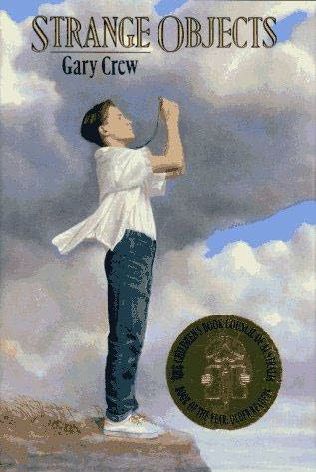
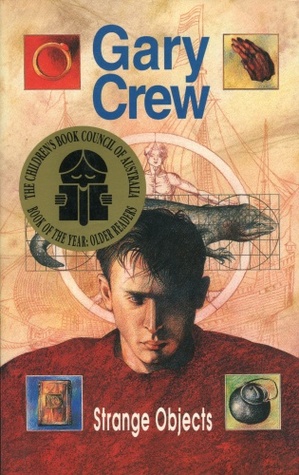
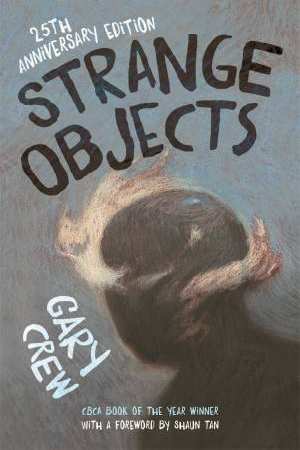
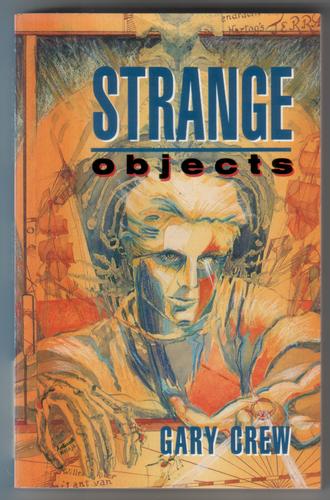
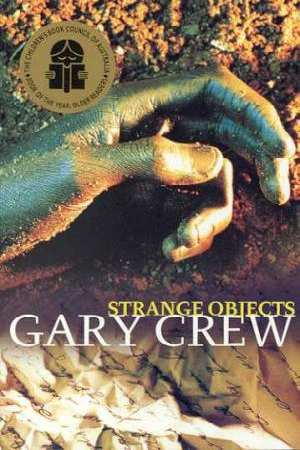
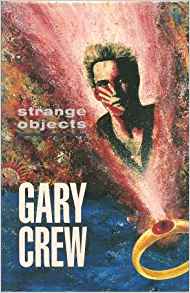
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**STSTRANGE OBJECTS** By Gary Crew

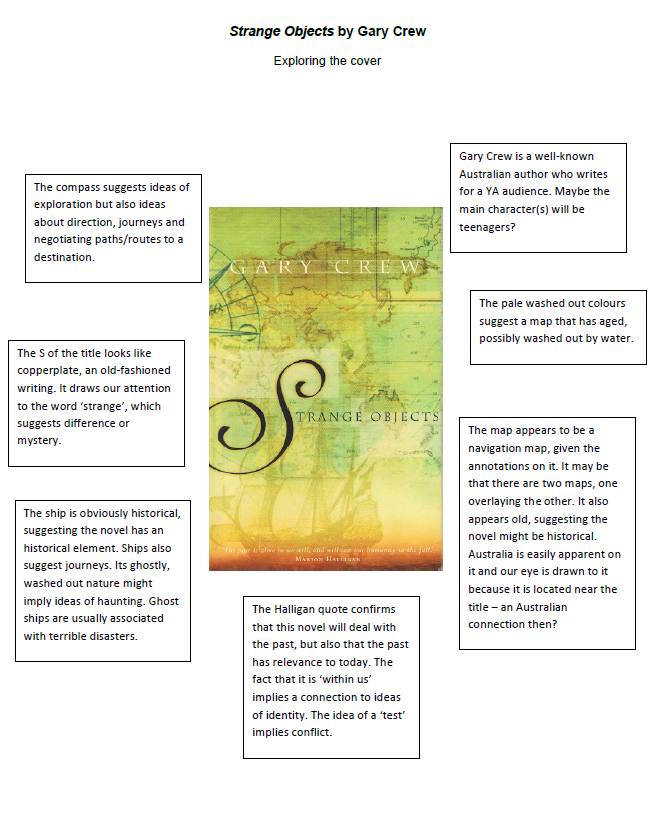
 

**Activity 1 (4 marks)**

*Strange Objects* has had many covers since its first date of publication. Go online to: <https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&id=BA187193C92E9CC7DE7C57BC07BBA102F38F7342&thid=OIP.z8rluZup98VRsVSI-gTpUAAAAA&mediaurl=https%3A%2F%2Fbalwynbestbooks.files.wordpress.com%2F2011%2F06%2Fstrange-objects.jpg&exph=250&expw=160&q=gary+crew+covers+of+strange+objects&selectedindex=8&ajaxhist=0&vt=0&eim=1,6&ccid=z8rluZup&simid=608049389628362407>

1. Select four covers
2. Place each cover in the centre of an A4 page.
3. Annotate each cover in as much detail as possible. Identify the:
4. Ideas developed
5. Composition /design elements
6. Symbolism
7. Evaluate the effectiveness of each cover. Justify your opinion.





**Gary Crew Biopic**



<https://www.bing.com/images/search?view=detailV2&id=0B27553DE4E052D605B243A7075CA1F1576E2AF8&thid=OIP.lyon1P1Tllvh7d3FW7kFZwHaHa&mediaurl=https%3A%2F%2Fimg.fantasticfiction.com%2Fimages%2F1%2F7866_1.jpg&exph=200&expw=200&q=gary+crew+covers+of+strange+objects&selectedindex=24&ajaxhist=0&vt=0&eim=1,6&ccid=lyon1P1T&simid=608047353770936073>

**First Name:**Gary

**Last Name:**Crew

Professor Gary Crew lives in Maleny,

South East Queensland. He lectures

in Creative Writing at the University

of the Sunshine Coast, Maroochydore.

A graduate of the University of

Queensland (Masters in Literature;

specialising in Post-Colonial Studies),

he taught English in Queensland High

Schools for 18 years. He took his

Doctorate in Creative Writing at the

University of the Sunshine Coast.

Gary has been internationally published

since 1986 (*The Inner Circle*, Heinemann,

London) and has won the Australian

Children’s book of the Year 4 times: twice

for his novels, twice for his illustrated books. Gary has also been awarded the American Children’s Book of Distinction, twice short listed for the Edgar Allen Poe Mystery Fiction Award in the USA, the Aurealis Award for Speculative Fiction, the Ned Kelly Award for Crime Writing, the New South Wales Premier’s Award, the Victorian Premier’s Award, the Wilderness Award for Children’s Writing and the Royal Geographic Society Whitley Award.

His over 100 short stories, novels and illustrated books are published all over the world. Gary regularly addresses and conducts Literary and Creative Writing workshops for International audiences of both students and teachers. Gary’s reputation for innovation in the illustrated book and its impact on visual literacy is borne out by Shaun Tan’s comment: ‘the golden rule of our partnership as author and illustrator was to never explain each other’s words or pictures, to never illustrate what the words are telling you, and never describe what the pictures represent’. (Shaun Tan, 2015, Preface to the 25th year anniversary edition of Gary Crew’s *Strange Objects*)

Gary’s latest novel is *Voicing the Dead* (Ford St, 2015), which explores the impact of the wreck of the *Charles Eaton* off the Queensland coast in 1834. He continues to innovate in the design of illustrated books with *The Visions of Ichabod X*, illustrated by Paul O’Sullivan (Harbour, 2015).

***Strange Objects* is an epistolary novel**

An **epistolary** novel is a novel written as a series of documents. The usual form is letters, although diary entries, newspaper clippings and other documents are sometimes used. Recently, electronic "documents" such as recordings and radio, blogs, and e-mails have also come into use.

**Activity 2: Research – Author (3 marks)**

1. Outline Crew’s personal history. Cover education, family, career. What does he do now? How could this have influenced his writing?
2. Identify any recurring themes or motifs in Crew’s body of work.
3. What influenced Crew as a writer? Start by referring to the following websites:

<http://perilousadventures.net/0903/garycrew.html>

<https://biography.jrank.org/pages/1787/Crew-Gary-1947.html> <https://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/A23335> <http://textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue1/crew.htm>

<https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/authorpage/gary-crew.html>

<https://www.ais.wa.edu.au/event/prof-gary-crew-critical-visual-literacy-creative-collaboration-between-author-and-illustrator>

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

<https://www.slaphappylarry.com/picturebook-study-caleb-by-gary-crew-and-steven-woolman/>

<https://www.hachette.com.au/gary-crew/lost-diamonds-of-killiecrankie>

**Activity 3: Initial Reading (5 marks)**

1. Keep a list of questions you wish to ask about the text as you read.

2. Comment on a striking use of language you come across while reading. You’ll share these with the class. Record the Item number and page number. If you can, identify the technique used. Use the handout provided to guide your identification of language features and techniques.

2. *Continued:* Comment on a striking use of language you come across while reading. You’ll share these with the class. Record the Item number and page number. If you can, identify the technique used. Use the handout provided to guide your identification of language features and techniques.

3. Identify an ‘aha!’ moment (particularly if it relates to a theme of the novel)

4. Record an emotional response you had to a section/s of the story.

5. Record any predictions you make as you read the novel.

**Activity 4: Strange Objects Quiz (25 marks)**

Complete the following questions in class as you read the novel. Include the page number of your evidence in your answers.

1. What were Steven and his classmates doing when Steven found the ‘cannibal pot’?

2. Who was given responsibility for analyzing the artefacts found by Steven?

3. What was inside the leather wallet found with the cannibal pot?

4. Name the two castaways from the Batavia wreck.

5. Where was Steven’s secret place?

6. What was the recurring dream about that Steven began having after finding the cannibal pot?

7. What did the castaways make from the wreckage of their boat?

8. What happened to the pup that the castaways had with them?

9. How did Ela come to arrive on the Australian mainland?

10. Which of the castaway’s possessions disturbed the Aboriginal men who found them? Explain.

11. What was the ‘Life Frame’?

12. Where was the Aboriginal mission located?

13. How did the castaways come to meet Ela?

14. Why were Steven, Kratz and Charlie heading north to the ranges?

15. What was painted on the cave walls?

16. Why did Steven hit Charlie Sunrise?

17. Why were the Aboriginal people pleased to find the whale carcass?

18. Whose hand are we led to believe was in the cannibal pot?

19. Why did Kratz get into trouble for rushing Charlie Sunrise to hospital?

20. What was unusual about Steven’s return from the ranges?

21. How does Crew end his parallel storylines – both Messenger’s and Loos’ narrative?

Messenger’s narrative:

Loos’ narrative:

22. Does the end of this novel work? Explain.

**ACTIVITY 4 - TOTAL MARK: /25**

<https://static-readingaustralia-com-au.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2015/06/StrangeObjectsQuiz.pdf>

**Read the interview transcript that follows and use Activity 5 to retrieve key information from the text.**

**Tom Tilley Speaks to Author Gary Crew**

**TOM TILLEY**: Gary Crew, fantastic to meet you, and I'm very much looking forward to digging deep behind the writing of Strange Objects. Now, Gary, the edition of your book I have in my hand here is the most recently released 25th-anniversary edition, which has a cover illustrated by Shaun Tan. How did it come to be that he worked on this book with you?

**GARY CREW**: When the new edition - the 25th... the quarter-century edition - came up, Hachette, the publisher, asked who I'd like to do the cover and I said, 'Certainly, Shaun.' And then also because Shaun's Western Australian, and he grew up with the Batavia relics. I asked if he could do the preface, which he has done as well. So it's been a very happy connection right through.

**TOM TILLEY**: And it's obviously a work of fiction. It's very fantastic in parts.

**GARY CREW**: Well…

**TOM TILLEY**: Oh, yeah, but there's some real historical events there as well.

**GARY CREW**: When it was first published, it did have 'Strange Objects - A Novel', so I couldn't be accused of aborting fact. But the facts, which are absolute facts, are all the accounts of the wreck of the Batavia and how the two men were put onto Australia, on the continent of Australia. That is all factual. Plus, the illustrations are the illustrations done at the time, shortly after the time of the wreck. But then what happened to them, their subsequent lives, is still absolutely unknown. And while, little by little, that's coming out through archaeological excavation - even today, they're still finding skeletons from the wreck - the bits of the jigsaw have still not been put together.

**TOM TILLEY**: But the way you construct it is really interesting. I mean, it's already complex enough with the parallel narratives, but you explore those narratives using a range of different formats and mediums and perspectives, ranging from newspaper articles, letter to the editor, archaeological reports, diaries... Why did you choose to do it like that, not just write a normal, straightforward narrative?

**GARY CREW**: Again, because what I wanted to do was to have bite-size grabs, but that also allowed me to bring in... interrogative voices, voices that interrogated the text, and said, 'Could this be true? Is this a pile of crap? Could this be right?'

**TOM TILLEY**: That's right, and it leads you to question some of the key characters and if what they're saying is true...

**GARY CREW**: That's what I wanted. The biggest outcome... I stopped caring about the winsome, lonely youth standing on the beach, feeling sorry for himself, and I became more interested in a thematic message, saying, 'How do we know what is true? How do know we can believe?'

**TOM TILLEY**: How do we write out history?

**GARY CREW**: I'll give you a very simple example... which many modern people would appreciate. When Diana, Princes of Wales, died in the Mercedes in the tunnel, there was this theory, that theory, this theory, that theory, this theory, that theory, and I still think there'll be lots of conspiracy theories out there regarding her death. How do we know, if ever, the truth will ever come out? And that is exactly what I wanted to bring up. I wanted to write a book that had no answer, that would be interrogated differently every time you read it.

**TOM TILLEY**: And speaking of 'every time you read it', it's the sort of book that you could read a few times and still get lots of different thoughts, questions and conclusions out of the story.

**GARY CREW**: I realise that that can cause frustration because a lot of people want, you know, the sun going down on the people with happy marriage, great sex, three kids, blah, at the end of the novel. Sorry, they're reading the wrong one, if they're reading Strange Objects, because it doesn't happen that way.

**TOM TILLEY**: You create an incredible vivid account of the first-contact experience with Wouter Loos and Jan Pelgrom meeting these Indigenous people for the first time, and you feel their fear, you kind of get inside their decision-making as they work out how to approach these people. What research did you do to make sure that you were conveying that first-contact interaction in a realistic way as possible?

