



**Literary**  
education lab

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# Teaching 'Consent' in Secondary School English

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## Executive summary

This report discusses the *Consent in Literature* research project conducted in 2021 by the Literary Education Lab, funded by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education in collaboration with Stella. The project investigated the potential and possibilities of including a focus on consent education in school English, as part of engagement with literature and literary representation in the secondary years of schooling.

In 2021, the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority (ACARA) advised that a focus on 'consent education' would be introduced into the Australian Curriculum. Following consultation, an updated curriculum was released with specific guidance for teachers of Health and Physical Development. The content changes were designed to "strengthen the explicit teaching of consent and respectful relationships from F-10 in age-appropriate ways, including content that addresses the role of gender, power, coercion and disrespect in abusive or violent relationships" (ACARA, n.d., n.p.).

The imperative to provide an explicit focus on consent education occurs within an existing commitment to advancing students' personal and social capabilities, and to providing a comprehensive approach to health education which encompasses a focus on social and emotional learning, sexuality education, drug and alcohol education, and mental health education. The curriculum focus is located within broader school-wide approaches to advancing inclusion, gender equality, and provision of a safe and supportive environment, free from all forms of discrimination and violence.

The focus on consent education has been driven by increasing community awareness of the high prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault, with girls and young women, along with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) people, experiencing far higher rates of violence than the rest of the community.

To explore these questions, the project team undertook a close analysis of:

- ✧ 20 texts widely used in secondary English
- ✧ 20 contemporary texts that engage with broad issues of consent
- ✧ two focus groups conducted with secondary teachers of English
- ✧ invited responses from 11 Australian writers regarding the potential contribution of literature to consent education.

The research identified that literature currently taught in secondary school English commonly includes accounts of interpersonal violence, including sexual harassment and sexual assault. It demonstrated that subject English, and the teaching of literature more broadly, provides an important site through which to contribute to consent education, not only because the subject matter is commonly present in the texts studied, but also because the rich text of a novel can provide access to the

complexity and depth of experiences of those who are affected. Such novels offer a unique opportunity for students to develop empathy and perspectives on the lives of others. However, in terms of pedagogical practice, this research found that teachers of English commonly avoid discussing the more sensitive issues pertaining to sexual relations when conducting a novel study. Teachers noted that they need more support if they are to discuss issues pertaining to consent and would benefit from frameworks, and further training and resources, to guide their approach: this has implications for pre-service English teacher preparation and in-service professional learning.

*Given this context and background, the key questions examined in this project included:*

- ✧ In what ways are issues of consent present in a selection of literary texts routinely taught in Australian secondary English?
- ✧ In what ways do contemporary, award-winning Australian texts relevant to subject English address issues of consent?
- ✧ How do English teachers conceptualise the potential contribution of subject English in the context of consent education?
- ✧ How do contemporary Australian writers conceptualise the reading and teaching of literature in the context of debates about consent education?



*I believe that literature is one of the strongest forces available for bringing about social change. Literature can thus be incalculably useful in the teaching of consent, both through the reading of works that unpack and examine consent and through the discussion of those works.*

Claire G. Coleman

## Introduction

This report discusses the *Consent in Literature* research project conducted in 2021 by the Literary Education Lab, funded by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education in collaboration with Stella. The project investigated the potential and possibilities of including a focus on consent education in school English, as part of engagement with literature and literary representation in the secondary years of schooling.

The impetus for the *Consent in Literature* research project stems from an ongoing collaboration between the Literary Education Lab and Stella. The collaboration focuses on teacher education, youth, and contemporary Australian women and non-binary authors' writing in an era of #MeToo, ongoing settler colonisation, and climate crisis in Australia.

Previous projects completed by the Literary Education Lab and Stella focused on the affordances of literature as a modality for linking aesthetic practices to real world contemporary concerns such as climate change, racism, and sexism (McLean Davies, Truman & Buzacott 2020; Phillips, McLean Davies & Truman, 2022; Truman, McLean Davies & Buzacott, 2021). Researchers in these projects were told by both classroom English teachers and students that consent needs to be explicitly addressed in English and literature classes.

The research is also informed by the broader interest of members of the research team in designing respectful relationships education (Cahill, 2022), and investigating the challenges and opportunities that it presents for teachers and schools. This body of research showed that teachers have a strong commitment to the importance of providing respectful relationships education (Molina, Cahill, & Dadvand, 2021); however, they also find significant challenges in relation to the emotional, pedagogical, and political labour that they encounter in doing so (Cahill & Dadvand, 2020), and require professional learning, guiding resources and policy and leadership support to enable them to do so with confidence (Dadvand & Cahill, 2020).

*The key questions examined in this project included:*

- ✧ In what ways are issues of consent present in a selection of literary texts routinely taught in Australian secondary English?
- ✧ In what ways do contemporary, award-winning Australian texts relevant to subject English address issues of consent?
- ✧ How do English teachers conceptualise the potential contribution of subject English in the context of consent education?
- ✧ How do contemporary Australian writers conceptualise the reading and teaching of literature in the context of debates about consent education?

Funding for the *Consent in Literature* project was obtained from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education to consider how literature can be used within schools to shape and deepen young people's understandings of consent. The *Consent in Literature* project undertook an environmental scan of the field to ascertain how issues of consent were manifesting in conversations about the teaching of literature. The project coded commonly taught texts and contemporary texts in order to examine the intersections of consent education and subject English. Additionally, the research team conducted two focus groups with teachers of secondary English and invited responses from 11 Australian writers regarding the potential contribution of literature to consent education.



