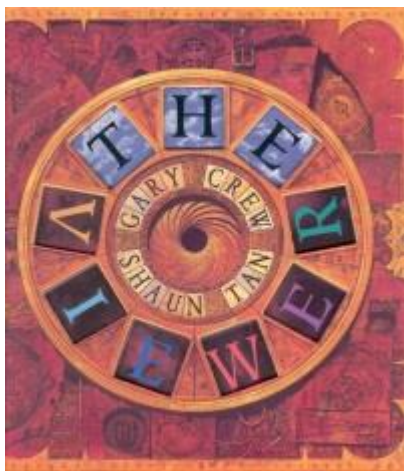
The story is beautifully illustrated in ink line and watercolour in lengthwise double spreads. The interchanges between tadpole and caterpillar dominate the upper two-thirds of each opening but further down in the water there is another little drama going on between all the other tadpoles and some fish. The polished text, superimposed on the pictures, is made for reading aloud. It is also accessible to confident newly estab-

lished readers. And, of course, there is the bonus of scientific phenomenon thrown in. Recommended.  
*Joan Zahnleiter*



NEW BOOKS NEW BOOKS NEW BOOKS THIRTY-ONE NEW BOOKS NEW BOOKS NEW BOOKS

Pantaleo, Sylvia '[Review: *The Viewer*]' *CM Reviews* Vol X, No 20, June 4, 2004  
<<https://www.cmreviews.ca/cm/vol10/no20/theviewer.html>>



***The Viewer.***

**Gary Crew. Illustrated by Shaun Tan.  
Vancouver, BC: Simply Read Books, 2003.  
32 pp., cloth, \$22.95.  
ISBN 1-894965-02-7.**

**Subject Headings:**

**Regression (Civilization)-Juvenile fiction.**

**End of the world-Juvenile fiction.**

**Grades 4 and up / Ages 9 and up.**

**Review by Sylvia Pantaleo.**

**\*\*\*\*/4**

**excerpt:**

*Tristan was curious from birth. This is not to say that he was different from other babies. In fact he was rather ordinary. But from the moment he opened his eyes, he seemed to be looking. Taking the world in, as it were. Nor did this remarkable curiosity - this constant need to search, to look out - lessen as he grew older.*

As a teenager, one of Tristan's favourite attractions is the city dump. "The place was littered with the off-scourings of a careless people." Tristan marvels at the treasures he finds in the dump. He takes home broken objects, dismantles them to discover how they function and then restores them. He wonders at the inner world of the objects - a world that he cannot see. One day, Tristan discovers a curious locked box constructed from dark wood and metal. He takes the box home and, once he triggers the lock, Tristan discovers many treasures, all "aids to sight, aids to seeing further. Or more closely. Or more clearly." The most intriguing object to Tristan is a Viewmaster-type device. On each of the three accompanying discs, Tristan views the ages of humankind depicted as cyclical structures of growth and destruction, conveying the evils of war, religious persecution and slavery. Each disc has its own particular sounds; the first orb depicts creation and evolution, the second ancient civilization and the third, the Middle Ages. Tristan, frightened by the sights and sounds of the discs, has a restless sleep. The next day at school, Tristan is unfocused as he is eager to return home and peer again into the haunting world of the Viewmaster.



Once Tristan arrives home, he picks up the Viewmaster and inserts the first disc again. However, the orb has changed, and Tristan views the age of conquest and colonization. The second and third discs have also changed - they portray disturbing images of the machine age and a modern ecological crisis. As Tristan tries to pull the Viewmaster from his eyes, he is compelled to continue looking, to actually attempt to enter the machine. When Tristan's mother enters his bedroom the next morning because he has not answered her calls, she discovers an empty bed and a strange box, firmly locked on his desk.



This sophisticated picture book tells a mysterious, eerie and disturbing story. Although an apocalyptic worldview is conveyed, the discs also illustrate the circularity of regeneration and decay. The orbs demonstrate how, over the ages, humans have tried to order their worlds via science, religion, and technology. Circularity is symbolized in numerous images including the design of the text that describes Tristan's absorption into the Viewmaster. Note Tristan's name on the outside of the Viewmaster on the double page spread where he is drawn into the machine - into the inner world that he will now be able to see!

Tan includes multiple symbolic representations in his artwork. The recurring image of the comet in every disc (and on the cover) is only one of the many motifs for readers to consider. The orbs created are amazing in their realism. Each disc has nine images, and a human figure from each particular era (e.g., hunter gather, Egyptian, religious figure, Native Chieftain, scientific figure, toxic waste worker) is depicted to the left of the centre image. A version of the human figure is then repeated under the other eight images on each disc. The attention to detail is remarkable, and the synergy between the words and pictures demands, and deserves, close reading. *The Viewer* encourages and rewards careful observation - on every page readers can point and click on varying images or texts with their eyes. Finally, the unique design of the cover reflects the central themes of the book. Die cut letters on the cover are designed to appear as a viewer, but they are also symbolic of the inner world(s) within the pages of the book.

*The Viewer* is an outstanding picture book in that it invites discussion and lends itself to multiple interpretations. Gary Crew has written several novels for young adults, as well as numerous picture books. He won CBC Picture Book of the Year for *The Watertower* (1995). Shaun Tan has an outstanding reputation for his illustrative work, and *The Viewer* won the Crichton Award for Book Illustration in 1998.

### **Highly Recommended.**

*Sylvia Pantaleo is an Associate Professor of Language Arts in the Faculty of Education at BC's University of Victoria.*

To comment on this title or this review, send mail to [cm@umanitoba.ca](mailto:cm@umanitoba.ca).

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‘[Review: *The Viewer*]’ *Publishers Weekly*  
<<https://www.publishersweekly.com/9781894965026>>

## THE VIEWER

**Gary Crew, illus. by Shaun Tan. Simply Read, \$16.95 (32pp) ISBN 978-1-894965-02-6**

Ominous words and violent imagery fuel this dystopia, which is equal parts science fiction and life-as-we-know-it. Crew and Tan (previously teamed for *The Memorial*) introduce Tristan, a curious boy who tinkers with discarded objects. In the junkyard one day, Tristan discovers a box covered in obscure hieroglyphs. Inside are various lenses and scopes and an unusual bronze mask with glaring eyes. Three metallic discs, each with nine images around its perimeter, fit this apparatus, and Tristan cannot resist looking into it. The artist likens these concentric circles, which appear on the right side of each spread, to mandalas, compasses and cyclical calendars, and he matches the iris of Tristan's astonished eye—peering through the viewer (on the left page)—to a mechanical camera shutter. As the boy scans the first disc's snapshots of fighting dinosaurs, a roaring sabre-tooth tiger and a caveman, he hears "raucous cries of human beings." With the next disc, alongside the sound of "the grinding of stone against stone," the artist pictures ancient wonders (e.g., Stonehenge, Easter Island); the third shows bloody scenes from the Bayeux Tapestry and Bruegel ("He heard the clash of steel upon steel"). When he goes to sleep that night, Tristan feels that he is "no longer alone." The next day, Tan presents an Escher-inspired scene of the boy's room, as if viewed by the mask itself. When Tristan looks at the discs, their content has changed to haunting images of the colonial era, world war and present-day pollution. Crew's language is foreboding, while Tan loads his marvelous, shadowy images with post-apocalyptic clutter. The audience can almost feel the power that the mask exudes in this unsettling walk through history and its cautionary perspective. Ages 6-11. (Apr.)

**Appendix C. USB**

[Contains photo of author, electronic copies of books, and an electronic copy of the dossier.]