**GARY CREW**: I am fascinated by castaway narratives and there are many, many castaway narratives, going from Robinson Crusoe, which was kind of based on fact, and those narratives sometimes have a fairly heavy factual basis, and sometimes are utterly fantastical and made-up. But what I did was immerse myself in those castaway narratives so that I was more empowered to be able to write such a narrative myself. But, also, because the wreck itself was hugely famous, the Batavia itself would kind of had been the equivalent of the Titanic. Biggest ship in the world, literally, was on its maiden voyage, and when it went down, it was an international incident. Therefore, there were books about that wreck and the subsequent murders instantaneously. That book was written almost immediately and that was written in response to Pelsaert, the captain's, journals, so there were two very, very powerful primary source documents, to use a historical term, that came almost immediately after the wreck. All of those are still in print and all of those are available. Then, there was another big one by a fabulous Western Australian woman, who really investigated the wreck and dived on the wreck when she was 80 years old, she went down. She was the person who said, 'I will locate it,' and she did. More power to her. She also wrote about the wreck. 'Cause I was informed all the way through, all the way by primary source research documents.

**TOM TILLEY**: But you didn't have any of those for the journey of Wouter Loos..

**GARY CREW**: No. I use other primary source documents. So what I did, I got hold of the journals of West Australian explorers. Grey, who went around that area and had very final journals, which he kept, but what I did by looking at 19th-century Australian explorers, I want to use their descriptions of the landscapes. So the descriptions of the big lakes and ranges and things are cribbed - not plagiarised - cribbed from journals written in 19th century.

**TOM TILLEY**: Now, the ring is a fascinating symbol in the book. It's in both narratives because it's the same ring, as the story goes. What does the ring mean?

**GARY CREW**: The ring means zip. It doesn't mean anything. I have had people write scholarly works, to my astonishment.

**TOM TILLEY**: I've heard about them.

**GARY CREW:** Telling me that it is a link to Tolkien and the... and how the power of one ring to join them all... Whaaat? I didn't write that book. I don't even like fantasy. Um, to me, the ring is a unifying... artefact... which does have a high degree of fascination between the two generations. I think, when I say that, I imagine... Well, I constructed that he found the ring - he got the ring in a pub or something like that - and he... to him, it was a very precious thing. He kept it, he then gave that to Ela, the girl, I think, again, if I had to really be pushed, as a bribe, a sexual bribe because Ela was a further white castaway, and I think that he wanted to be intimate with her and he needed that to buy her. And, certainly, it was her hand, hers was the mummified hand, that the ring was on when it was discovered. So it would appear that his bribe was possibly successful but that was a mechanism to join then and now. There are no fantastic elements. Even, even when there's a moment we see... um, we see Loos or Pelgrom, whoever it is, against the sun, where it looks like he's shining, I did a lot of work on kirlian photography, where, purportedly, we all have auras. And, while I don't really believe that, I thought that... the text suggest that he might have had an aura - he was a very evil person.

**TOM TILLEY**: Mm.

**GARY CREW**: He was a murderer and a rapist. And I think Messenger, also, was very evil. But if that had to be rationalised, I would say it was the sun going down behind his head.

**TOM TILLEY**: But it makes you question, as a reader, if there's some more power to the ring.

**GARY CREW**: That's all I want. I don't really invest in anything, in the ring, or in the fantasy of glows around people's heads or anything like that.

**TOM TILLEY**: Now, Gary, you've been writing books for over 30 years and you write a lot of books, tons of books. Sometimes you release five books in one year. What is it that you love so much about the writing process?

**GARY CREW**: I think it's a double whammy. There's no simple answer. I think that... I came to be aware a long, long time ago that I liked... I liked the solitude of writing. I like very much to go into my own space... even today, I'd tell the truth. I live on top of a mountain in Maleny, in Queensland, and if I see a car coming up my road, I'd turn the lights off.

**TOM TILLEY**: Hm!

**GARY CREW**: 'He's not home!' I do like living in my little world, and writing or entering a book is like doing that. I get to work, I work at a university every day and I'm engaged with people, which is terrific, but I'm also very glad when I arrive home, on my verandah. I have two studies. One which is light and airy and surrounded by glass and trees, and one which is more like a den, and I'll use it according to mood. But, very much for me, writing is going into a space. And then that becomes my world. And the thing I find is that I just like a wall around me and writing does that. So the time just is gone. I could... I'll start work, if I'm working on a novel, and it's a weekend or something, 8 o'clock in the morning and then I'll know it's coffee time by midday. So the four hours will just vanish, and that's what I really like,

**TOM TILLEY**: I think a lot of people will be surprised to hear that even in 2015, you still write a lot of your drafts with a pen - in fact, a fountain pen.

**GARY CREW**: That's right.

**TOM TILLEY**: Why do you still do that? I truly do believe... And I teach my students this. And all my students die, they have a heart attack. So, at the moment, I'm working on a novel called... a subject called 'Writing Your Novel', and all this young, fresh, young things came in. I gave each one of them a journal I bought down the road at the local trading post. I gave each one of them a 2B pencil and an eraser, and said, 'This is what we're writing on this semester,' and they all went, 'Arrgh!' Literally, there's a generation that actually can't hand-write, that actually can't write by hand. But I believe that... I've got several computers for travel or whatever I use it for. 'Cause I do, it's fabulous. A great thing. But I believe there's a connection between, like, the brain going down the arm, and through the hand and through the pencil or through the pen, which is more intimate contact with the page than your fingers on a keyboard, looking at a grey screen. I don't get turned on by a piece of... a touch-screen. Doesn't excite me at all. I do get turned on by looking at lined paper and thinking I can fill that with my personal, human marks. And I think it's kind of like the cave person in me who wants to make smudges on walls. The other problem with the computer is that... you could write, 'Bam, bam, bam, bam, bam,' a thousand times and it would look good because it's neat. There is something about handwriting that says it's handmade and interruptible, that you can continue to scribble and cross out. If I write a draft on the computer, and I print it, I think, 'Aren't I smart?' It looks so beautiful. It's on this white paper, all the lines are straight. But if I write a draft by hand, then it's malleable and alterable. And I think that's the most important thing. Another point, which I think is very important for people to know, is that, if you're... A lot of objects, a lot of strange objects, has to do with maps and charts and stuff. If you're going to create a map or a chart on the computer, you've gotta change your program and go into lines and diagrams and stuff, and draw sticks. But you've got a pencil or a pen in your hand, you just do this - a crazy doodle - and that works. So I find it's easier to make the transition from idea to expression by using handwriting.

**TOM TILLEY**: Now, this question is for any young person aspiring to be a writer much like yourself. You, throughout your whole writing career, have had full-time jobs teaching in high schools and now at university. Do you think that's what most writers have to do? They have to have a 'day job', essentially, and do their fictional work outside of that?

**GARY CREW**: I think it's very advisable. I think that... OK, I'm Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Sunshine Coast. That is a degree in creative writing and it's one of the biggest... As a degree, nationally, it's one of the biggest there is of academia in growth terms for enrolments. Nevertheless, any creative artist, whether you're a tap dancer or a singer or an instrumental music player... you can - I'm not saying 'will', but you can have your place in the sun, and in a decade, someone will say, 'Who the hell is he?' or, 'I found this old LP under a pile of magazines.' Creative artists can become yesterday's news very quickly. And while I hope that won't happen to me... I would like to know that I could still go to a shop and say, 'I'll have that shirt.' I drive a Honda, I'd like to know I can go and buy a new Honda. I'd like to know I can pay my rates, I'd like to know I can eat out for dinner when I want to without having to look in my wallet and say, 'Hell, I've got no money left.' Because income from the creative arts can be like a seismic graph. 8 on the Richter scale, 2 on the Richter scale, where you're big today, gone tomorrow. And for many people, you're only as important as your last CD or your last book.

**TOM TILLEY**: I don't think there's much chance of you becoming yesterday's news any time soon...

**GARY CREW**: Well..

**TOM TILLEY**: Let's see. Great to meet you. Thanks for speaking to us.

**GARY CREW**: Thanks very much, Tom.

ABC Education Services Australia and Copyright Agency Reading Australia appear on screen.

<http://education.abc.net.au/home#!/digibook/1919705/interviews-with-10-australian-authors>

**Activity 5: Information Retrieval from Tom Tilley’s interview with Gary Crew (7 marks)**

1. Read page 1 of the transcript. What facts about the Batavia does Crew use in his novel,

*Strange Objects*?

2. Crew does not produce a linear narrative in *Strange Objects*.

What does Tilley call the type of narrative Crew constructs? Explain.

3. Why did Crew choose to structure his narrative in a non-linear way rather than “write a normal,

straightforward narrative?”

4. Crew identifies two key themes he developed in his novel on the first page. What does he say

about truth and history?

5. Tilley comments that Crew “create(d) a vivid account of the first-contact experience (p. 1)?” How

did Crew manage to achieve this (p.2)?

6. What primary sources did Crew rely on to write about the Australian landscape when he was

describing Loos and Pelgrom’s fictional journey after becoming castaways?

7. What do we learn about the ring and the hand on page 2 of the interview transcript?

**Plot of *Strange Objects***

*Strange Objects* is ostensibly a collection of records collated by the protagonist, Steven Messenger, into a scrapbook, which is then subsequently published by another character, Dr Hope Michaels, who adds a Foreward and an Afterword. The records range from newspaper clippings, excerpts from non-fiction texts, letters, journal entries from Steven himself, the serialized journal of Wouter Loos (a marooned sailor from the Batavia shipwreck) and a cassette tape transcript.

Although fragmented, there are three basic narrative streams. Steven recounts his own, abeit unreliable, experiences after he discovers the ‘strange objects’ of the title: an iron pot, a mummified hand and a gold ring. Although the pot and hand are turned over to authorities, Steven keeps the ring. Wearing it, he starts to have visions of the past and other disturbing visions involving an alternate version of himself and alien spacecraft.

The second major narrative stream is the serialized journal of Wouter Loos, which recounts the story of his survival on mainland Australia, along with another survivor, Jan Pelgrom. They encounter the local Aboriginal people and are taken in, meeting another suri=vivor of a different shipwreck. Jan becomes increasingly disturbed, and after taking Ela, the European girl as a wife, ends up killing her. They also bring disease to the Aboriginal people.

The third stream is that of Dr Hope Michaels, who charts the investigation into the artefacts and reveals Steven’s strange disappearance.

Ultimately, the novel resists any attempt at resolution. The reader does not find out what happens to nay of the major characters and is left with an array of questions.

**Activity 6: (4 marks)**

1. What questions were you left with at the end of the novel?
2. What voices are privileged or foregrounded in this novel?
3. What voices are marginalised or silenced in this story?
4. Charlie Sunrise represents Indigenous Australians in this text.

* Why does he die?
* Why do we know so little about him and his life?
* Why does Loos tell us so little about Indigenous Australians?
* Whose perspective is this novel written from?

**Characters of *Strange Objects***

Steven Messenger – the isolated teenaged protagonist who discovers the artefacts and, after keeping the ring, becomes increasingly erratic and experiences visions.

Nigel Kratzman – Steven’s neighbor and somewhat friend.

Wouter Loos – a real historical figure, Wouter (and Jan Pelgrom) were cast away for their roles in the mutiny and murders that took place on the Abrolhos Islands after the shipwreck of the Dutch East Indiaman Batavia; while there is no evidence Loos made it to the mainland, Crew has speculated on what may have happened if he had.

Jan Pelgrom – Loos’ 16 -year-old fellow cast away and original carrier of the ring, who becomes increasingly disturbed throughout the course of the novel.

Charlie Sunrise – a local Aboriginal elder who reveals, through his role as a lore keeper, that many of Steven’s visions were of ‘true’ historical events, so to speak.

Dr Hope Michaels – the Director of the Institute of Maritime Archaeology in Western Australia, who publishes Steven’s scrapbook.

**Strange Objects Essay Pamela Freeman**

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 uncertainy; 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 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 17th 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 conviciton, 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 expolorers 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 specfic 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.

**References**

Crew, G. *Strange Objects.* Lothian, Sydney, 1998 (ebook).

Lisson, D. *The Devil’s Own*. Walter McVitty Books, Melbourne, 1990.

Todorov, T. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1975.

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

**Activity 7: Information Retrieval From Pamela Freeman’s Essay (16 marks)**

1. What happened to the Batavia?

2. Identify the differences between the plot of *The Devil’s Own* and *Strange Objects*.

3. What is a conceit (research required)? What conceit does Crew use in *Strange Objects* (p. 1)?

4. Name the effect of the “lack of a single authorial voice” – this is related to theme (p. 1).

5. Freeman dismisses Gary Crew’s comment that the “magic” of the ring is “just a red herring.”

Who does she quote from? Explain the three categories this expert uses to categorise the genre of a

novel (p. 1-2). In your own words, what does this mean?

Own explanation:

6. What is an unreliable narrator (research required)? Why is Messenger called an unreliable narrator?

7. Who else is an unreliable narrator in this text. Why are they unreliable?

8. What is the significance of the ring in the novel?

9. What is the main characteristic of fantastic literature? How does this affect readers’ interpretations of the novel? List the three ways.

10. What parallels underpin Strange Objects?

* Plot:
* Character:

11. What is a character ‘foil’? Research needed.

12. ‘truth’ is reflected in the lack of female characters in the text (p. 3)? Explain.

12. What issues does Freeman claim this book explores?

13. How does our perspective cloud our perception of people and events (bottom of p. 3)?

14. How does Freeman sum up her observations about Loos’ and Messnger’s unreliability as narrators (p.

4)? Explain.

Messenger

Loos

15. What does Crew say about history (p. 4)?

16. What does Freeman say are the themes of this text? (Hint: Consider your answers to questions 12 and

15).

**TOTAL MARKS: /16**

**‘New Takes on Time’: A critical dissertation on**

**time-distort fiction and The Serpent House, a novel**

**for children.**

Barbara Henderson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the

degree of PhD

Supervisors: Professor Kimberley Reynolds

Professor Jackie Kay

School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics

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**CHAPTER 4. STRANGE SYNERGY - Radical Form in Gary Crew’s Strange Objects**

I chose to focus on this novel by the Australian writer Gary Crew because it demonstrates how the time-distort genre can be used to experiment with form. Strange Objects (1990) is for an older readership than the Yolen novel, and it too explores a violent and sensitive incident in history. For the critic Eliza T. Dresang, innovative use of forms and formats demonstrates Radical Change Type One: Changing Forms and Formats.**1** These, she says, incorporate characteristics including non-linear or non-sequential organisation and format and multiple layers of meaning. Crew’s experiments with form interested me as a writer, which is one reason why I chose his work to study. I took inspiration from Crew’s works for my creative project, using the polyphonic diary form in which one of the narrators is both unreliable and unsympathetic, although I did not in the end decide that my own novel called for as radical a treatment as those by Crew.