*Literature can say what students are afraid to reveal about themselves, about their mental health, family situation, sexual orientation and deepest concerns. It can open up discussions that otherwise would not be broached. Tagore wrote that 'Truth in her dress finds facts too tight, in fiction she moves with ease'.*

Alice Pung

## The imperative for Consent Education

The global #MeToo movement drew attention to the need for critical conversations to take place in schools that focus on respect and consent, and investigate how sexist scripts can be internalised by young people. In the wake of #MeToo, in early 2021, Chantel Contos posted on Instagram asking her followers if they or someone close to them had been sexually assaulted while at school in Australia. Over 200 people responded in the first 24 hours. This prompted Contos to launch a website for anonymous testimonials of sexual assault. Over the course of 2021, 6750 testimonies were submitted by school students depicting experiences of sexual assault during their time at school and asking for a reconsideration of consent education to be foregrounded in secondary schools. The testimonies were anonymously posted by students, who had graduated from independent schools in the past 10 years, some of whom were as young as 13 when the assaults occurred [[www.teachusconsent.com](http://www.teachusconsent.com)]. The stories depict occasions of peer pressure to perform sex, or sexual assaults while unconscious, followed by feelings of shame or online bullying. Alongside this, Contos launched an online petition for the teaching of consent in schools which has generated more than 44000 signatures.

Almost **one in five women** and **one in twenty men** have experienced sexual assault **since the age of 15 years.**

**38% of young women** aged 18-24 years experienced sexual harassment **in the last year.**

**95% of victims** and survivors of sexual assault experience **violence from a male perpetrator**, regardless of their gender.

ABS (2017)



In light of major social and political events, and the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault in Australia, consent education will be mandated in Australia from 2023. To facilitate the implementation of this imperative, educators must be equipped to ensure a rich and robust engagement with issues relating to respectful relationships and consent. This includes engaging young people in discussions about the influence of gender norms on assumptions about human rights, gender equity, gender identities, interpersonal relationships, power relations, and intimate relationships. A specific focus on consent within sexual relationships calls for a focus on the *why, what, who, when, where* and *how* of consent, as well as critical engagement about the influences of social, institutional and gender norms on attitudes and behaviour. A comprehensive approach to consent education thus calls not only for a focus on interpersonal relationships, but also a critical engagement with the ways in which social and cultural norms influence human relationships.

## Consent education in secondary school English

As the only mandated subject across the years of schooling, English holds a unique place in the school curriculum. It is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing together historical, social, and cultural issues through the study of texts. As well as supporting students to develop rich literacy skills, English contributes to the ethical and moral development of individuals and communities, engaging young people in critical conversations about contemporary issues with the aim to empower them to become informed and active citizens. Further, the Literature and contexts substrand of the secondary English curriculum provides opportunity for teachers to use diverse texts and to assist students to analyse the ways that historical and social contexts inform ideas and points of view.

For example, in Year 8, students will:

*explain the ways that ideas and viewpoints of view may represent the values of individuals and groups in literary texts, drawn from historical, social and cultural contexts, by First Nations Australian, and wide-ranging Australian and world authors authors. ([AC9E8LE01](#), [ACARA, n.d., n.p.](#))*

It is through English, students can develop empathy, and experience aspects of life, people and places that they do not have access to (McLean Davies et al., 2022). Literature is central to subject English, and to language studies globally. Core to the social and cultural work of English is the reading of literary texts, which fundamentally examine the complex relationships between people, and their ethical, social and historical contexts. In studying literature created by diverse authors, students can expand their understanding of themselves and others, and the nature and impacts of both problematic and respectful relationships.

*... literature 'holds' an issue within the narrative threads of private memoir and testimony, readers often have a more intimate and reflective connection to the issues – it's not shoved down their throat so to speak. We are drawn into nuance and subjectivities that resonate beyond the page and into our own lives. There is a sense of safety, of being shepherded through confronting terrain by an author who shares their expertise and perspective.*

Cath Moore

Part of the rationale for the *Australian Curriculum: English* is to support young people to become "ethical, informed, perceptive, innovative and active members of society" who are able to "analyse, understand, communicate and build relationships with others and the world around them" (ACARA, n.d., n.p.). In addition to interacting with others in purposeful and respectful ways, the English curriculum also supports young people to engage in meaningful ways with the range of texts in their world, literary and non-literary. Within the Literature strand of the English curriculum, students learn how historical, cultural and social contexts influence the creation and appreciation of literary texts. Students are also taught to examine how authors use language and literary techniques and devices to influence readers. Thus, the structure and aims of the English curriculum recognises not simply the socialising function of literary texts, but also the dynamic relationship that exists between texts, culture and readers.

Given the nature of literature and its core position in subject English, it is clear that this curriculum area has a role to play in providing students with opportunities to engage with issues of consent (Reynolds, 2021). Following the #MeToo movement, writers and commentators committed to raising issues of gender inequality and the complexity of relationships in patriarchal cultures profiled the ways in which literature, more broadly, could be understood as supporting conversations about consent or lack of consent (see, for example, Levitin, 2020; Radio 4). What follows is that texts in the English classroom can clearly offer opportunities for students to explore the complex nature of consent in its interrelationship with dominant power structures (Little & Morzi, 2021), and empower students to become active and informed citizens, able to recognise and transform systems of oppression within the societies in which they live. Accordingly, teachers of subject English are well-positioned to deploy the concept of 'respectful relationships' to analyse texts as it carries an invitation to engage with both interpersonal relationships and social and cultural norms. Core to this work is supporting students to understand how literary texts reflect and in turn come to influence the culture in which they were created, and the ways in which they contribute to the cultural legacy which in

itself influences presumptions about gender roles. Texts provide the opportunity for students to detect and deconstruct the operations of social norms on the everyday moments of the lives of the characters that they encounter, assisting them to connect the micro with the macro, or the personal with the political. This, of course, occurs through reading, but significantly, through writing, and rewriting narratives. What students do with texts matters.

Yet, scholarship also shows that while school English offers opportunities to critically reflect on social structures and relationships, the nature of the texts selected (Truman, 2019a), as well as the pedagogical approaches employed to explore these texts (Cahill, 2022; Potter, 2022) may serve to reinforce limiting social structures and implicitly sanction or render normative, certain levels of interpersonal violence—this is the case with enduringly popular texts such as *Romeo and Juliet*, and *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, for example. While critical literacy has been explored and mobilised in Australian schools since the 1990s, backlash against critical reading as overtly ideological and dangerous have meant that critical literacy is not explicitly addressed as a curriculum aim in the current *Australian Curriculum: English* (ACARA n.d.). Indeed, the history of English reminds us that this curriculum area has also maintained systems of oppression through repeated master narratives, and this is particularly the case in colonised contexts (Truman et al., 2021; Truman, 2019b). Consequently, considerations of consent education in school English need to take account of the histories of English carried in texts and textual practices, and consider current and possible approaches to reading.

*If there is enough room for creative writing, then students are able to explore the idea of consent in their imaginative worlds, and even rehearse literary scenarios based on life experience or the experience of their peers, and what they believe bad/good relationships should be like. This is invaluable for gleaning insight into how they feel about the issue of consent.*

Alice Pung

*Literature still has a key role to play in raising public awareness around social and environmental issues in interpersonal relationships, but it is limited by factors including:*

**Who is writing the literature and whom are they writing it for?**

*Ask whether it speaks to the diversity and concerns, or reflects the lived experience, of the reader back to the reader?*

*You might find that, in many cases, the author is simply reflecting their own lived experience back at an audience exactly like them, losing a large slab of the potential readership because of this. People turn off when they are not seen or properly engaged with. I'm proof of this.*

*There would be millions of others like me. 'Preaching to the converted' is lovely, but very limited if you have an important message to deliver.*

**Its accessibility and format**

*There's still an assumption that 'literature' has to look or be written a certain way in order for it to be literature. The very ways in which we deliver 'literature' – particularly in our always-on, always-connected, keep-it-brief culture – can be off putting to potential new 'readers' (eg because of cost, because of its very 'bookiness', because of the language and idioms it is conveyed in).*

Rebecca Lim



# Reading with Consent: Project Conceptual Framing and Methodology

## Framing consent education in research

Consent should be considered in the wider education context and should include a focus on promoting gender equality, provision of comprehensive approaches to social and emotional learning, respectful relationships and sexuality education, along with education efforts directed at prevention of gender-based violence and promotion of safe, equitable and inclusive learning environments for students and their teachers.

There are risks in an overly narrow focus on 'consent' as the issue needing attention, particularly if consent is taken to refer only to the interactions whereby permission is sought, given, or refused in relation to sexual activity. This is because a focus on these actions, without a focus on the broader contexts of gender norms and power relations, can mask the factors that influence what people understand to be possible, acceptable or desirable within their relationships, and indeed draw attention away from a breach of consent as a form of violence. These forms of violence would more accurately be named as sexual harassment, sexual assault, rape or child sexual abuse, depending on the situation. In avoiding use of this nomenclature, there is some risk of minimising or excusing these forms of violence, or of erasing the impact of these forms of violence on victims, survivors, observers, and perpetrators.



## Sexual abuse before the age of 15

Of the 1 million women who experienced sexual abuse before the age of 15, at the time of the first incident:

- ✦ **12% were aged 0 to 4 years**
- ✦ **48% were aged 5 to 9 years**
- ✦ **40% were aged 10 to 14**



The most common perpetrators were:

- ✦ **A known person who was not a family member (42%)**
- ✦ **A relative or in-law who was not a parent or sibling (27%)**
- ✦ **A father/stepfather (16%)**
- ✦ **A stranger (10%)**

Of the 412,000 men who experienced sexual abuse before the age of 15, at the time of the first incident:

- ✦ **6.8% were aged 0 to 4 years**
- ✦ **45% were aged 5 to 9 years**
- ✦ **48% were aged 10 to 14 years**



The most common perpetrators were:

- ✦ **A known person who was not a family member (66%)**
- ✦ **A relative or in-law who was not a parent or sibling (14%)**
- ✦ **A stranger (15%)**

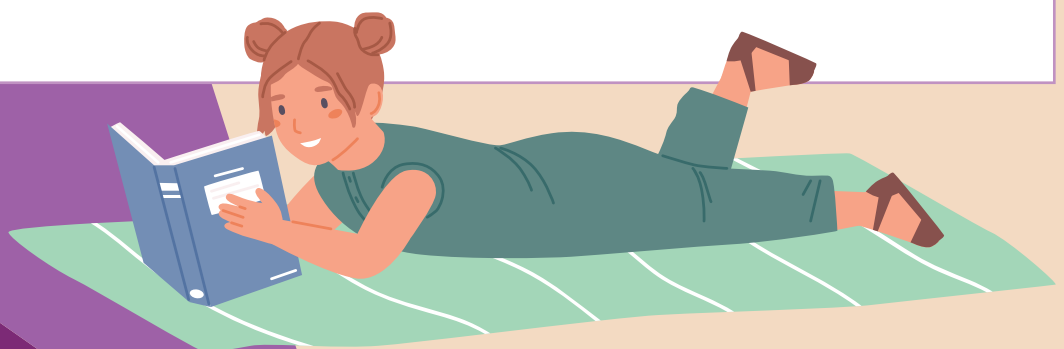
ABS (2021)

One of the challenges in providing consent education arises from the different approaches to conceptualising what is meant by sexual 'consent'. There have been definitional contributions from a range of disciplines, including feminist theory, sociology, law, and philosophy. Some definitions place emphasis on the notion of consent as the free, informed, and affirmative verbal or non-verbal permission given for sexual activity. Those who bring feminist perspectives to critique legalistic understandings of consent have noted that patriarchal and heteronormative assumptions have led people to conceptualise consent as something that a man seeks

and a woman provides, with it being the responsibility of the consenting party to ensure that their verbal or non-verbal messages are given in a manner that leaves no room for doubt (Beres, 2014). Others have pointed out that following the legalistic influence, many definitions of consent have derived solely from a focus on sexual assault, and thus have not provided sufficient nuance for addressing ways in which consent might operate within respectful intimate relationships (Fenner, 2017). Some scholars critique the notion of 'freedom' within 'affirmative' consent-giving, drawing attention to the ways in which social pressures and gender norms can influence and shape expectations and behaviour within an interpersonal encounter. From this structural perspective, decisions are always made within the context of power relations and narratives which shape one's sense of what is possible or desirable, or indeed, what one is entitled to do or expect within a relationship (Beres, 2014).

Following this analysis, suggestions have been made that sexual consent could be understood as a fluid, continuing and reciprocal communicative process transacted between persons, via a form of 'communicative sexuality' (Fenner, 2017). This conceptualisation directs attention towards the mutual responsibility of partners to seek information about the willingness of the other and indeed the 'wantingness' of their partner, in relation to what it is that would give them pleasure. A focus on 'communicative sexuality' provides a useful framework which recognises that interpersonal relations are dynamic and fluid, occurring within social constructs that inherently affect communication relating to consent. Locating and conceptualising consent in this way acknowledges the intrinsic interconnectedness of the interpersonal and the societal.