Gary Crew is a historian who has taught the subject at high school in Australia. He says that he was aware at the time of writing the novel how much teenagers disliked history and how little they knew of the subject. In researching Strange Objects, he deliberately sought out an episode from history which dealt with the isolation of a teenager in order to create a rapport with his potential readers.**2** Twenty-two years ago, it was still comparatively rare for children’s or young adults’ authors to experiment with form, but Crew deliberately set out, he says, to ‘stretch [his] literary wings.’**3** There are a number of ways in which this novel has embraced radical and innovative ideas for its time, including polyphony, fictitious diary form, a merging of genres and what have been termed the ‘jigsaw puzzle’ and ‘collage’ methods. These terms are considered by Maria Nikolajeva who, writing in 1996, commented that “pure formal experiments” are still rare in children’s literature.**4** Whilst not the first author of the period to experiment with the form, Crew was one of the first to do so in the children’s time-distort genre. As will become apparent, in doing so he has demonstrated how this genre, far from being a necessarily conservative form, can indeed be radical, dynamic and innovative.

**4.1 Strange Objects**

The story is played out through a series of letters, documents and journals which take the narrative between the past and the present. They are initially presented by the fictional character of Dr Hope Michaels, an archaeological expert. The time distort journey is one of the psyche, but the two time periods

1 Eliza T. Dresang (1999), Radical Change: Books for Youth in a Digital Age (New York and Dublin: H.W.Wilson), p. 19. 2 Gary Crew (2000), ‘Ideas Behind the Writing of the Creative Non-fiction Novel Strange Objects.’ TEXT Special Issue Website No. 1, April 2000. Available from http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/speciss . (Accessed 24th June 2010). 3 Ibid. 4 Maria Nikolajeva (1996), Children’s Literature Comes of Age: Towards a New Aesthetic (New York and London: Garland Publishing), p. 220.

explored are the late twentieth century and the seventeenth century. During a school camping trip, teenager Steven Messenger discovers the strange objects of the title - a leather bound journal and a black iron pot which contains a mummified woman’s hand wearing a ring. Here, Crew may be drawing on a long literary tradition of powerful rings beginning in early folk and fairy tales, from Norse myths and fairytales such as Aladdin to J.R.R. Tolkein’s The Hobbit (1937) and C.S.Lewis’s Narnia series (1950 54), and it becomes the device for the psychological time distort journey. We later learn that Steven took the ring to keep for himself. He describes this act as almost accidental, but it soon becomes apparent that he is an unreliable narrator, and so at various points readers must reassess even basic facts such as this. Steven decides to keep the ring, even though he is aware of the archaeologists’ eagerness to find it. The teenager may, in fact, be suffering from schizophrenia, something which gradually occurs to the reader as the narrative evolves. The ring becomes an obsession and seems, from the evidence of his narrative, to take over his mind or else to draw him into the mind of Jan Pelgrom.

As I have indicated, the time-distort journey in this novel can be understood as one of the psyche. The leather-bound journal is revealed to be that of a seventeenth-century Dutch sailor, Wouter Loos, who was cast away with the violent teenager Pelgrom. Loos and Pelgrom are real historical characters from the shipwreck of the Batavia, a ship of the Dutch East India Company which was shipwrecked on her maiden voyage in 1629. It became famous for the subsequent mutiny and massacre of 125 survivors and has inspired a number of writers during the 1970s and 1980s.**5**

The material links between past and present are the ring and also the mummified hand of Ela, a survivor of the 1622 Trial shipwreck, who is both desired by Pelgrom and later murdered by him, probably in order to gain the ring. The full details of the story, written in Loos’ journal, are serialised in a newspaper and presented throughout the book in this way. As the police and archaeologists investigate the hand, the pot and the journal, some of the history is also revealed by the Aboriginal elder Charlie Sunrise, who is later fatally injured. Although it is never firmly established, it is likely he was assaulted by Steven Messenger and later died from these injuries. Throughout the book, facts are called into question and all narrators are revealed as being unreliable to a greater or lesser extent. At the end of the book, Steven disappears and his fate is left unexplained, so there is an indeterminate ending.

**4.2 Hybrid Genres - Strange Objects as time-distort**

For me, it is important to establish whether Strange Objects is indeed an example of time-distort fiction. The book’s form is so unusual that it could be classified in a number of ways and its genre has been debated by critics and indeed the author himself. Unlike Yolen, who embraced the tradition, Crew, who was heavily influenced by Todorov’s ideas in The Fantastic, wished to credit it with innovation by calling it a ‘new genre of fantastic history.’**6** In fact, Crew resisted the idea of its being categorised at all: ‘I consciously wrote the novel as a composite or ‘collage’ of genres, as written history itself is a collage of genres.’**7** The author’s views on history are relevant here. Crew explains how he despises what he calls ‘fictionally reconstructed history’ as a genre because of its stilted prose and dialogue and its inherent didacticism. I will go on to examine ways in which Strange Objects avoids the former difficulties, although the author regards the novel as ‘essentially audience-less …and non-definitive in narrative structure/prevalent genre, being a combination of fact, fiction, reportage, journalese, personal and stream-of-consciousness (automatic) writing.’**8** Critics have also labelled the work as a ‘horror fantasy thriller.’9 Certainly it fits with Todorov’s definition of the fantastic in that it has both integrated old and new myths and also raised the possibility of a supernatural explanation. Crew deliberately heightens the ambiguity in the work by using the elements of real history and pseudo-documentation alongside invented and supernatural elements. The difficulty in classification comes partly because it mixes these real documents, characters and events from history with parallel fictional characters and events from the twentieth century – but that is also why it can be classified as part of the time-distort genre.Clearly Steven Messenger can be seen as taking a journey

5 These include Mark O’Connor (1986), who wrote a poem sequence called The Batavia and Deborah Lisson (1990), whose young adults’ book The Devil’s Own won the Western Australia Premier’s Award in 1991.Clearly if Crew was to take this subject matter he would have had to tackle it in a fresh way. 6 Gary Crew (1990), Cited in Bernard McKenna and Sharyn Pearce (1999), Strange Journeys: The Works of Gary Crew. (Sydney: Hodder and Stoughton), p. 87. 7 Gary Crew (2000), ‘Ideas Behind the Writing of the Creative Non-fiction Novel Strange Objects’. Available from: http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/speciss/issue1/crew.htm (Accessed 20th June, 2010). 8 Ibid. 9 Bernard McKenna and Sharyn Pearce (1999), p. 87.

into themind of, or perhaps having his own mind taken over by, the seventeenth-century criminal, Jan Pelgrom. Messenger’s schoolmate and neighbour, Nigel Kratzman, seems to have a parallel role to Wouter Loos, Pelgrom’s contemporary. The text implies the ring serves as a talisman which connects Steven to the past (or Pelgrom to the present day). In his writer’s journal, Crew also makes a statement which tallies with the motivations of other authors in the time-distort genre, namely his desire to give young readers a powerful entry into the past:

The real secret of the story depends on […] its voice which must be an authentic voice of youth – not a cold historical voice; its connection or rapport with kids today who must be able to say “That’s like me.”**10** History, therefore – but through a modern-day prism. For these reasons it is appropriate to classify the text as part of the time-distort genre.

**4.3 Crew on Strange Objects**

Even when Gary Crew was planning and researching Strange Objects, it is clear that, as well as using experimental forms, he was not intending to follow a traditional plot. In his 1988 writing journal, Crew wrote that he wanted to trace the life of a boy left entirely alone in Australia before settlement, looking not only at the fight for physical survival but also ‘psychic survival.’**11** The ideas of displacement, loss, loneliness and fear were central. He uses the ‘narrative hook’ of Steven Messenger’s disappearance to interest readers at the beginning of the book and then also uses the plot to consider other issues important to the author, such as the nature of history and the troubled relationship between indigenous Australians and whites.Crew claims that he sees his books as ‘symmetrical.’ For me, this is another reason to class the book as time-distort fiction, because the use of symmetry between the past and present, or between the primary and secondary chronotopes, is usually found in texts of this genre and is a device which I used in my own novel. This symmetry is apparent in the parallels between the characters and events from the past and those in the present – there are obvious links between Steven Messenger and Jan Pelgrom, and less obvious but definite links between Loos and Kratzman. Crew says of Messenger and Pelgrom that both represent ‘the continuing incomprehension and mistreatment of the land’ in that they exploit it in a self-defeating way and have no respect for nature (see Messenger’s ‘life frame’ experiment and Pelgrom’s mockery of the dead whale).**12** Both characters are associated with illness and both are apparently responsible for murders which result in the discontinuation of history. Both also vanish without trace; both seem to be troubled, possibly evil characters who can also display cunning and exploit others. Crew does not see them as evil in a clear-cut sense of the word. Of Pelgrom he says he is ‘one of society’s victims (who) finds evil easier,’ while of Messenger he says he has suffered trauma because of the loss of his father and he is isolated and lacking support. He is ‘amoral rather than immoral.’**13** With Steven Messenger, Crew deliberately makes it difficult for readers to conclude which parts of his world are real and which fictional, so we are left without a stable central protagonist. Messenger is also unusual in that he is an unlikeable protagonist; usually, in a time-distort novel, the reader identifies with the protagonist to a greater or lesser degree, particularly as they begin to ‘redeem’ themselves as part of the time-distort process; this does not happen in Strange Objects.

Giving a voice to ‘the other’, in this case the Aboriginal native Australians, was a central concern for Crew, but, as a white author, he felt constrained in how to do this. One method he uses is promoting an interest in Aboriginal literature and history. As there was, at the time of writing, a virtual absence of indigenous Australians in popular literature and film, Crew first had to acquaint the reader with ‘the other’ and then deal with the issues raised by ‘otherness.’ Crew has recorded in his writing journal that, for him, there are two contexts for otherness: the postcolonial and the horror. Crew draws on the idea of the ‘horror’ other from Stephen King. The ‘horror’ other could be Steven Messenger; postcolonial ‘others’ are Ela and Charlie Sunrise. Crew points out how, while the whites either endure or perish, the indigenous black people have a stable culture.

10 Gary Crew (1990), cited in McKenna and Pearce (1999), p. 87. 11 Gary Crew (1988), Strange Objects Journal, 11th July 1988, cited in McKenna and Pearce (1999), p. 53. 12 Gary Crew (1988), cited in McKenna and Pearce, (1999), p. 68. 13 McKenna & Neilsen (1994), p. 16, cited in McKenna and Pearce (1999), p. 70.

**4.4 Radical Form 1: Multiple Voices**

The novel as ‘an endless discussion of various issues, a battlefield of ideas and existential questions’ is how the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin describes Dostoyevsky and its use of the polyphonic technique, in such a way that Dostoyevsky’s fiction writer’s voice disappears altogether.**14**  This was something I hoped to achieve in my own use of two narrators and diary form. In Strange Objects, Crew uses the voices of Steven Messenger, Dr Hope Michaels and Wouter Loos in diary or note form, with the back-up of historical documentation, as well as the oral history input of Charlie Sunrise. Crew has spoken out against the ‘stilted’ language used by many fictional histories. One way he has avoided this is by having Loos’ diary translated and printed as a serial in a present-day newspaper, thereby ensuring he is able to use easily recognisable, modern-day language.**15** Crew’s collected notes on Messenger are represented to the reader via Dr Michaels and, given that Dr Michaels becomes a kind of curator of the collected documents as well as the discovered artefacts, these written documents and testimonies could also be ‘strange objects.’ Crew, however, takes this idea a stage further not only by using the fictitious diary-like form (Messenger and Loos’ voices), but also by ensuring that there are no reliable narrators. Even the authoritative voice of the archaeologist, Dr Michaels, becomes questionable as the text progresses, in that she appears rather obsessive in her search for the ring. She seems also to make assumptions about Messenger which stray beyond what we would expect to be the boundaries of her role. Writing in 1996, Maria Nikolajeva points out that it is only recently that the fictitious diary form has entered the field of children’s/young adults’ literature and that it appears to be a good way of making the voice more authentic for young readers.

The crucial difference between an authentic autobiographical text and a fictitious one is determined by the dissimilarity between the mimetic and the semiotic process of writing.**16** The former is mimetic; the modern or postmodern fictitious form is semiotic and the reader is encouraged to ‘decipher’ the text. I find the latter works well in Crew, who plays with the reader’s assumptions. It takes us some time to realise the full extent of Messenger’s inner disturbance; Kratzman and Loos are both highly ambivalent characters and even Dr Michaels displays some disturbing tendencies in the obsession with procuring the ring.

**4.5 Radical Form 2: Jigsaw Puzzle and Collage**

Crew’s method in Strange Objects can be likened to a jigsaw puzzle, in that the narrative does not follow a simple linear or even circular pattern, which again is cited by Dresang as a kind of Radical Change Type One.**17** This is particularly unusual within the time-distort genre, as this tends towards a circular pattern. Nikolajeva describes the jigsaw technique as ‘somewhat daring and innovative’ in children’s literature; it also corresponds to Dresang’s definition of ‘multi-layered fiction,’ and so we can identify it as radical in form by its non-linearity and complexity. Dresang particularly cites what she calls ‘time switches,’ in which the traditional form might allow the time-distort to take place and then be reversed; the radical form of the genre would ‘emulate the hyper-textual world, in that they allow the reader to deviate from one story to nother.’**18** Crew’s technique is to shift back and forth between the two time periods and allow the reader to draw parallels between the main characters and the plot lines. Crew uses the various voices and also the real and pseudo-documents as pieces of his jigsaw puzzle and asks the reader to draw conclusions from these fragments.

At the end of the book, the reader is not given a full or clear picture of what really happened, especially to Steven Messenger. We know from the beginning of the book that Messenger has disappeared but a reader expecting the mystery to be ‘solved’ at the end will be disappointed. Other mysteries remain, including the truth about Charlie Sunrise’s fatal injuries. It is a jigsaw puzzle which, on ‘completion,’ still has pieces missing or allows the readers to fill in their own assumptions.

Crew’s technique also has elements of ‘collage.’ In looking at this device, Maria Nikolajeva cites the work of Aidan Chambers and Robert Cormier in the late 1970s, which seems to be similar to Crew’s experimental form and may, given that around a decade passed between the works, have been an influence on him. Because of the work of Chambers and Cormier, I am not suggesting that Crew was the first to utilise these techniques, but I am suggesting both that they were uncommon in books for young people and also that he was radical in using them in the time-distort genre. According to Nikolajeva,

14 Maria Nikolajeva (1996), p. 99. 15 I faced a similar dilemma with my two historical time-periods. I was advised by my supervisor to write the main protagonist’s voice in as modern a way as possible, whilst avoiding any obvious anachronisms. 16 Maria Nikolajeva(1996), p. 104. 17 Eliza T. Dresang (1999), p. 19. 18 Eliza T. Dresang (1999), p. 117.

devices such as quoting from maps or guidebooks, newspapers or other ‘factual’ texts, and the utilisation of different typefaces, are ‘obviously modernistic and are comparable, for instance, to conceptualism in visual art,’ reflecting the chaos and looseness of modern life and particularly the confusion of an adolescent.**19** Crew’s work echoes these techniques and concerns, but, as none of the above texts are time distort novels, Crew may be seen as a pioneer within this genre. These techniques again tally with Dresang’s Radical Change Type One: Changing Forms and Formats. Here she looks at graphic books and ways in which the use of words and pictures reach a new level of synergy.

**4.6 Radical Form 3: Open text**

Several critics, including Nikolajeva and Dresang, have talked about the use of non-linear texts as innovative, and coupled with that is what I would term the ‘indeterminate conclusion,’ in which there is no traditional happy ending or even true closure, ‘happy’ or otherwise. Crew is scathing about ‘people who expect little bows to be tied at the end, so it all turns out happily.’**20** In Strange Objects, therefore, our expectations of people, time and place are all deliberately subverted and there is more than one mystery in the text – not only what happened in the past but also Steven’s disappearance and the circumstances of Charlie Sunrise’s death. This is a relatively recent development in style among children’s writers.**21** It is safe to say the reader must reconsider events at the end of Strange Objects, which in its publication date precedes the Lowry work cited in Dresang (see footnote 21) by four years: in the last pages, for instance, an unexpected but key fact emerges about Steven’s father, which requires readers to re-assess Steven’s narrative and, crucially, there is no clear explanation of the youth’s disappearance. Dresang also cites the use of story-telling devices which have previously been seen as ‘non-literary,’ such as those associated with the oral tradition. Crew employs these by the way in which the character Charlie Sunrise fills in part of the aboriginal history that readers need to understand if they are to find ways of putting the pieces of this textual puzzle together. Dresang suggests three ways in which native storytelling possesses characteristics which are similar to hypertext: the fluidity of the text, which can change from telling to telling or reading to reading; the lack of boundaries, allowing, for instance, gestures and digressions; and the opportunity for the listener or reader to construct or alter the text.**22** It may, therefore, be a time-honoured form in itself, but it is radical when incorporated into written texts for children/young adults and contributes to the non-linearity of the text.**23** Charlie Sunrise is crucial to the plot in that he makes the link between Pelgrom and Messenger at the rock painting, saying: ‘See the ring. That’s you, the pale one who walks at night.’**24** Charlie is portrayed as a stable character who disturbs Steven by appearing to see through him.

**4.7 Radical Form 4: Truth or fiction?**

Like Yolen, Crew decided to take a horrific episode from history as the basis for this novel, but, rather than exploiting its more graphic or bloodthirsty elements, his concern as a writer is with the nature of history and historical inquiry. Throughout the story, several different characters gather stories from historical artefacts and have different motivations for doing so. Untold stories, such as those of the Aboriginal people and Ela’s own history, are also significant.

Whilst Crew’s use of diary-type form (with the characters of Loos and Messenger) initially encourages the reader to give the accounts a high degree of credibility, as the text progresses this is shown to be dangerous. The characters’ ‘inner thoughts’ are tinged with the knowledge that they will at some point be read by another and therefore both characters attempt to portray themselves in a reasonably good light. Steven’s insistence that he acquired the ring by accident, for instance, is highly dubious, while Loos would have hoped that, if he were rescued, he would not be punished by the authorities for any actions taken during his time with Pelgrom. We see similarities also between Loos and the character of Steven’s schoolmate and neighbour, Nigel Kratzman, who gives rather incomplete and unsatisfactory accounts of their meeting with Charlie Sunrise, perhaps in an attempt to disassociate himself from Steven’s actions.

19 Maria Nikolajeva (1996), p. 111. 20 McKenna & Neilsen(1994), p. 16. Cited in McKenna and Pearce (1999), p. 65. 21 Dresang cites Lois Lowry’s The Giver (1994) as one of the best-known books with an unresolved ending (as opposed to a ‘to be continued’ ending, which is of course a different thing). ‘Truly unresolved endings remain unresolved, and force the reader to reconsider the meaning of the entire story.’ Eliza T. Dresang (1999), p. 232. 22 Eliza T.Dresang (1999), p. 233. Here Dresang is citing Manley, who was discussing Native American culture in particular. Kathleen Manley (1994), ‘Decreasing the Distance: Contemporary Native American Texts, Hypertext and the Concept of Audience’. Southern Folklore 51. 23 Eliza T. Dresang (1999), p. 233-4. 24 Gary Crew (1998), Strange Objects. p. 186.

Crew is also keen to alert the reader to the differences in the way historical accounts are interpreted, because of the dominant ideologies at the time of discovery. While history may strive for objectivity, its interpretation is affected by such things as the time, place and ethnicity of the historian. The different accounts present in Strange Objects constitute five separate sections: the news account (the press cuttings), the Messenger account, the ‘professional’ account (Dr Michaels, or factual textbooks cited in the novel), the Loos account (instalments from his journal) and the ‘alternative’ account (letters to the newspaper concerning the journals or else a note from Kratzman), according to McKenna and Pearce. This appears to be an attempt by Crew to ‘decentre’ history by making the reader look at it through the gaze of many different people, from those who we trust, such as the archaeologist, to those who may seem less important or reliable.

These attempts at decentring and at blending innovative fiction with apparently truthful history allow the reader an imaginative new insight into past events not possible within the academic discipline that history requires.**25** The effect of these devices is to make readers question the idea of history as objective fact. Whilst a key attraction of the time-distort genre for writers and readers is the suggestion that history can be more directly experienced, here all accounts are so unreliable that the reader is never quite certain what he, she or the characters in the book, really do experience.

At the time of publication, little fiction had previously been written (particularly for young readers) on Aboriginal culture and so at this level Crew can be seen, like Jane Yolen, to be venturing into new and uncharted content. The issue has long been a sensitive one, and it is one to which Crew said he would not wish to return because the Aboriginal experience was in ‘such an enormous state of flux […] that I haven’t got a clue where it’s going.’**26**  Yet, until the early 1990s, the relationship between indigenous peoples and whites was a recurring theme in Crew’s work. He researched Aboriginal culture, knowing that he would encounter criticism as a white writer for using this voice, but wishing to ensure that the voice was at least heard. In three novels, including Strange Objects, the black characters play a positive and significant role, reinforcing parts of the narrative, such as the story of Ela.**27** Crew described his task as a writer as reenergising ‘decayed or dying elements of culture’ by blending them with new influences.**28** He was careful, however, not to exploit Aboriginal stories, but to blend black and white storytelling in a way which he felt essential to emerging Australian culture.

Crew also subverts traditional readings of shipwreck stories, which in the past have often presented the protagonists as heroes and native populations as savages – the archetype being Robinson Crusoe (1719), although for later readers William Golding’s Lord of the Flies (1954) is more significant, even though it lacks traditional heroes.**29** A postcolonial reader would recognise the notion, which is very evident in Crew’s writing, of the white as invader. We know that even more recent writers have failed to recognise post-colonial sensitivities in spite of their original intentions.**30** Crew, however, is able to demonstrate great self-awareness as a writer. Loos and Pelgrom also fall victim to a shipwreck and they are living at a similar time to Defoe, but there is no heroism or glorified adventure here. The whites bring sickness and death and their ignorance of the landscape and people results in their oblivion.**31**

**4.8 Radical Form 5: The Use of Horror**

We know that, whilst Gary Crew was reluctant to classify the novel, he admitted to its elements of horror. Whilst horror is not a new genre, the merging of genres which Crew has achieved here seems to be particularly modern. John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, for example, credit the fluid boundaries between modern horror and realist fiction with an element of innovation: Perhaps this generic fluidity is consonant with the more fluid conceptions of subjectivity in the postmodern world, and becomes a vehicle for introducing versions of subjectification uncharacteristic of adolescent fiction in general.**32**

25 McKenna and Pearce (1999), p. 78. 26 McKenna and Pearce (1999), p. 80. 27 See also The Inner Circle (1986) and No Such Country (1991). 28 McKenna & Neilsen (1994), p.16. Cited in McKenna and Pearce (1999), p .89. 29 Crew taught this work to high school students and later hoped that The Inner Circle would fill a gap where there had been little written about the Australian experience and to which modern-day teenagers could relate. 30 See Clare Bradford, Kerry Mallan, John Stephens and Robyn McCallum (2008), New World Orders in Contemporary Children’s Literature: Utopian Transformations. (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan). 31 McKenna and Pearce (1999), p. 94. 32 John Stephens and Robyn McCallum (2001), ‘There are Worse Things than Ghosts: Reworking Horror Chronotopes in Australian Children’s Fiction’, in Mystery in Children’s Literature: From the Rational to the Supernatural, in A.E. Gavin and C. Routledge, (eds.). (New York: Palgrave), pp. 165-183.

In other words, this narrative hybridity allows authors like Crew to play with notions of what is real and what is not, adding to the ambiguity of the story. They go on to suggest that the uncanny disrupts our senses to a point where we stop thinking rationally and become prey to primitive superstitions and deep fears. This seems particularly pertinent to Strange Objects, in which the fears and superstitions of the whites around the native Aborigines seem to become more marked throughout the novel, both in the accounts from the past and in the accounts credited to Steven Messenger. Hybridising horror and other genres can result in an implicit conservatism, because the resulting texts tend to reaffirm dominant ideologies, according to Stephens.**33** This cannot, however, be said of Strange Objects, in which the combination of realism and horror add to the ambiguity of the story, or what Allan Lloyd Smith refers to as an ‘unbearable absence of meaning.’**34**  Stephens’ and McCallum’s particular concern is to ascertain whether hybrid horror stories can have an Australian setting, given that they tend to draw upon internationally recognised features of the genre (such as a house with more than one storey, which is uncommon in Australia). To do that they examine the chronotopes of a number of examples, including Dark House (1995), an anthology of mystery stories for adolescents edited by Gary Crew, which the pair deem a good introduction to these more contemporary treatments of the genre.**35** The problem, they say, is that the ‘present day’ chronotope tends to be specifically North American:

There is no tradition of mystery or horror writing in Australian children’s literature, so there is still a tendency to carry over chronotopes from (mainly) American sources.**36** Crew’s use of time-distort in Strange Objects, however, allows him to create a horror setting from a real period of history; there is also a certain bleakness about the present-day setting. In my own use of the supernatural and the snake motif, I have included some elements of horror in my own time-distort fantasy, although the British Gothic horror chronotope is much more firmly established. Whilst many of the stories in Dark House tend to use elements of the North American horror chronotope, the same cannot be said of Strange Objects, which successfully creates what seems to be a very new Australian horror setting and would appear from Crew’s own writing journals to have been a deliberate choice. In fact, the work of establishing an Australian horror genre is still being carried out and Strange Objects seems to be highly radical in this regard and can therefore be credited with innovation within the existing time-distort genre.

**4.9 Conclusion**

Crew’s work demonstrates innovative propensities in several ways, not the least of which is the hybridity of the genre in which he has chosen to work. In spite of the author’s reluctance to classify it himself, and his aversion to fictionalised history, there are sufficient elements of the time-distort genre to place Strange Objects in this category, albeit as a highly unusual kind of time-distort work. Here the characters do not travel in time in the way we have understood the device from other works in the tradition. Arguably the journeys undertaken by both Messenger and Pelgrom, are entirely of the psyche. Crew’s intention was to explore the mind of an isolated teenager and, by doing this through two disturbed characters, Pelgrom and Messenger, he has linked the two time periods. Crew’s merging of real and imagined history gives the fictional elements extra authority and blurs the boundaries for the reader between what is real and what is imagined. This is a device I initially aimed to emulate in my own creative project, although I changed direction once I began writing it because I found the creation of faux documentation did not work well within the context of The Serpent House.

Strange Objects makes readers consider the nature of history, in particular whose stories are told and how history is more than facts but a combination of things, including prevalent cultures. Crew’s work has influenced my own, in that he opened up for me as a writer the possibility of using polyphony and fictitious diary form, devices with which I experimented. Crew uses a number of experimental elements, including multiple and unheard (in the case of Charlie) voices and the collage and jigsaw puzzle devices. Again, this was something I found inspirational, even though my own attempt ended up as much less experimental. Crew disrupts conventional relations between past and present, truth and fiction. The voice of the Aboriginal Australian was innovative both because it had been so little heard in fiction before Crew began writing for young people and in its use of the oral storytelling form. Although Crew was not the first writer to utilise collage and jigsaw puzzle devices, by placing them in the children’s time-distort genre, he opened new pathways for writers of juvenile fiction. It has also been argued that Crew has pioneered a specifically Australian horror novel, which had not been successfully attempted in the past. Crew has, therefore, combined a number of experimental forms to produce a radical and innovative time-distort novel.

33 See Stephens and McCallum (2001), p. 174. 34 Cited in Stephens and McCallum (2001), p. 178. 35 It should be noted that Crew wrote only one of the stories in the anthology. 36 Stephens and McCallum (2001), p. 174.

**Activity 8: Information retrieval From Henderson’s Thesis (20 marks)**

1. The text above is chapter 4 of Barbara Henderson’s thesis. The thesis compares Gary Crew’s

use of ‘radical form’ with the form of other texts. In your own words, what does Henderson mean

when she refers to ‘radical form’? Explain.

2. List the five ways the form of *Strange Objects* is radical? Note: form is a synonym for Genre.

(skim the subheadings in the whole text for this answer)

Way 1:

Way 2:

Way 3:

Way 4:

Way 5:

3. List the “number of ways” Crew “has embraced radical and innovative ideas for (his) time” in

experimenting “with form.”

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

4. What is a time distort genre (eg: what synonym do we use when describing this text p. 1)?

Explain.

5. What do you think Henderson means when she says, on p. 2, that “the time-distort journey in

this novel can be understood as one of the psyche?”

6. On p. 2, Henderson explores whether “Strange Objects is indeed an example of (the) time-

distort genre.”

1. How does the novel fit Todorov’s definition of the fantastic (genre)?
2. Crew names the genre as “fictionally reconstructed history.” Note that earlier in this paragraph he defines history as being “itself a collage of genres.” Henderson also states that Crew “resisted the idea” of the novel “being categorised at all.” Why does Crew consider his novel has no set genre?
3. How does Crew “heighten the ambiguity” of the novel?
4. What genre do critics consider the novel to be?
5. What does Crew say is “the real secret of the story (p. 2)?”
6. How does this comment of Crew’s support Henderson’s assertion that the novel is a time-distort text (p. 1-2)?