Central to this conceptualisation of consent is the recognition that power relations operate societally and interpersonally. Power relations are differently exercised depending on how one is positioned relative to structural forms of power (Hunehäll Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021). Some of the factors that can influence one's position in relation to structural forms of power and how power is exercised include social class, race, disability, ability, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and culture. The interplay between such factors underscores that communication and choices regarding consent must be conceptualised as contextual as well as relational. The framing of





affirmative consent that has produced the rhetoric of 'yes means yes,' does not account sufficiently for the interconnected influence of context, culture, and circumstances. Questions persist, such as: *What role does the embodiment of one's relation to power play in communications relating to consent? How does one's positioning in relation to structural forms of power and its bodily representations influence interpersonal communication? How are historically fashioned inequalities such as failing to ask and attend to the other ignored?*

This focus on the operations of power relations requires critical consideration of the role gender plays in the ways bodies relate to one another. There is a large body of scholarly work that explores the influence of gender on interpersonal relations which makes a contribution that can be harnessed by teachers (Cahill, 2022; Carrera-Fernández et al., 2018; Keddle, 2021; Ringrose et al., 2022). Scholarly work that locates and critically engages with the operation of gendered power relations has long troubled naturalised understandings of gender. Gender scholar Judith Butler (1990) proposes that gender is produced through social constructions consisting of rules, conventions, and norms that naturalise certain ways of 'doing' one's gender which in turn shape one's identity, expressions, behaviours, relations, and disguises. Social constructs define societally comprehensible ways of 'doing' one's gender and as such, materialise the heterosexual gender binary of boy/girl and man/woman in distinct ways. 'Sexual scripts' are one mechanism through which heterosexual gender norms, sexual relations, and sexual consent play out and can be analysed (Fenner, 2017). 'Sexual scripts' function as storylines that shape and categorise sexual relationships and behaviours and function to normalise particular expectations (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Beres (2007) highlights that normative and traditional 'sexual scripts' situate men as sexual initiators where consent is implicit and women as sexual gatekeepers where non-consent or consent is given, which underscores the gendered power relations that are to be considered when analysing sexual consent. Fenner (2017) importantly highlights that education relating to consent can inadvertently reinforce these normative sexual scripts by signalling who it is that seeks and gives consent. As such, sexual consent must be examined and discussed through the use of a framework that analyses the heterosexual gendered power relations that influence 'sexual scripts'. Analysing sexual consent in this way allows for the contextual and relational nuances to be considered to better understand how structural forms of power and social norms shape the ways bodies relate to one another.

Torenz (2021) points to the importance of acknowledging how these socialised gender roles and the subsequent gendered power relations influence how consent is communicated within interpersonal relations. Heterosexual societal structures shape gendered bodies and relationships and work to influence and regulate the ways in which the gender binary of boy/girl and man/woman plays out within interpersonal power relations (Ringrose et al., 2022). Heterosexual gender norms influence sexual relations and sexual consent by shaping presumptions about what one is entitled to do to, with or for another within a sexual interaction.



This discussion about how consent might be conceptualised highlights the complexity and nuances that are to be considered when seeking to meaningfully engage young people with consent education in secondary English. It provides important questions for those analysing texts. For example, attention can be directed towards analysis of the operations of interpersonal, structural, and social forms of coercion that may be at work within or between the characters, as well as the effects of people's actions on the lives of others.

*The boundaries of our bodies don't end with our skin—they project and stretch beyond us—a shrill and brilliant life force, invisible, elastic, endlessly shapeshifting. At least this is how I have come to understand my own body and those that I live alongside.*

*Our expansiveness is often only recognised in its recoil, swift and tight, when a set of eyes appraise us from across the street. In the click of a passenger door lock. In a rough fumble and quick rebuke: Can't you take a joke?*

*Consent as a script suggests that it is a predictable sequence of events. It assumes an equal footing or understanding. It assumes that there is an endpoint. A point that lies beyond refusal. A chance to tick a box.*

Fiona Murphy

## Methodology

As we have acknowledged, literary studies enables the complex investigation of relationships through the study of aesthetic texts. Literary studies therefore enables readers to explore issues of consent in the context of unequal institutional and social power relationships, including relationships between people and land. Understood in this way, as we have outlined, consent education is more than understanding individual rights in intimate and sexual relationships, it also explores the ways in which power relationships, gender and social expectations render individuals vulnerable and silence their concerns and abuses within dominant discourses. To address our core research questions, and to enable a robust and integrated examination of consent, the project had two dimensions: a close reading/analysis of representations of issues of consent in literature and focus group interviews with teachers. Additionally, we asked some leading, contemporary Australian authors to respond to our key questions regarding consent education, literature and school English, and these reflections have also informed this report.

## Analysis of literature - close literary reading for consent

Addressing questions 1: In what ways is the issue of consent raised in the literary texts routinely taught in Australian secondary English? and 2: In what ways do contemporary, award-winning Australian texts relevant to subject English raise issues of consent?, two groups of texts were curated. Print texts were selected, as novels and short stories remain a substantive part of school English. This is not to say that film and other multi-modal forms are not significant in English, or likely to take up these issues, but that print texts continue to have capital, and English pivots on these forms. The first group consisted of 20 texts most widely taught in Australian schools, as evidenced by survey responses from more than 700 Australian English Teachers in 2017. This data was collected as part of the Investigating Literary Knowledge in the Making of English Teachers (ARC Grant ID DP160101084). This list, called 'commonly taught' texts for the purposes of our research, was discerned not from set text lists, but rather from information offered by survey respondents regarding texts they were teaching; often, text selection debates are centred around texts set for study, rather than those *actually* being taught. Recent research shows that many of these texts are also amongst the most popular in the United Kingdom (Kneen et al., 2021).