7. On p. 3, what ideas did Crew intend to explore in *Strange Objects*?

8. On p. 3, identify Crew’s narrative ‘hook’.

9. On p. 3, list what Crew says about why he did not intend to “follow a traditional plot?”

10. What do Messenger and Pelgrom represent and how does Crew use them to do this?

11. Explain how Crew gives “a voice to ‘the other,’ in this case Aboriginal native Australians.” He

names two ‘others.’ What are they?

12. Polyphonic writing (Henderson calls this polyphonic technique) occurs when often contrasting

perspectives tell the story. The resulting novel is ‘many-voiced,’ allowing layers of

contradiction, similarity and identification that is more nuanced and complex than a traditional

linear narrative ([www.quora.com](http://www.quora.com)). Why does Henderson say Crew used this polyphonic

technique?

1.

2.

13. How is *Strange Objects* like a jigsaw puzzle (p. 4)?

14. How does Crew use the “collage” technique in *Strange Objects*?

15. How does Henderson say Crew uses Charlie Sunrise in Strange Objects?

1.

2.

16. How does Crew undermine the superiority of the dominant culture in both the past and the

present narratives in Strange Objects (p. 4-5)?

17. Henderson claims that Crew “successfully creates what seems to be a very new Australian

horror setting…” What does she mean when she says this?

18. Henderson sums up her arguments in the conclusion of her chapter on *Strange Objects* (p. 5).

a) How is Crew’s work innovative?

b) How does Crew put a twist on the time-distort genre?

c) What was Crew’s intention in writing Strange Objects?

d) How does Crew achieve this intention?

e) What does Crew’s blurring of “boundaries for the reader” do (p. 5)?

19. In dot point form, summarise the main points raised in the final paragraph.

20. What is Barbara’ Henderson’s overall thesis (or argument)?

**Themes of *Strange Objects***

* History:
* Early Australian exploration by the Dutch
* Aboriginal Australian history
* Fallibility of historical accounts/’truth’ in history – history is just one version of reality, usually written from the perspective of the dominant culture
* The repetitious nature of history
* Alternate versions of history (multiple perspectives/versions)
* Power: who writes history?
* Racism:
* Australia’s treatment of Aboriginal people and culture
* Historical approaches to Aboriginal people and culture
* Marginalisation and silencing through historical recording
* Media:
* Media sensationalism
* ‘truth’ in the media
* Identity:
* Adolescent identity
* Self-image
* Authenticity in the different ‘versions’ of one’s identity (as constructed by oneself, or by others, such as the media or historical accounts)
* Isolation and its effects on identity
* Australia’s cultural identity

**Activity 9: What are the themes of the novel, Strange Objects?**

**Language and Style in Strange Objects**

**Activity 10: Close Reading – narrative voice** Learning Intention: What is narrative voice?

Compare the style of language used across the different narrative voices. Work in groups of three. Each group is to focus on their designated item. Each item presents us with a different narrative voice.

Initial group task: what is narrative voice – create your own definition. Put it on a piece of coloured paper and ‘post’ your definition on the whiteboard.

Collect a sheet of A3 paper and a photocopy of your item. Paste it in the centre of the A3 sheet. Annotate the item, making comments about the:

* complexity of sentence structure
* complexity of vocabulary
* register (formality of the language: formal, informal, colloquial, slang)
* tone
* degree of descriptiveness
* the ratio of literal to figurative language
* the ratio of opinion to (supposed) fact

Now consider the effects that arise as a result of the construction of voice. On a separate A3 sheet of paper, record your answers to the following questions: For example, who seems more credible? What is it about their narrative voice that makes them so? Are there any other questions you’d like to generate about narrative? Answer these.

‘Post’ your findings to your designated space. One person stays with the work (to field questions), the other two move around the room to complete a guided walk exploring other group’s work. Take notes if you find anything new. Return to your group and share what you saw. Add any information you collected to your A3 sheet. Record your notes in your file.

Come back to your original definition of narrative voice. In groups, answer these three questions:

1. What is narrative voice?

2. How does Crew use language features to construct distinct narrative voices?

3. What are the effects of this construction of distinct narrative voices?

Record your answers to these questions in your file.

**Activity 11: Close Reading – discourse** Learning Intention: What is the discourse of horror?

Work in groups of 5 to explore the concept of discourse.

Collect a photocopy of page 2 (5 pages) and 5 A3 sheets of paper.

Paste each page onto the centre of each A3 sheet of paper.

Annotate the text - conduct a close reading of Item 2 to analyse the use of the discourse of horror, noting the:

* metonymy of gloom and shadows (revise the concept of metonymy)
* pathetic fallacy of the stormy weather
* circle around a bonfire
* telling of ‘ghost stories’
* personification of the wind as ‘moaning’
* references to blood
* the description of the students as ‘the circle of the dead’
* Steven’s admission that there was ‘something wrong about that place’
* The cannibal pot and mummified hand
* The description of the opening of the pot with its foul stench

‘Post’ your annotation of each item in the designated area. One person stays with your response (to field any questions) the other four do a guided walk around each group’s work, reading their observations as you go and taking notes of anything you see that you do not have on your work.

Once you get back to your group, share what you noticed as you walked around the room. Everyone takes a copy of the notes.

1. What is the discourse of horror?

2. How does the language Crew uses create the discourse of horror?

3. What is the effect of the discourse of horror in *Strange Objects*?

4. What other discourses does Crew use in *Strange Objects*?

**Activity 12: Symbolism**

Learning Intention: What symbols does Crew use in *Strange Objects* to create additional layers of meaning? In pairs, examine the following symbols within *Strange Objects* and consider the meanings they add.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Symbol** | **What might it mean?** | **How it applies to Strange Objects** |
| Cannibal pot |  |  |
| Mummified hand |  |  |
| Ring |  |  |
| Abandoned mission |  |  |
| Blinding light |  |  |
| Aliens |  |  |
| Fragmentation of the narrative |  |  |
| The whale |  |  |
| The Life Frame |  |  |
| Allusion to James Dean |  |  |
| Allusion to *Psycho* and *Bates Motel* |  |  |
| Steven Messenger |  |  |
| Hope Michaels |  |  |
| Charlie Sunrise |  |  |
| Ela |  |  |

**Activity 13: Close Reading: Racism as a Theme in *Strange Objects***

Racism is a major theme in the novel and is explored in both historical and contemporary contexts.

1. In dot point form, before talking to anyone else, what constitutes racism? Consider the connection between racism and: exploitation, paternalism, textual representations, stereotyping and marginalisation.
2. Pair up. Come up with a definition of racism.
3. Create a group of 6. Each pair first shares their definition. Next, create a group definition.
4. Each group shares their definition with the class.

Conduct a close reading of Items 21 and 23. Compare them in terms of the representation of Aboriginal people living in close harmony with the land, and with a strong sense of community and positivity.

Item 23, though coloured by Steven’s own racism, represents Aboriginal people living amongst the detritus of colonisation. This section is highly symbolic, as the Aboriginal people live behind a failed Mission that sought to ‘civilise’ them. Steven and Kratz need to walk through a graveyard to find the Aboriginal settlement, which is described as ramshackle. The correlation here is significant: European intervention was doomed to fail and resulted in the devastation of Aboriginal culture.

1. Separate your group of 6, from the previous activity, into a group of 3. No pair should remain together.

Read the Item 21. Focus on the way that positive representations of Aboriginal culture are created. Next focus on the representation of Pelgrom and/or Loos. Are they exploitative, paternalistic, stereotypical or marginalised? What is the significance of this? What language features construct these representations?

1. Read Item 23. Focus on the representation of Aboriginal Australians (positively or negatively represented) and of Messenger and Kratz (positively or negatively represented).

What language features construct these representations?

3. Class discussion of each item. Summarise findings.

**ANALYSING DIFFERENT READINGS**

How are different readings of a text made? Gaps and Silences/ Foreground and Privileging. This may be referred to as:

* What bits of the text or textual fragments are emphasised or fore-grounded.
* What textual fragments are privileged (promotion of particular values and attitudes) or read as important.
* What textual fragments are ignored, marginalised or silenced (gaps which lead to an avoidance of questioning cultural values).
* How particular textual fragments are read to ‘fit’ a reading.
* How gaps (where readers make connections by using common sense) are filled.

The readings we construct for a text relate to the ways of thinking and acting that are made available to us by our culture, our social positions, our genders, our professions and so on – which all befit our view of the world in which we live. For a specific text, some readings will be common, others will be rare. There have been three classes of readings suggested by critics:

* **DOMINANT OR PREFERRED** readings which may be designed to invite favour, or which represent the beliefs and values that are most powerful in our culture.
* **ALTERNATIVE** or readings which are less common readings, but which are still considered acceptable because they do not challenge the dominant reading.
* **OPPOSITIONAL OR RESISTANT** readings which are unacceptable in terms of the dominant cultural beliefs and which challenge prevailing views.

Complexity of texts: achievement in higher levels in this English course demands the study of textual complexity. So what is complexity?

* It involves what the reader brings to the text in the way of experience and thought processes. This enables students to see subtlety within the composition – looking beneath the surface to see the various shades of possible meanings.
* Tit is an awareness of gaps or silences in the text which provide scope for inference on the reader’s part.
* It is texts which contravene the usual conventions and thus our expectation of what the text may provide for the reader. Rather than solving our questions, such texts urge us to ask more questions – especially in relation to the world we live in.
* Complex texts are often paradoxical – that is, contradictory in its treatment of subjects or ideas, or something which is contrary to or conflicts with common opinion.

**Activity:**

1. What beliefs and values are the most dominant in our culture? Construct a dominant reading of the text – what values and beliefs is Crew foregrounding in his text? Eg: *Strange Objects* is a bildungsroman novel and as such it explores the confusion of life as a teenager; Messenger grows up after the sudden death of his father and struggles to redefine who he is and what his place is in the world. It values individualism and a teenager’s right to forge their own identity and become their own person but it acknowledges that sometimes teenagers like Messenger are overwhelmed by their circumstances and get lost along the way, so they need the guidance/understanding of adults.
2. How else can this text be read (or interpreted) in a way that does not challenge our values and beliefs? Construct an alternative reading of the text. Eg: this is really a novel about what it is like to grow up on the fringes of society and exist in a world where your values are so different from the general population. It explains how sociopaths are created and invites the general public into their world in a way that is safe for us to do so. We reject Stephen’s actions and values and so our culture’s dominant values are endorsed.
3. What readings are unacceptable in terms of our dominant cultural beliefs? Construct an oppositional or a resistant reading of this text.
4. What questions are raised by the way we read *Strange Objects*? Eg: Is a postcolonial reading of this text a resistant or a dominant reading – to what extent do we accept that Indigenous Australians have a right to self-determination because their land was stolen from them?

**Different Perspectives or Theoretical Approaches to Reading *Strange Objects***

**1. Post-colonialism**

Postcolonialism or postcolonial studies is the academic study of the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism, focusing on the human consequences of the control and exploitation of colonised people and their lands.

[Postcolonialism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcolonialism) **[-](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcolonialism)** [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcolonialism)

[https://**en.wikipedia.org**/wiki/**Postcolonialism**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcolonialism)

This novel was originally published in 1990, two years after Australia’s Bicentenary. This was a period of great reflection upon Australia’s history, particularly from a very Eurocentric perspective of celebrating the colonisation of Australia. However, such reflection also drew strong criticism, marginalising as it did Indigenous history and the nations whose earlier ‘discovery’ of Australia was overlooked.

In groups of three, discuss how *Strange Objects* can be seen as subverting dominant versions of Australian history by:

* Highlighting the fallibility and often contradictory nature of historical accounts
* Implying that history is constructed, a pastiche that ultimately serves the interests of some whilst marginalising or even silencing others
* Revealing the treatment of Aboriginal people at the hands of colonising Europeans and the resultant social issues that continue to be problematic
* Suggesting that history repeats itself, particularly in regards to human nature, thus providing a gloomy vision for the future
* Revealing the role of language in perpetuating racist and marginalising attitudes towards Aboriginal peoples.

Developing this approach further by addressing the following:

1. Does Crew’s novel do enough to acknowledge Aboriginal histories and cultures, or does his

privileging of white voices in the novel continue to marginalise Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander histories and cultures?

2. Do his representations of the dangerous landscape and Aboriginal culture perpetuate the

ideologies of colonialism? Remember, ideology is the beliefs and values of a culture.

**The following text by Harper, is only part of his exploration of post-colonialism in a range of literary works. It refers to other texts as well as to Strange Objects. Before reading it:**

1. Scan the text looking for unfamiliar words. Highlight these and use a dictionary to define each word. When you come across each word as you later read Harper’s analysis of *Strange Objects*
2. Skim the text, reading only the first paragraph and the topic sentence of every paragraph. Do not worry if you are confused. Jot down what you think the text is saying.
3. Read the whole text paragraph by paragraph. Stop to question what Harper is saying. If you get lost, read ahead until you reach a section you do understand. Skip whole sections, if necessary. Then come back and try to make sense of what you did not understand.
4. Take notes section by section.
5. Ask questions – write them in the margins - if you don’t understand.
6. Work together with a partner to decipher the text.

**As If By Magic: World Creation in**

**Postcolonial Children’s Literature**

**GRAEME HARPER**

**Sgt. Norman**: Too many things to answer there. I'll try one at time. First, an Aboriginal friend told me the hand could have been worn as a good-luck charm. Quite common to wear part of a loved one around the neck or carry bones or a finger in a "charm bag." This was supposed to keep away evil spirits (GARY CREW, *Strange Objects*).

WESTERN CHILDREN TODAY live in societies characterised not simply by difference but by a consuming passion for it. Likewise, they live in a period in which they are more or less free to consume fictional and fantastic worlds not as forms of difference situated within a homogeneous theological paradigm but rather as heterogeneous secular worlds, and to consume these enthusiastically wherever they find them. Adults in Western society register their agreement with this philosophy of ontological pluralism not least by encouraging early engagement with contemporary media forms, television, video, computer generated visual images and written text, and so on; such forms Jean Baudrillard has linked with the growth of the "hyperreal". Baudrillard's "hyperreal" is a world of the reproduced real, the generation of real "without origin or reality," which dissolves previous categories of social theory into simulation models and codes. For Baudrillard, the hyperreal is exemplified in the relationship of Disneyland to the America which surrounds it. If, as Baudrillard implies, the American model has a paradigmatic influence on Western childhood, then it is worth noting that a recent edition of Parents Magazine listed under "Indoor Entertainment" for American children "books, videos, software packages and music recordings," and included both an electronic replay of Homer's Iliad, in which Morgan the Chimp takes on the role of Odysseus, and a book of poems by African American writer, Langston Hughes, described elsewhere as "perhaps the most significant black writer of the century."

It is tempting to agree with postmodernist theorists that the world of Western childhood is a world of superabundance, of disconnected images and signs, of intertextual references, pastiche, and eclectic nostalgia, fragmentary sensations, promiscuous superficiality, numbed and flippant indifference, bricolage, and aleatory disconnection. And yet, it is no less true today that children live in a shared world of critically ordered sensory experience; that they are involved in the passing on to others of knowledge gained about the natural and social worlds (which presupposes a shared meaning); and that they are encouraged to join with adults in the classification of the things of the world (that is, to make identifications of similarity and so on). In fact, here is an ontology that is consciously progressivist and alerts children to the condition of adulthood, seeks authenticity in the present and celebrates possibility in the future, an ontology, which by this definition, has a modernist ethos. The dialectic between postmodernist pluralism and modernist futurism opens up any analysis of postcolonial children's fiction. Children's literature is, after all, both the literature of enfranchisement and literature for the disenfranchised. It is rarely written by children and almost never published by them. For the writer, it provides access to the past as well as an opportunity to interpret an observed present, while for the child consumer (whether reader or listener), it is the literature of the experienced present and, most significant, of the yet to be experienced future. How similar these conditions are to the contextual history of colonial and postcolonial literature. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, colonialist or colonizing children's literature provided Western children with access to the future New Imperialism explicitly promised. Through the narratives of adventure stories, for example, British boys entered Africa alongside their fathers. As Patrick Brantlinger has pointed out, since imperialism always involved violence and exploitation and therefore never could bear much scrutiny, propagandists found it easier to leave it to boys to "play up, play up, and play the game" than to more mature, thoughtful types. Much imperialist discourse was thus directed at a specifically adolescent audience, the future rulers of the world.

Indeed, such literature helped to define "Europe (or the West) by offering contrasting image, idea, personality, [and] experience." No doubt it is superfluous to mention that this "contrast" involved the use of stereotypes, such as those of "African" children presented in Helen Bannerman's Little Black Sambo, Florence and Bertha Upton's The Adventures of Two Dutch Girls and Golliwog (1895), and Ellis Credle's Across the Cotton Patch (1935), and the transposition of European literary attitudes onto non-European environments, invoking the Romantic notion of nature as an elusive metaphor such as in the mysterious lives of May Gibbs's Snugglepot and Cuddlepie (1918) or in Jessie Whitfield's The Spirit of Bushfire and Other Australian Fairy Stories (1898), both of which emphasize not only the irrational but the emotional dimensions of the Australian bush.

Finally, this contrasting of image, idea, personality, and experience involved specific classifications and weightings of story, theme and motif—both abrogation of local narratives and appropriation, in varying degrees. The work of Patricia Wrightson, from The Crooked Snake, published in 1955 and taking the form of a conventional adventure novel, to Journey Behind the Wind, part of a trilogy featuring the Australian Aboriginal hero Wirrun, published in 1981, provides historical reference to one author's changing understanding of colonialism. Of course, these examples cut across both settler and invaded societies, for which the histories of displacement, denigration, constraint, alienation, transformation, and subversion are by no means singular. In fact, the rejection of Eurocentrism involves, first, the recognition of the multiplicity of colonial experiences and, second, the realization that the definition "postcolonial" itself privileges European settlement and invasion as the ontologica! foundation for non-European societies. Given these reservations, it is nevertheless possible to approach anti-colonialism, decolonisation, and postcoloniality as contemporary influences on Western children's literature. However, the word "postcolonial" is best used only as a mnemonic shorthand for the many examples of cultural syncreticity, hybridisation, ethnicity, and resistance that have entered Western children's literature in the late twentieth century — though certainly not all by one route. "The post-colonial," after all, "is an open-ended field of discursive practices characterized by boundary and border crossings" For postcolonial societies, these boundary and border crossings are not the consequence of living in an eclectic Disneyland, but the result of incorporating the modernist ethos of progressivism, the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality, and the celebration of new or alternative histories.

To read postcolonial children's literature closely, it is necessary to acknowledge not the hollowness of the hyperreal, a reality that purports to be more than reality, but the complex cardinalship of actual worldmaking. This act of worldmaking helps to illustrate that children's literature is not a separate entity from adult literature but a component of the same cultural, linguistic, and conceptual matrix. "Worldmaking," Nelson Goodman writes, "always starts from worlds already at hand; the making is a remaking." Goodman's five processes - Composition and Decomposition, Weighting, Ordering, Deletion and Supplementation, and Deformation - provide an exemplary heuristic method for approaching postcolonial children's fiction, because they rely on an organic metaphor of emergence and fructification, an identifiable postcolonial trope. For example, two works of postcolonial adult fiction, Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children (1981) and Ben Okri's The Famished Road (1991), exemplify the five processes that Goodman outlines. Interestingly enough, while Midnight's Children and The Famished Road are not works for children, they are works about children. In both cases, the authors use the conceit of the uniqueness of a child born at a particular time in history as a method to take control of history and give it shape. The time of birth is, of course, the arrival of national Independence. In Okri's novel, Azuro is a spirit child who moves through the "dreaded gateway" (5), between the world of "the fauns, the fairies and the beautiful beings" and the world of fathers swallowed by holes in the road and mothers dangling from the branches of trees. In Rushdie's novel, Saleem Sinai, the narrator, joins the children "who were only partially the offspring of their parents - the children of midnight (who) were also the children of the time: fathered, you understand, by history." Midnight's Children and The Famished Road use internalized narratees to draw attention to the component features of postcolonial childhoods, to highlight and combine their distinctions and features into new complexes and make new connections. Exemplifying the act of composition and decomposition, their narratives are narratives of both an individualistic and a culturally holistic childhood. In a similar fashion, Margaret Atwood's novel Surfacing (1979) returns a young Canadian divorcee to her childhood home where, immersed in childhood memories, she enters a mystical natural world from which she ultimately returns renewed. Nature here is not the elusive metaphor of the European Romantics but an attainable metaphysical foundation located in childhood. Likewise, in Nurrudin Farah's Maps (1986), the child Askar is possessed by strange qualities, "burdened by the violent and passionate world he lives in and dispenser of wisdom and insight that only an adult should possess."

The composition and decomposition of cultural events, the deletion and supplementation of accepted truths and historical facts, the weighting and ordering of narrative and stylistic forms - it is through these that postcolonial societies, though disparate, acknowledge their role in a shared world of critically ordered sensory experience. These are methods of passing on to others knowledge gained about the natural and social worlds of postcolonial life. Such classifications of similarity and, most important, of difference can be seen in a number of contemporary works of children's literature. "Everything is in order, and numbered, just like history is supposed to be," writes Steven Messenger in the conclusion of Gary Crew's novel for older children, *Strange Objects* (1990). Messenger's comment, of course, is heavy with irony. The ironic mode is predominant in postcolonial literature, and this form of declaration, a discourse between public history and self-identity, is identical to that which drives the novels of Rushdie, Okri, Atwood, and Farah.

In *Strange Objects*, the disappearance of a fictional, sixteen-year-old schoolboy, named Steven Messenger, is connected to the discovery of the underwater wreck of a seventeenth-century Dutch vessel, the Batavia, off the West Australian coast. The actual story of the Batavia is one of the most horrific stories in Australian maritime history. The ship, with 316 passengers on board, 12 chests of silver, and a priceless casket of jewels, was wrecked 40 miles from the Australian coastline. Unbeknown to the captain, the supercargo (the officer in charge of the cargo) had already been planning to mutiny and seize the ship's treasure. After the captain departed in search of help these mutiny plans were put into play, and Jeronimus Cornelisz, the leader of the mutineers, oversaw the murder and rape of some 125 people, including many women and children. Eventually, Cornelisz was outwitted, and he and his fellow mutineers were tried, sentenced and hanged. Before he was hanged, however, Cornelisz had both his hands cut off to signify his role as ringleader. *Strange Objects* begins with a report on Steven Messenger's discovery of some highly valuable maritime relics - these include "an iron pot (which became known as the 'cannibal pot'), a leather-bound journal and a mummified human hand." On a thematic level, *Strange Objects* places at the centre of its narrative the dangers experienced by colonial pioneers, the attendant violence of isolation, and the implicit suggestion that physical distance can produce moral displacement. More than this, however, it links this same spatial and moral displacement with implied violence bred in the isolation of contemporary Australian settler society. Steven Messenger writes:

I remember the time a client suicided in one of the motel rooms, slashed

his wrists in the shower and bled to death on the bed. Katz got to know

about that well before Sergeant Norman or the ambulance arrived. I

happened to be in the Roadhouse Cafe (getting a Coke) when he came

in and told me the body was there, and in which room. I had never seen

a dead body.

This is not an overt political declaration such as we might find in certain works of South African children's fiction of the same period. For example, *Strange Objects* was published in 1990, a year after Beverley Naidoo's *Chain of Fire*, which fictionalises protests against the homeland laws of Apartheid, and a year before Norman Silver's *An Eye For Colour*, in which Basil Kushenovitz, a white South African Jewish boy, examines the contrasts between the physical beauty of his country and the far less attractive political reality which confronts him.

The concern of Crew's novel is not the decomposition and deformation of history but its supplementation, the bringing into the present of the acts of the past, an anachrony which can only work if we challenge the weight and order of history's composition. All three of these works are postcolonial narratives from within settler rather than invaded communities; unlike the novels of Naidoo and Silver, however, Crew's novel provides the added dimension of being an experiment in narrative shape and form. The novel progresses through a series of Messenger documents; that is, the documents Messenger has previously collected into a project file and forwarded to Dr. Hope Michaels at the Western Australian Institute of Maritime Archaeology. These documents, or "messages," include not only newspaper clippings and Messenger's own narrative of events, but also transcripts of audio-tapes, reports prepared by Dr. Michaels, translations from the journal of a young man who was on board the ill-fated Batavia when it ran aground, advertisements and quotations from books about shipwrecks, and even photocopies from a dictionary of legends and the supernatural, annotated with drawings by Messenger himself. While this might be a postmodern turn towards ontological insecurity, also at play here are epistemological questions concerning the knowledge of past events, what kind of knowledge that might be, how it is acquired, and how that knowledge persists into the present.

The driving force oí *Strange Objects* is not the destruction of truth or the sidelining of the real but an examination of the political as well as the textual character of the authenticity which surrounds the production and reproduction of fact. In the end, Crew's novel encourages the reader to believe that "Someone knows...somewhere." The novel tacitly suggests that this someone might be a member of the local, indigenous or invaded community. Indeed, post-colonialism frequently involves a dialogue between settler and invaded communities. As Pieterse and Parekh argue:

The decolonisation of imagination involves both the colonisers and the colonised.

The decolonisation of the Western imagination means reviewing Western horisons

in the light of the collusion of empire and colonialism, and with the ongoing

asymmetries of global power.

This asymmetrical global power is not necessarily confined to the economic; it can also be spiritual. In Glenyse Ward's autobiographical stories for older children, *Wandering Girl* (1987), and the more recent *Unna You Fullas* (1991), this spiritual dialogue takes place between the sisters in charge of an Australian Aboriginal mission and the mission children. Ward's mission children live a hybridised life in which the Australian bush rings out with the yodelling of Swiss mission nuns.

Sister Erika would tell us of her homeland, the Swiss Alps, and of snow. I

understand how she must have felt when she stood on the rocks at the

mission and yodelled for us. There must have been real longing for her

home, and it would have seemed strange to her, having tall redgum trees,

blue skies, singing birds and dark-skinned, snotty-nosed kids jumping up

laughing and shouting for joy around her.

For Sprattie, the mission child, the irony here is not solely in the recognition of the mutuality of colonial displacement, but in the hybrid condition of language. Speech and song, of course, are not realms of independent existence, but aspects of a multifaceted network of social relations. Sister Erika's songs ring out strangely over the rocks and gullies of outback Australia as Sprattie learns to rise each day to the sound of Sister Ursula's cow bell and to laugh at the Mother Superior's comically accented English. Nevertheless, it is not the mission sisters' English which is unacceptable but the English of the mission children. As Mr Pitts tells them:

Another word I do not want mentioned in Mr Foley's class or mine is the word

'unna.' What sort of language is that? A sort of language that has to be stopped."

Of course, despite the strict routine of the mission, it is not stopped. *Unna You Fullas* in fact means "Isn't that right, you fellows?" and this call to confirm fact, to engage in epistemological discussion, to commit to world-making, not least through the subversion of colonial authority, reiterates that cultural hybridisation does not lead to inauthenticity and that colonial destruction myths are ideologically spurious. The linguistic complexities of much postcolonial children's fiction are overtly indicative of the conditions of polyglossia or diglossia, displaying an orality that suggests multiple entryways and multiple exits. Linguistic representation, however, is always learnt piece by piece, word by word and therefore, like the move from child to adulthood, suggests linearity. By way of comparison, it is worthwhile for us to consider how pictorial representation in recent children's literature has dealt with the postcolonial condition. Judith Lechner has said in her work on the images of African Americans in children's picture books that:

because picture books send two images simultaneously, the impact they

create on young children is long and lasting.

Unfortunately, Lechner is misrepresenting here the language of visual texts by compartmentalising their reception into a binary. In pictorial representation, systems of language are learnt all at once and it is this fluidity, this totality, rather than a binary or duality, which is the starting point for a discussion of two very different picture books for young readers: Peter Pavey's *One Dragon's Dream* (1978) and Jeanie Adams's *Going For Oysters* (1991). *One Dragon's Dream* was published some 19 years ago, in a period in which magical realism was reaching its peak (that is, with the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to the Columbian magical realist Gabriel García Márquez, in 1982). Magical realism, of course, combines the fabulous and the fantastic with the narratives of objective realism and originates in the visual arts where it was applied to the mildly surrealist, smoothly painted pictures of figures and objects reminiscent of the neoclassical art of Italian artists such as Felice Casorati. In literature, magical realism is characterized by,

two conflicting but autonomously coherent perspectives, one based on an

'enlightened' and rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of

the supernatural as part of everyday reality.

Its popularity in Latin America is,

based around the idea that Latin American reality is somehow unusual,

fantastic or marvellous because of its bizarre history, and because of its

varied ethnological mark-up.

Accentuating the playful pictorial elements of this mode, Australian author Peter Pavey presents a dream narrative in which a phantasmagorical dragon, in falling asleep, dreams of "real" animals, some of which, by their frequent appearance in children's literature, have become culturally non-specific (that is, turkeys, tigers, monkeys), and others, such as kangaroos, koalas, numbats, and flying foxes, which emblematize the Australian environment. Although *One Dragon's Dream* adopts the generic shape of a "counting book," Pavey continues the illustrations after the numerical text is complete and concludes metafictionally, with a picture of a window in which the reader can observe characters from the dream disappearing from view. *One Dragon's Dream* is also a story of incarceration: One dragon had a dream—that two turkeys teased him, three tigers told him off and four frogs seized him. Five cranky kangaroos hopped around and fenced him in. Six stern stalks tried and sentenced him. Seven slippery seals off to jail they juggled him. . . .