	Title	Author	Publishing date
1	<i>Macbeth</i>	Shakespeare	1606
2	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	Shakespeare	1597
3	<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	Harper Lee	1960
4	<i>Animal Farm</i>	George Orwell	1945
5	<i>Of Mice and Men</i>	John Steinbeck	1937
6	<i>Hamlet</i>	Shakespeare	1611
7	<i>The Outsiders</i>	S. E. Hinton	1967
8	<i>Jasper Jones</i>	Craig Silvey	2009
9	<i>1984</i>	George Orwell	1949
10	<i>Othello</i>	Shakespeare	1603
11	<i>The Crucible</i>	Arthur Miller	1953
12	<i>Tomorrow, When the War Began</i>	John Marsden	1993
13	<i>The Great Gatsby</i>	F. Scott Fitzgerald	1925
14	<i>Lord of the Flies</i>	William Golding	1954
15	<i>Holes</i>	Louis Sachar	1998
16	<i>The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas</i>	John Boyne	2006
17	<i>Trash</i>	Andy Mulligan	2010
18	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	Shakespeare	1600
19	<i>The Hunger Games</i>	Suzanne Collins	2008
20	<i>The Book Thief</i>	Markus Zusak	2005

Cursory reading of this list highlights that the presence of the British and North American canon remains strong in the discourses and practices of Australian secondary English, and that conversations about consent will be largely contextualised—when studying these texts—outside of contemporary Australia and diverse Australians. Of note are the texts by Australian writers on this list —three by male authors, one set in Nazi Germany (Zusak), and the other two in regional Australia (Marsden; Silvey). While the title of Silvey’s novel takes its name from the one Indigenous character in the text, the story is told by an adolescent white male narrator.

*... even reading things that were/are considered ‘harmless’, ‘fun’, ‘thrilling’ and/or ‘worthy’ (like anything by Ian Fleming, anything by Ernest Hemingway, anything by Thomas Harris or Jo Nesbo), comes absolutely loaded with violence against women and girls. It’s a given in some crime fiction written by men that the female victims have to die in increasingly horrible, titillating and perverse ways, or be tortured almost beyond survival.*

Rebecca Lim

Additionally, we curated a second group of 20 texts, distinguished as ‘contemporary texts’ which we identified from award winning/short-listed texts published within the last 15 years that as a collection address:

- ✦ **Inclusivity:** text selection was informed by understanding of intersectionality and includes a diverse range of protagonists (gender, race, sexuality, disability, ability, class, location) with an emphasis on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors;
- ✦ **Sensitivity:** text selection was informed by an understanding of trauma-informed approaches to learning and wellbeing;
- ✦ **Quality:** text selection was informed by readings of the aesthetic quality of the text and literary awards;
- ✦ **Accessibility:** text selection was informed by consideration of the extent to which diverse adolescent readers would be able to engage with the literacy demands of the text.

The intention behind establishing two groups of texts was to enable comparison of what might be considered representations of the existing 'school canon' of literature, and newer texts yet to gain traction in schools, but nonetheless identified as of value to contemporary young people. We note, of course, that schools ultimately will make decisions about text choice according to their communities; however, we support critical reflection on these practices and the inclusion of diverse voices in the curriculum. Both literature for young adults and adults were thus included in order to consider a range of texts that could be taught across the secondary years of English. Often, young adult novels are used from Years 7–9, while from Years 10 students are introduced to adult texts.

*As a child migrant of the 1970s, almost every book available to me in bookstores or libraries, or pressed upon me by librarians or teachers, emphasised gender inequality, 'the place' of women and children, the dominance of a particular mainstream narrative and the absolute invisibility of people like me and other marginalised or intersectional people.*

Rebecca Lim

### Twenty contemporary texts that could be included in subject English in Australia

	Title	Author	Publishing date
1	<i>Terra Nullius</i>	Clare G. Coleman	2017
2	<i>The White Girl</i>	Tony Birch	2019
3	<i>Stone Girl</i>	Eleni Hale	2018
4	<i>Heat and Light</i>	Ellen van Neervan	2014
5	<i>Meet Me at the Intersection</i>	Rebecca Lim and Ambelin Kwaymullina	2018
6	<i>Foreign Soil</i>	Maxine Beneba Clarke	2014
7	<i>The Marrow Thieves</i>	Cherie Dimaline	2017
8	<i>Catching Teller Crow</i>	Ambelin and Ezekiel Kwaymullina	2018
9	<i>Calypso Summer</i>	Jared Thomas	2014
10	<i>The Miseducation of Cameron Post</i>	Emily M. Danforth	2012
11	<i>Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe</i>	Benjamin Alire Sáenz	2012
12	<i>Laura Dean Keeps Breaking Up with Me</i>	Mariko Tamaki	2019
13	<i>Fire Song</i>	Adam Garnet Jones	2018
14	<i>Bila Yarrudhanggalangdhuray</i>	Anita Heiss	2021
15	<i>The Bogan Mondrian</i>	Steven Herrick	2018
16	<i>Ghost Bird</i>	Lisa Fuller	2019
17	<i>Gabi, a Girl in Pieces</i>	Isabel Quintero	2014
18	<i>Blood</i>	Tony Birch	2011
19	<i>Golden Boy</i>	Abigail Tarttelin	2013
20	<i>Cloudwish</i>	Fiona Wood	2015

## Reading Framework

While discussions of consent often centre around sexual relations and interactions, the intention of this research was to explore the interconnection of issues of sexual and relational consent with other forms of the use and misuse of power, such as relating to land, race and class. Examinations of consent in literature need to go beyond analysis of narrative renderings of sexual acts and decisions and permissions that have led to this. For example, it is not enough to affirm Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, for example, as offering a positive 19th century example of consent requested and given (McBride, 2022). Class plays a part, here, in the nature of the relationship between Oliver and Lady Chatterley (whose name reminds us that, ultimately, even though he is rendered impotent, she is owned by a powerful man, who will not consent to divorce), and her ability to give consent is structurally and legally limited.

To this end, a framework was developed that enabled a comprehensive coding of issues relating to consent. This framework was developed using NVIVO software and trialled and refined by the coding team to ensure a shared understanding of codes and comprehensive reading of diverse texts.