Magical realists have made a point of acknowledging the influence of European modernist experimentalism and the stream of-consciousness dream narratives associated with James Joyce, not least in Ulysses with its search for psychic purity. In a connected way, Pavey's *One Dragon's Dream* presents complex, eclectic, and self-referential illustrations (often displaying the paints and brushes of their own making), which exploit the calmness of European metaphysical painting in order to exceed by far the linguistic parameters of the written text that accompanies them. Pavey's eventful, surreal illustrations don't "ward off the real world" (Hunt 187) but reference the extra-textual dimension of postcolonial psychic unease (Ashcroft 148), which itself is kinetic.

This relationship between written and pictorial representation in Pavey's work can be fruitfully compared with that employed by Jeanie Adams in *Going For Oysters*, set in an Aboriginal community in Queensland's Cape York Peninsula. In Going for Oysters, Adams's illustrations display a far higher degree of fluidity and a lack of linear definition; they depend more on the written text for clarification. Her breaking of frame and line extend to the relationship between writer and reader. At one point, the reader observes the Aboriginal community as if floating in the sky above it. In contrast, Adams uses a first-person narrative and a homodiegetic child narrator. The effect is to place directly into the child's world view the signs, symbols, and traditions of Aboriginal Australia. By frequently using her illustrations to re-position the mediation between narrator and implied reader, Adams shifts a high degree of intimacy onto the written narrative.

Significantly, the language of the written text in *Going For Oysters* is colloquial, close, and casual. As in Glenyse Ward's work, language serves as a place of intersection between Aboriginal and English lexicon and syntax. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin have suggested that "in one sense all postcolonial literatures are cross-cultural because they negotiate a gap between 'worlds,' a gap in which the simultaneous processes of abrogation and appropriation continually strive to define and determine their practice" (39). This argument for the notion of "a gap" between worlds is not supported by works such as *Going For Oysters* which depend on a sustained dialectic within the same epistemological and ontological field, between linguistic enfranchisement and disenfranchisement, and which explicitly reference the relationship between child and adult world that is a progression or plot rather than a counterplot. This is extended to the narrative itself as the child narrator both acknowledges and transgresses adult control and authority: We crept up on the pelicans. We dived into the water, making plenty of noise to frighten the crocodiles. We pretended we were in an oldtime skinbark canoe. And when it leaked we patched it up with sticky mud. After a while that got a bit boring. Cousin said, "Let's row to the east side." I forgot all about Grandad's warnings, and we all climbed into the dinghy and pushed off. (20) The act of worldmaking in *Going For Oysters* is certainly, as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin point out, the interconnected acts of abrogation and appropriation. However, the importance of pictorial representation in these acts is that it calls up the same recognitional capacities that children use in observing the real world. Performance and reception in pictorial systems, in being naturally generative, is much less rigid (Schier 2) than performance and reception in written systems and therefore is much more closely linked with conditions of postcolonial oral literature that constantly crosses the borders and boundaries of communication, being grammatically intricate but lexically sparse, lacking solidarity and offering a mode of being in process not product. In each of these works, the postcolonial world is one that is being made rather than one which is already established. It is certainly true that by designating any literature "postcolonial," imperialism becomes ontologically privileged. However, as a mnemonic the term references a certain kind of worldmaking, one that involves definite processes of composition and decomposition, weighting, ordering, deletion and supplementation, and deformation.

Postcolonial children's literature enters the media-saturated West through the global ethos of postmodernity. Its importance, however, is that the worlds it creates are, like childhood, evolutionary, celebratory, and inhabited by possibility. Brian McHale argues in *Postmodernist Fiction* that "the dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological. How can I interpret this world I am a part of? . . . The dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological. Which world is this?" (9-10) According to McHale, postmodernist fiction, with its recursive structure, proffers changes in ontological level, "changes of world," and emphasizes techniques of embedding and nesting. This as distinct from the structures and formal notions of modernist fiction. McHale's attempt to cleave modernism from postmodernism on the basis of a rift between the ontological and the epistemological is arbitrary (failing to acknowledge that 'ways of knowing' and 'what is known' might be considered as part of a holistic philosophy so that solutions to the problem of method and solutions to the problem of ontological dimension are parts of the same dialectic). However, he does make the significant point that the game plan of fiction often labelled "postmodern" is to emphasise and exploit movement: accentuating contrast, issues of parallelism, interaction, addition and subtraction between different diegetic levels. Post-colonial magical realist fiction is also notable for this. Gerald Martin writes: Since my view is that this is the century of Joyce in Western literature, and that the "Ulyssean" design is especially relevant to Latin American fiction, this critical journey is one which risks shipwreck at the hand of both the English literature traditionalist and Latin American nationalists ... not only do I believe that Latin America's development of a "Ulyssean" fiction springs largely from its writers' own experience, but I also believe that the Latin American contribution to Modernism has been decisive in its later evolution and in the process of communication between First, Second and Third world cultures.

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**Different Perspectives or Theoretical Approaches to Reading *Strange Objects***

**2. A Gender Approach**

There are several strong female characters in the novel:

* Steven’s mother manages a roadhouse on her own
* Kratz’s mother works and cares for her son
* Dr Hope Michaels is obviously well-educated and heads up a respected institute
* Ela survives a shipwrecking and adapts to life in another culture

Compare how the female presence within the text compares to those of males. Explore the ways in which Strange Objects can be seen as challenging traditional stereotypical representations of women by:

* Presenting strong female characters from both the domestic and professional spheres
* Highlighting the marginalisation of women in history through the presence of the character of Ela and the symbolism of her lost language
* Treating males who abuse women, such as Wouter Loos, unfavourably
* Constructing female narrators as more reliable than males

Developing this approach further, question whether history is still seen as created or ‘owned’ by males in the text:

* Hope Michaels may curate history, but the artefacts are found by males, the documents translated by males, and male voices dominate
* Steven’s mother is trapped in her roles as manager, mother and widow. She is as lost as Steven is because of the death of her husband, stuck in a low-paid job in an isolated environment (women typically earn less than men) while her husband got to travel and see the world, she stayed behind and cared for her son, trapped by society’s expectation that women nurture the children
* Ela is ultimately portrayed as a sexual object to be used by Pelgrom and then killed at his whim. She is a victim of male violence and objectification and as such endorses raher than challenges stereotypical representations of women.
* Alternatively, Ela is a manifestation of the madonna/whore complex. As the Madonna she is worshipped by Pelgrom but as the whore, she is murdered by him. There is the suggestion that Indigenous society does not view women in this exploitative way. Ela was not killed, nor stalked by the Aboriginal men she lived with. She was in no danger until European men, with European expectations, values and beliefs arrived and killed her. Was she ‘tainted’ because of her time spent living with the ‘Indians?’ Was she somehow less?

In groups of three, discuss the above. Which gendered reading do you favour?

The following CLT information is for you to use as a reference. We will use it when studying texts in term 4.

* **Critical Literary Theory**
* [Aestheticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aestheticism) – often associated with [Romanticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romanticism), a philosophy defining aesthetic value as the primary goal in understanding literature. This includes both literary critics who have tried to understand and/or identify aesthetic values and those like Oscar Wilde who have stressed [art for art's sake](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_for_art%27s_sake).
  + [Oscar Wilde](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oscar_Wilde), [Walter Pater](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Pater), [Harold Bloom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harold_Bloom)
* American [pragmatism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pragmatism) and other American approaches
  + [Harold Bloom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harold_Bloom), [Stanley Fish](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanley_Fish), [Richard Rorty](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Rorty)
* [Cognitive Cultural Studies](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Cognitive_Cultural_Studies&action=edit&redlink=1) – applies research in cognitive neuroscience, cognitive evolutionary psychology and anthropology, and philosophy of mind to the study of literature and culture
  + [Frederick Luis Aldama](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Luis_Aldama), [Mary Thomas Crane](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mary_Thomas_Crane&action=edit&redlink=1), [Nancy Easterlin](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Nancy_Easterlin&action=edit&redlink=1), William Flesch, David Herman, [Suzanne Keen](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Suzanne_Keen&action=edit&redlink=1), [Patrick Colm Hogan](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Patrick_Colm_Hogan&action=edit&redlink=1), Alan Richardson, [Ellen Spolsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ellen_Spolsky&action=edit&redlink=1), [Blakey Vermeule](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blakey_Vermeule), [Lisa Zunshine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lisa_Zunshine)
* [Cultural studies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_studies) – emphasizes the role of literature in everyday life
  + [Raymond Williams](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raymond_Williams), [Dick Hebdige](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dick_Hebdige), and [Stuart Hall](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart_Hall_(cultural_theorist)) ([British Cultural Studies](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=British_Cultural_Studies&action=edit&redlink=1)); [Max Horkheimer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max_Horkheimer) and [Theodor Adorno](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodor_Adorno); [Michel de Certeau](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel_de_Certeau); also [Paul Gilroy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Gilroy), [John Guillory](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=John_Guillory&action=edit&redlink=1)
* [Darwinian literary studies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darwinian_literary_studies) – situates literature in the context of evolution and natural selection
* [Deconstruction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deconstruction) – a strategy of "close" reading that elicits the ways that key terms and concepts may be paradoxical or self-undermining, rendering their meaning undecidable
  + [Jacques Derrida](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Derrida), [Paul de Man](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_de_Man), [J. Hillis Miller](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._Hillis_Miller), [Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philippe_Lacoue-Labarthe), [Gayatri Spivak](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gayatri_Spivak), [Avital Ronell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avital_Ronell)
* [Gender](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender) (see [feminist literary criticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist_literary_criticism)) – which emphasises themes of gender relations
  + [Luce Irigaray](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luce_Irigaray), [Judith Butler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judith_Butler), [Hélène Cixous](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H%C3%A9l%C3%A8ne_Cixous), [Elaine Showalter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elaine_Showalter)
* [Formalism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Formalism_(literature)) - a school of literary criticism and literary theory having mainly to do with structural purposes of a particular text
* German [hermeneutics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermeneutics) and [philology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philology)
  + [Friedrich Schleiermacher](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich_Schleiermacher), [Wilhelm Dilthey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilhelm_Dilthey), [Hans-Georg Gadamer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans-Georg_Gadamer), [Erich Auerbach](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erich_Auerbach), [René Wellek](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ren%C3%A9_Wellek)
* [Marxism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxism) (see [Marxist literary criticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxist_literary_criticism)) – which emphasizes themes of class conflict
  + [Georg Lukács](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg_Luk%C3%A1cs), [Valentin Voloshinov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valentin_Voloshinov), [Raymond Williams](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raymond_Williams), [Terry Eagleton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terry_Eagleton), [Fredric Jameson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fredric_Jameson), [Theodor Adorno](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodor_Adorno), [Walter Benjamin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Benjamin)
* [Modernism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modernism)
* [New Criticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Criticism) – looks at literary works on the basis of what is written, and not at the goals of the author or biographical issues
  + [W. K. Wimsatt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/W._K._Wimsatt), [F. R. Leavis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F._R._Leavis), [John Crowe Ransom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Crowe_Ransom), [Cleanth Brooks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cleanth_Brooks), [Robert Penn Warren](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Penn_Warren)
* [New Historicism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Historicism) – which examines the work through its historical context and seeks to understand cultural and intellectual history through literature
  + [Stephen Greenblatt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Greenblatt), [Louis Montrose](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_Montrose), [Jonathan Goldberg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jonathan_Goldberg), [H. Aram Veeser](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=H._Aram_Veeser&action=edit&redlink=1)
* [Postcolonialism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postcolonialism) – focuses on the influences of [colonialism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonialism) in literature, especially regarding the historical conflict resulting from the exploitation of less developed countries and [indigenous peoples](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigenous_peoples) by [Western nations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_nation)
  + [Edward Said](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Said), [Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gayatri_Chakravorty_Spivak), [Homi Bhabha](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homi_K._Bhabha) and [Declan Kiberd](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Declan_Kiberd)
* [Postmodernism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Postmodernism) – criticism of the conditions present in the twentieth century, often with concern for those viewed as social deviants or the [Other](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Other)
  + [Michel Foucault](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel_Foucault), [Roland Barthes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roland_Barthes), [Gilles Deleuze](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilles_Deleuze), [Félix Guattari](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F%C3%A9lix_Guattari) and [Maurice Blanchot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maurice_Blanchot)
* [Post-structuralism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-structuralism) – a catch-all term for various theoretical approaches (such as [deconstruction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deconstruction)) that criticize or go beyond [Structuralism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structuralism)'s aspirations to create a rational science of culture by extrapolating the model of linguistics to other discursive and aesthetic formations
  + [Roland Barthes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roland_Barthes), [Michel Foucault](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel_Foucault), [Julia Kristeva](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julia_Kristeva)
* [Psychoanalysis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychoanalysis) (see [psychoanalytic literary criticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychoanalytic_literary_criticism)) – explores the role of consciousnesses and the unconscious in literature including that of the author, reader, and characters in the text
  + [Sigmund Freud](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sigmund_Freud), [Jacques Lacan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Lacan), [Harold Bloom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harold_Bloom), [Slavoj Žižek](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavoj_%C5%BDi%C5%BEek), [Viktor Tausk](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viktor_Tausk)
* [Queer theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer_theory) – examines, questions, and criticizes the role of gender identity and sexuality in literature
  + [Judith Butler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judith_Butler), [Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eve_Kosofsky_Sedgwick), [Michel Foucault](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel_Foucault)
* [Reader-response criticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reader-response_criticism) – focuses upon the active response of the reader to a text
  + [Louise Rosenblatt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise_Rosenblatt), [Wolfgang Iser](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wolfgang_Iser), [Norman Holland](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Norman_Holland&action=edit&redlink=1), [Hans-Robert Jauss](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans-Robert_Jauss), [Stuart Hall](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stuart_Hall_(cultural_theorist))
* [Russian formalism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_formalism)
  + [Victor Shklovsky](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Victor_Shklovsky), [Vladimir Propp](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Propp)
* [Structuralism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Structuralism) and [semiotics](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semiotics) (see [semiotic literary criticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semiotic_literary_criticism)) – examines the universal underlying structures in a text, the linguistic units in a text and how the author conveys meaning through any structures
  + [Ferdinand de Saussure](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ferdinand_de_Saussure), [Roman Jakobson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Jakobson), [Claude Lévi-Strauss](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claude_L%C3%A9vi-Strauss), [Roland Barthes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roland_Barthes), [Mikhail Bakhtin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Bakhtin), [Yurii Lotman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yurii_Lotman), [Jacques Ehrmann](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Ehrmann), [Northrop Frye](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Northrop_Frye) and [morphology of folklore](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morphology_(folkloristics))
* [Eco-criticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eco-criticism) – explores cultural connections and human relationships to the natural world
* Other theorists: [Robert Graves](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Graves), [Alamgir Hashmi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alamgir_Hashmi), [John Sutherland](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Sutherland_(author)), [Leslie Fiedler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leslie_Fiedler), [Kenneth Burke](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kenneth_Burke), [Paul Bénichou](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_B%C3%A9nichou), [Barbara Johnson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara_Johnson), [Blanca de Lizaur](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blanca_de_Lizaur), [Dr Seuss](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dr_Seuss)

**Feminist**

* This perspective is an outgrowth of the women's movement that followed WWII to pursue a "feminist critique" of works by male authors that depict female characters and their relation to women readers, but this broad term now encompasses strict gynocriticism (focussing on the study of female-authored texts and women as writers), gender and identity construction, and a more general study of how literary texts present women and the role of women in culture and society. 13 responses in this study are based loosely on this perspective.

**Psychological or Psychoanalytical (Freudian)**

* The emphasis of this approach is to discover symbols and language that, often unconsciously, explain meanings or unconscious intention, including the motives and actions of characters. Freudian criticism specifically employs the concepts of *id* (unconscious, instinctual drives), *ego* (consciousness which mediates between the pressures of reality and libidinal demands), and the *superego* (an internal censor produced by socialization). 15 responses in this study are based loosely on this perspective.

**New Criticism**

* From the 1930s through the 1960s in American critics such as John Crowe Ransom and I. A. Richards concentrated on the verbal complexities and ambiguities of short works such as lyrics and short stories considered as self-sufficient objects without attention to their origins or effects. Related approaches include "Text-based Criticism, "Explication de text, Close Reading, and "Practical Criticism."

**New Historicist**

* The study of literary works within their historical, political, social, and cultural contexts; developed in the 1980s in reaction to ahistorical orthodoxies.

**Formalist or Structuralist**

* Influenced by Saussurean linguistics, Russian Formalists emphasized the study of form (including genre and its conventions) over content; a key concept here is "defamiliarization," any device that restores freshness to language. Structuralists such as Roland Barthes regard literary contentions as a system of codes that contribute to and convey meaning, especially in prose fiction.

**Archetypal or Jungian**

* This approach originated in the early 20th c. with anthropologist J. G. Frazer and psychologist C. G. Jung as a means of interpreting literary symbols as residues of ancestral memory preserved within the collective unconscious. It is related to "Mythic Criticism."

**Deconstruction**

* Based on the work of Jacques Derrida (1967 on), this perspective draws attention to the instability of language; a text unravels because of the presence of one or more aporia, internal contradictions that undermine the text's claim to coherent meaning. It assaults previously unquestioned postulates of order in binary, hierarchical pairs such as nature-culture, work-play, man-woman, with the first element always being the privileged one.

**Rhetorical**

* This critical approach analyses the devices and elements employed in a literary work to impose on the reader the author's view of the meaning, both denotative and connotative, of the work. Those aspects of a work that persuade or otherwise guide the response of the reader are called "rhetorical."

**Reader-Response**

* According to theorists such as Stanley Fish, a literary text exists only to be read; therefore, certain features of the text are intended to shape and guide a reader's reading, so that the hypothetical reader is part of the fiction itself and may be said to inhere in the work. Rosenblatt distinguishes between informational ("efferent") and artistic ("aesthetic") texts and modes of reading.

**Marxist or Sociological**

* Based on the social, political, and economic theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, this literary theory emphasizes the economic determination of all social actions and institutions and the class struggle as the basic pattern of history. Included in this perspective are kinds of audience, modes or conditions of publication and dramatic presentation (including publishers and magazines), and the class positions of authors and readers (consumers).

**Philological**

* The original scientific and modern method of criticizing literature in late nineteenth-century America and Britain, this term is associated with Historical Criticism, which often paid attention to the life of the author as it was reflected in the text. Just one response in this study is based on this perspective.

**Literary Theory and Criticism**

**Literary theory and literary criticism are interpretive tools that help us think more deeply and insightfully about the literature that we read. Over time, different schools of literary criticism have developed, each with its own approaches to the act of reading.**

**Schools of Interpretation**

**Cambridge School (1920s–1930s):** A group of scholars at Cambridge University who rejected historical and biographical analysis of texts in favour of close readings of the texts themselves.

**Chicago School (1950s):** A group, formed at the University of Chicago in the 1950s, that drew on Aristotle’s distinctions between the various elements within a narrative to analyse the relation between form and structure. *Critics and Criticisms: Ancient and Modern* (1952) is the major work of the Chicago School.

**Deconstruction (1967–present):** A philosophical approach to reading, first advanced by Jacques Derrida that attacks the assumption that a text has a single, stable meaning. Derrida suggests that all interpretation of a text simply constitutes further texts, which means there is no “outside the text” at all. Therefore, it is impossible for a text to have stable meaning. The practice of deconstruction involves identifying the contradictions within a text’s claim to have a single, stable meaning, and showing that a text can be taken to mean a variety of things that differ significantly from what it purports to mean.

**Feminist criticism (1960s–present):** An umbrella term for a number of different critical approaches that seek to distinguish the human experience from the male experience. Feminist critics draw attention to the ways in which patriarchal social structures have marginalized women and male authors have exploited women in their portrayal of them. Although feminist criticism dates as far back as Mary Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) and had some significant advocates in the early 20th century, such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, it did not gain widespread recognition as a theoretical and political movement until the 1960s and 1970s.

**Psychoanalytic criticism:** Any form of criticism that draws on **psychoanalysis,** the practice of analyzing the role of unconscious psychological drives and impulses in shaping human behavior or artistic production. The three main schools of psychoanalysis are named for the three leading figures in developing psychoanalytic theory: Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Jacques Lacan.

* **Freudian criticism (c. 1900–present):** The view of art as the imagined fulfillment of wishes that reality denies. According to Freud, artists sublimate their desires and translate their imagined wishes into art. We, as an audience, respond to the sublimated wishes that we share with the artist. Working from this view, an artist’s biography becomes a useful tool in interpreting his or her work. “Freudian criticism” is also used as a term to describe the analysis of Freudian images within a work of art.
* **Jungian criticism (1920s–present):** A school of criticism that draws on Carl Jung’s theory of the **collective unconscious,** a reservoir of common thoughts and experiences that all cultures share. Jung holds that literature is an expression of the main themes of the collective unconscious, and critics often invoke his work in discussions of literary archetypes.
* **Lacanian criticism (c. 1977–present):** Criticism based on Jacques Lacan’s view that the unconscious, and our perception of ourselves, is shaped in the “symbolic” order of language rather than in the “imaginary” order of prelinguistic thought. Lacan is famous in literary circles for his influential reading of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter.”

**Marxist criticism:** An umbrella term for a number of critical approaches to literature that draw inspiration from the social and economic theories of Karl Marx. Marx maintained that **material production,** or economics, ultimately determines the course of history, and in turn influences social structures.These social structures, Marx argued, are held in place by the dominant ideology, which serves to reinforce the interests of the ruling class. Marxist criticism approaches literature as a struggle with social realities and ideologies.

* **Frankfurt School (c. 1923–1970):** A group of German Marxist thinkers associated with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. These thinkers applied the principles of Marxism to a wide range of social phenomena, including literature. Major members of the Frankfurt School include Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas.

**New Criticism (1930s–1960s):** Coined in John Crowe Ransom’s *The New Criticism* (1941), this approach discourages the use of history and biography in interpreting a literary work. Instead, it encourages readers to discover the meaning of a work through a detailed analysis of the text itself. This approach was popular in the middle of the 20th century, especially in the United States, but has since fallen out of favour.

**New Historicism (1980s–present):** An approach that breaks down distinctions between “literature” and “historical context” by examining the contemporary production and reception of literary texts, including the dominant social, political, and moral movements of the time. Stephen Greenblatt is a leader in this field, which joins the careful textual analysis of **New Criticism** with a dynamic model of historical research.

**New Humanism (c. 1910–1933):** An American movement, led by Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, that embraced conservative literary and moral values and advocated a return to humanistic education.

**Post-structuralism (1960s–1970s):** A movement that comprised, among other things, Deconstruction, Lacanian criticism, and the later works of Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. It criticized structuralism for its claims to scientific objectivity, including its assumption that the system of signs in which language operates was stable.

**Queer theory (1980s–present):** A “constructivist” (as opposed to “essentialist”) approach to gender and sexuality that asserts that **gender roles** and **sexual identity** are social constructions rather than an essential, inescapable part of our nature. Queer theory consequently studies literary texts with an eye to the ways in which different authors in different eras construct sexual and gender identity. Queer theory draws on certain branches of feminist criticism and traces its roots to the first volume of Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1976).

**Russian Formalism (1915–1929):** A school that attempted a scientific analysis of the formal literary devices used in a text. The Stalinist authorities criticized and silenced the Formalists, but Western critics rediscovered their work in the 1960s. Ultimately, the Russian Formalists had significant influence on structuralism and Marxist criticism.

**Structuralism (1950s–1960s):** An intellectual movement that made significant contributions not only to literary criticism but also to philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and history. Structuralist literary critics, such as Roland Barthes, read texts as an interrelated system of **signs** that refer to one another rather than to an external “meaning” that is fixed either by author or reader. Structuralist literary theory draws on the work of the Russian Formalists, as well as the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and C. S. Peirce.

**Literary Terms and Theories**

**Literary theory is notorious for its complex and somewhat inaccessible jargon. The following list defines some of the more commonly encountered terms in the field.**

**Anxiety of influence:** A theory that the critic Harold Bloom put forth in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973). Bloom uses Freud’s idea of the **Oedipus complex** (*see below*) to suggest that poets, plagued by anxiety that they have nothing new to say, struggle against the influence of earlier generations of poets. Bloom suggests that poets find their distinctive voices in an act of **misprision,** or misreading, of earlier influences, thus refiguring the poetic tradition. Although Bloom presents his thesis as a theory of poetry, it can be applied to other arts as well.

**Canon:** A group of literary works commonly regarded as central or authoritative to the literary tradition. For example, many critics concur that the Western canon—the central literary works of Western civilization—includes the writings of Homer, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and the like. A canon is an evolving entity, as works are added or subtracted as their perceived value shifts over time. For example, the fiction of W. Somerset Maugham was central to the canon during the middle of the 20th century but is read less frequently today. In recent decades, the idea of an authoritative canon has come under attack, especially from feminist and postcolonial critics, who see the canon as a tyranny of dead white males that marginalizes less mainstream voices.

**Death of the author:** A post-structuralist theory, first advanced by Roland Barthes, that suggests that the reader, not the author, creates the meaning of a text. Ultimately, the very idea of an author is a fiction invented by the reader.

**Diachronic/synchronic:** Terms that Ferdinand de Saussure used to describe two different approaches to language. The **diachronic** approach looks at language as a historical process and examines the ways in which it has changed over time. The **synchronic** approach looks at language at a particular moment in time, without reference to history. Saussure’s structuralist approach is synchronic, for it studies language as a system of interrelated signs that have no reference to anything (such as history) outside of the system.

**Dialogic/monologic:** Terms that the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin used to distinguish works that are controlled by a single, authorial voice **(monologic)** from works in which no single voice predominates **(dialogic** or **polyphonic).** Bakhtin takes Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky as examples of monologic and dialogic writing, respectively.

**Diegesis/Mimesis:** Terms that Aristotle first used to distinguish “telling” **(diegesis)** from “showing” **(mimesis).** In a play, for instance, most of the action is mimetic, but moments in which a character recounts what has happened offstage are diegetic.

**Discourse:** A post-structuralist term for the wider social and intellectual context in which communication takes place. The implication is that the meaning of works is as dependent on their surrounding context as it is on the content of the works themselves.

**Exegesis:** An explanation of a text that clarifies difficult passages and analyzes its contemporary relevance or application.

**Explication:** A close reading of a text that identifies and explains the figurative language and forms within the work.

**Hermeneutics:** The study of textual interpretation and of the way in which a text communicates meaning.

**Intertextuality:** The various relationships a text may have with other texts, through allusions, borrowing of formal or thematic elements, or simply by reference to traditional literary forms. The term is important to structuralist and poststructuralist critics, who argue that texts relate primarily to one another and not to an external reality.

**Linguistics:** The scientific study of language, encompassing, among other things, the study of **syntax, semantics,** and the evolution of language.

**Logocentrism:** The desire for an ultimate guarantee of meaning, whether God, Truth, Reason, or something else. Jacques Derrida criticizes the bulk of Western philosophy as being based on a logocentric “metaphysics of presence,” which insists on the presence of some such ultimate guarantee. The main goal of deconstruction is to undermine this belief.

**Metalanguage:** A technical language that explains and interprets the properties of ordinary language. For example, the vocabulary of literary criticism is a metalanguage that explains the ordinary language of literature. Post-structuralist critics argue that there is no such thing as a metalanguage; rather, they assert, all language is on an even plane and therefore there is no essential difference between literature and criticism.

**Metanarrative:** A larger framework within which we understand historical processes. For instance, a Marxist metanarrative sees history primarily as a history of changing material circumstances and class struggle. Post-structuralist critics draw our attention to the ways in which assumed met narratives can be used as tools of political domination.

**Mimesis:***See***diegesis/mimesis,***above.*

**Monologic:***See***dialogic/monologic,***above.*

**Narratology:** The study of narrative, encompassing the different kinds of narrative voices, forms of narrative, and possibilities of narrative analysis.

**Oedipus complex:** Sigmund Freud’s theory that a male child feels unconscious jealousy toward his father and lust for his mother. The name comes from Sophocles’ play *Oedipus Rex,* in which the main character unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother. Freud applies this theory in an influential reading of Hamlet, in which he sees Hamlet as struggling with his admiration of Claudius, who fulfilled Hamlet’s own desire of murdering Hamlet’s father and marrying his mother.

**Semantics:** The branch of **linguistics** that studies the meanings of words.

**Semiotics or semiology:** Terms for the study of **sign systems** and the ways in which communication functions through conventions in sign systems. Semiotics is central to **structuralist linguistics.**

**Sign/signifier/signified:** Terms fundamental to Ferdinand de Saussure’s structuralism linguistics. A **sign** is a basic unit of meaning—a word, picture, or hand gesture, for instance, that conveys some meaning. A **signifier** is the perceptible aspect of a sign (e.g., the word “car”) while the **signified** is the conceptual aspect of a sign (e.g., the concept of a car). A **referent** is a physical object to which a sign system refers (e.g., the physical car itself).

**Synchronic:***See***diachronic/synchronic***above.*

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