## Extract from Coding Structure

Categories	Sub-Categories
<b>Gender Identities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Cis-gendered</li> <li>» Non-binary and gender queer</li> <li>» Transgender</li> </ul>
<b>Racial ethnic identities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Indigenous</li> <li>» Latinx</li> <li>» Black</li> <li>» Asian</li> <li>» White</li> </ul>
<b>Sexual and Intimate Relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Respectful intimate relationships between young people</li> <li>» Disrespectful intimate relationships between young people</li> <li>» Respectful Intimate relationships between adults</li> <li>» Disrespectful Intimate relationships between adults</li> <li>» Respectful Explicit content about sexual consent</li> <li>» Disrespectful Explicit content about sexual consent</li> </ul>
<b>Interpersonal violence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Sexual harassment and assault</li> <li>» Non-sexual assault and harassment</li> <li>» Family violence</li> <li>» Bullying</li> <li>» Betrayal</li> <li>» Derogatory comments</li> <li>» Coercion and manipulation</li> </ul>
<b>Major crimes involving interpersonal violence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Child sex abuse</li> <li>» Murder</li> <li>» Rape</li> <li>» Torture</li> </ul>
<b>Structural Forms of interpersonal violence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Deprivation of liberty (actual and subjective)</li> <li>» Forced migration refugee status</li> <li>» Gender inequality</li> <li>» Homophobia/transphobia</li> <li>» Indigenous First Nations oppression</li> <li>» Invasion colonisation</li> <li>» Politically motivated violence</li> <li>» Racism</li> </ul>

This extract from the comprehensive code book acknowledges the interrelatedness of issues of sexual/interpersonal consent, and other forms of consent, and the ways in which relationships exist within social structures.

## Limitations of the research

This pilot research is limited by the texts that have been selected for analysis, and the scale of teacher and author consultation. While this research offers important insights into the possibilities of consent education in subject English, it is by no means exhaustive and, notably, does not yet include the voices and perspectives of students and parents, or curriculum designers. These perspectives will be included at the next stage of the research.

# Data analysis and discussion

## Contextualising Consent

This project understands consent education in the context of broader social and structural issues relating to power. Factors that position a person in relation to structural forms of power and how power is exercised include race, age, disability, ability, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, and culture. We were interested in the kinds of interpersonal relationships represented in both the commonly taught and contemporary texts, and whether there was a difference between these, and the representation of characters' race, gender, sexuality, disability and ability across these texts.

Analysis of the commonly taught texts showed a dominance of white characters and 5% representation of Indigenous characters, as compared to the contemporary texts which had 55% Indigenous characters. As stated above, we did prioritise Indigenous Australian texts for the contemporary text selection, so this is likely to have contributed to the larger representation of Indigenous characters. The commonly used texts also had an underrepresentation of Asian, Black, and Latinx characters.

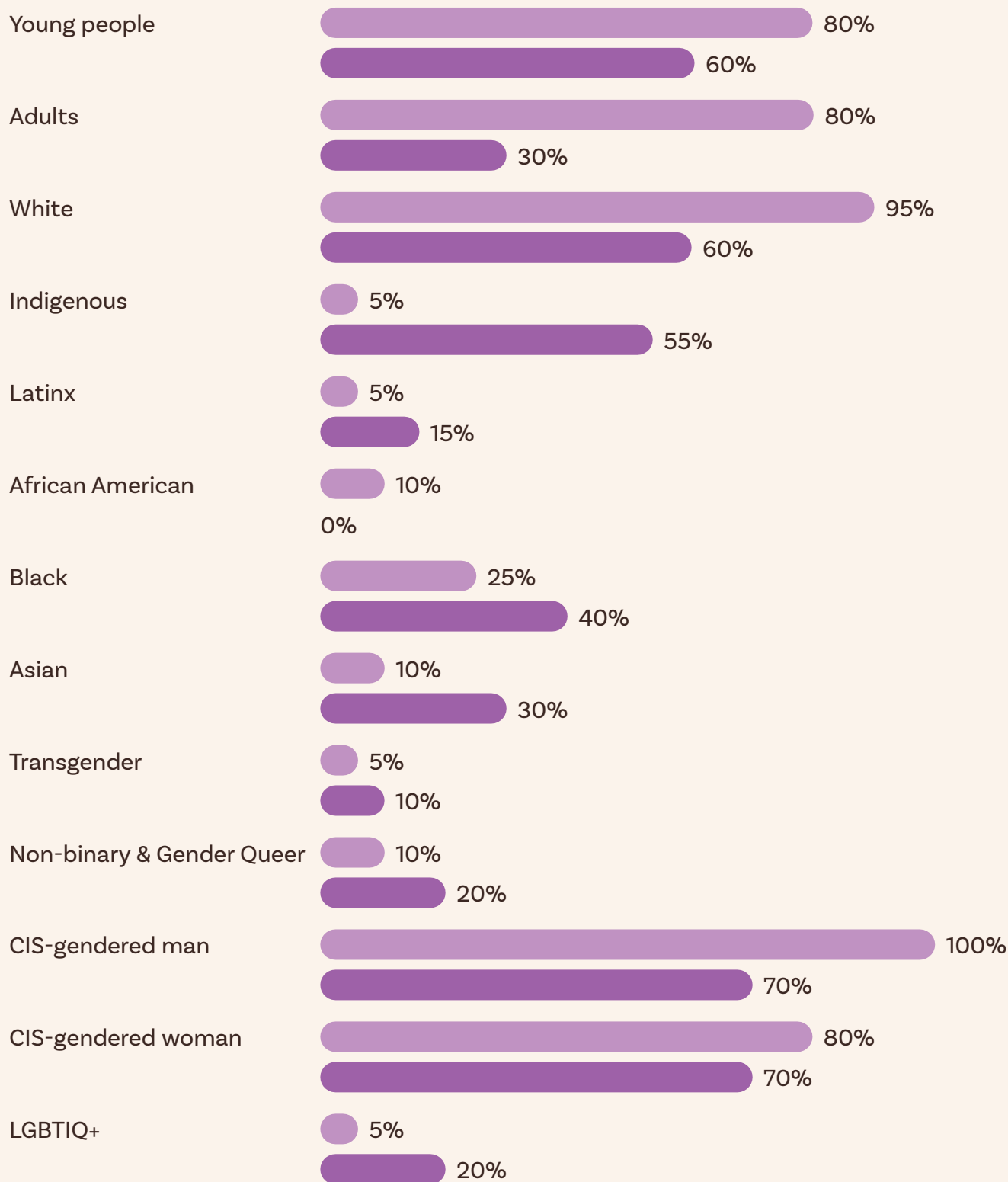
Both the commonly used texts and contemporary texts had a strong representation of cis-gendered male and female characters, with the contemporary texts demonstrating more instances of gender queer and transgender characters. The contemporary texts also had a larger representation of LGBTIQ+ characters than the commonly used texts. Both sets of texts had an underrepresentation of disabled

characters. As evidenced in the literary analysis below, representation of characters with diverse genders, sexual orientations, ages, and abilities offers different opportunities for readers to engage with different forms of power in relationships, and explore the different social, institutional, and cultural milieus in which consent is contextualised.

***Settler colonialism is the most powerful socio-political force in the country and the environmental impact since 1788 has been entirely caused by colonisation.***

Claire G. Coleman

## Comparative distribution of race and sexuality/gender coded across the selection of commonly taught and contemporary texts



Commonly taught texts



Contemporary texts

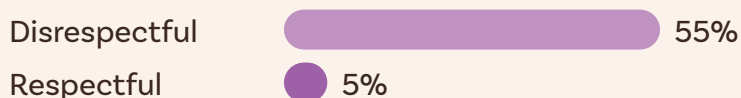


## Respectful and disrespectful relationships

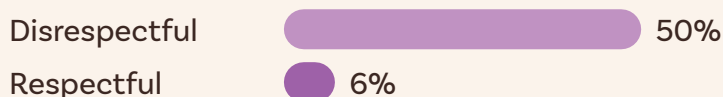
Both disrespectful and respectful relationships were evident in 'commonly taught' and 'contemporary texts' groups. Analysis of the list of commonly taught texts showed that 55% depicted disrespectful relationships between young people (adolescents under 18) and 50% depicted disrespectful relationships between adults. Conversely, 5% of texts in this group represented respectful intimate relationships between young people, and 6% highlighted respectful relationships between adults.

### Intimate relationships and explicit content in commonly taught texts

#### BETWEEN YOUNG PEOPLE



#### BETWEEN ADULTS



#### EXPLICIT CONTENT



### Intimate relationships and explicit content in contemporary texts

#### BETWEEN YOUNG PEOPLE



#### BETWEEN ADULTS



#### EXPLICIT CONTENT



Interestingly, 55% of the contemporary texts analysed also showed disrespectful relationships between young people, but only 15% profiled disrespectful relationships between adults. In contrast, 35% represented respectful relationships between young people, and 20% represented respectful relationships between adults.

There are several comments that can be made with regard to this data. Across both lists, we see that it is common to represent disrespectful relationships in literature. This highlights that English teaching provides an important context for exploring and critiquing relationships. Consequently, when studying these texts, it will be important to consider alternative narratives and different rendering of relationships that support respect. Having said this, there was a greater representation of respectful relationships between both young people and adults in the 'contemporary texts' list. Of course, given the criteria for the selection of this list, that is to be expected; however, this reminds us that texts that are part of an established canon do not necessarily offer positive depictions of relationships, or indeed show relationships between young people. The selection and setting of contemporary texts that speak directly to diverse young people is vital in subject English if literature is to be used to support conversation, analysis and understanding of how to live rich and productive personal and social lives.

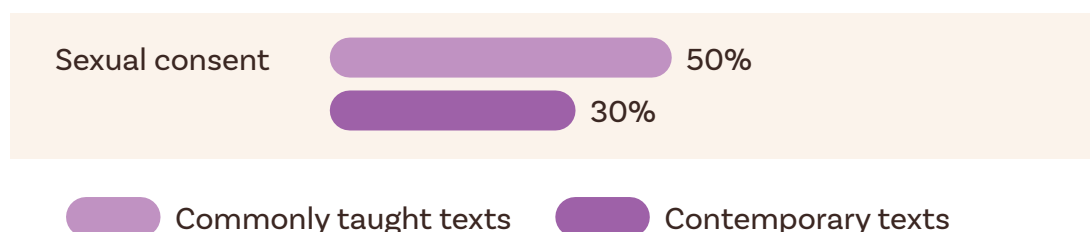


## Sexual consent

Within representations of respectful and disrespectful relationships, analysis also considered moments in texts where issues of sexual consent were addressed explicitly or implicitly.

Amongst the commonly taught texts, 50% explicitly represented or addressed issues of sexual consent. Of this 50%, three fifths raised issues of disrespect around sexual consent, and two fifths raised or represented respectful consensual relationships. Regarding the contemporary texts, a smaller percentage (30%) of texts analysed directly addressed issues of sexual consent. However, a similar pattern in terms of the split between disrespectful (two thirds) and respectful (one third) representation of sexual consent was evident.

### Explicit consent coded across commonly taught and contemporary texts



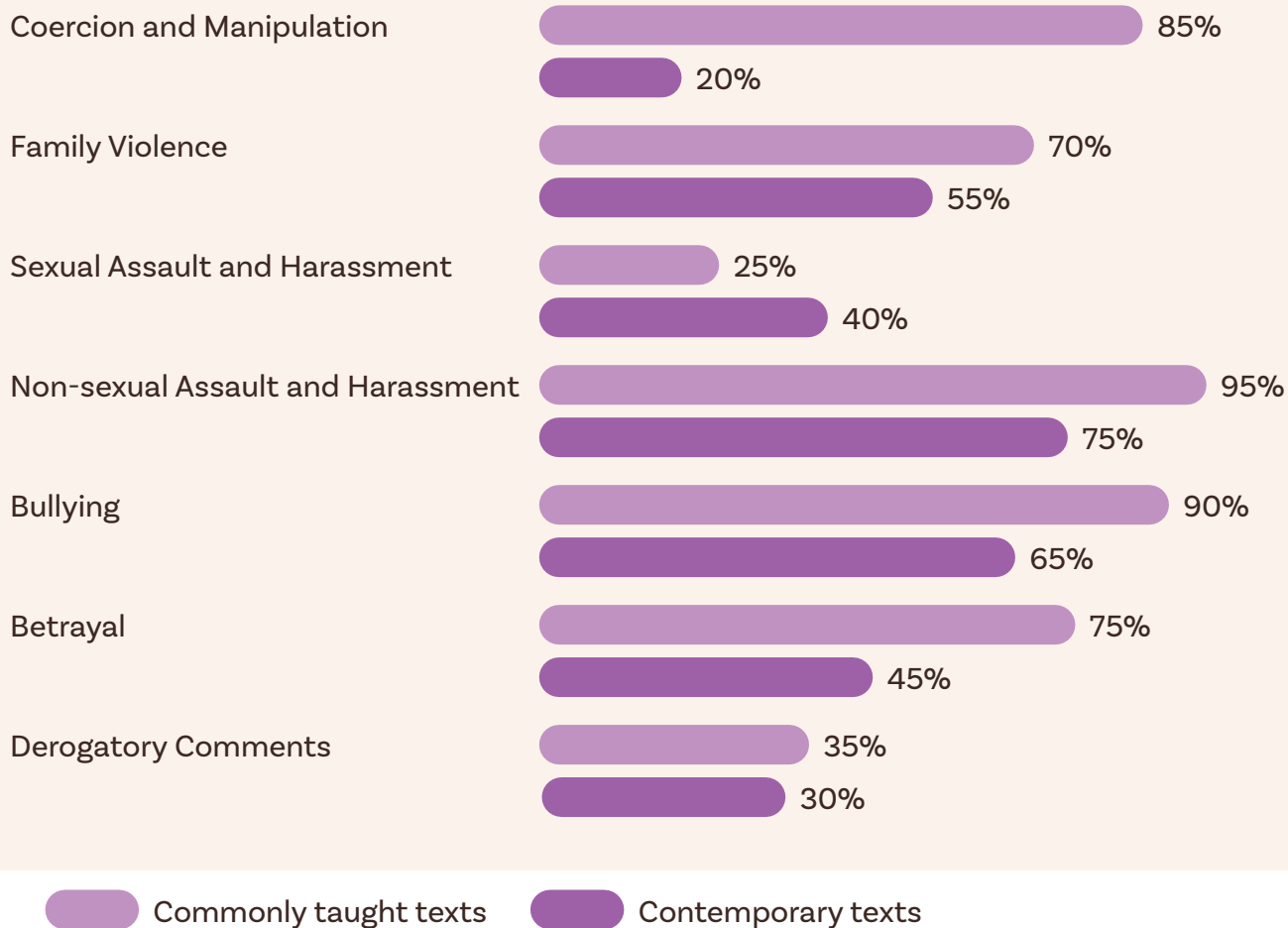
Regarding the contemporary texts, 30% of those analysed directly addressed issues of sexual consent. Of this 30%, 20% represented issues of disrespect in relation to sexual consent, while 10% showed respectful consensual sexual relationships.

This analysis shows that issues of sexual consent are significant in half of the texts that have been part of the secondary English canon, in some cases, for generations. Sexual consent is also a significant part of the contemporary texts analysed. While issues of sexual consent were less present in the contemporary texts, this is likely because of the intended audience for several of these texts. The suite of contemporary texts included more works understood to be for young adult readers, and such texts engage less explicitly with matters of sexual consent.

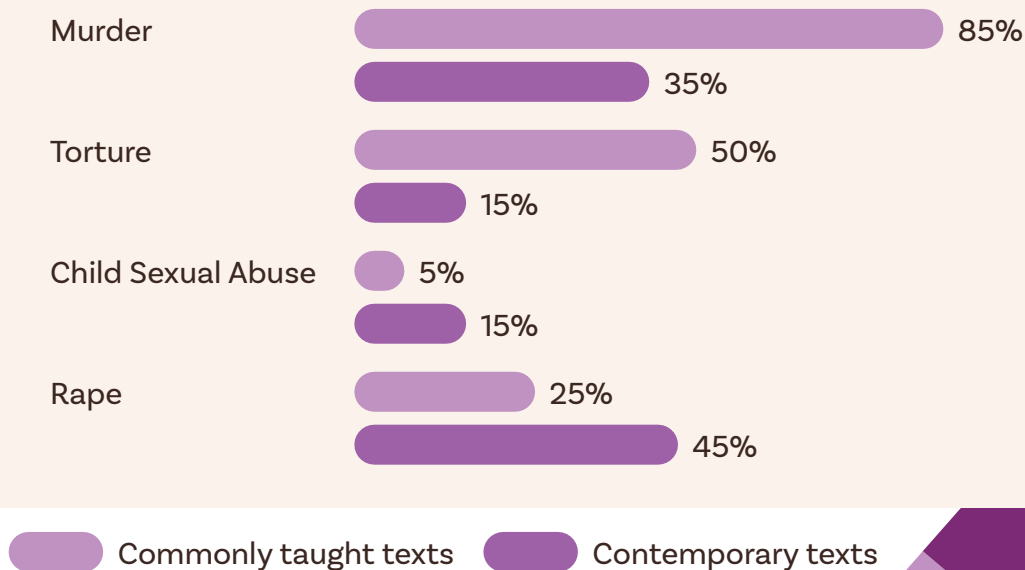
## Interpersonal Violence

Interpersonal violence features in both the commonly taught and contemporary texts. The commonly taught texts exhibited higher instances of all forms of interpersonal violence, with the exception of sexual harassment which featured in 25% of commonly taught texts, compared with 40% of contemporary texts. While sexual assault and harassment have been prevalent throughout history, it is revealing that the commonly taught texts have an under-representation or an un-naming of both harassment and sexual assault.

## Distribution and forms of interpersonal violence coded across a selection of commonly taught and contemporary texts



## Comparative distribution of aspects of major crimes involving interpersonal violence coded across a selection of commonly taught and contemporary texts



*A broad cross section of, and access to, stories that address issues of respect and consent widens social awareness about the complexities involved. It also highlights how important it is to keep asking questions and challenging normative constructs that perpetuate inequality and gendered violence.*

Cath Moore

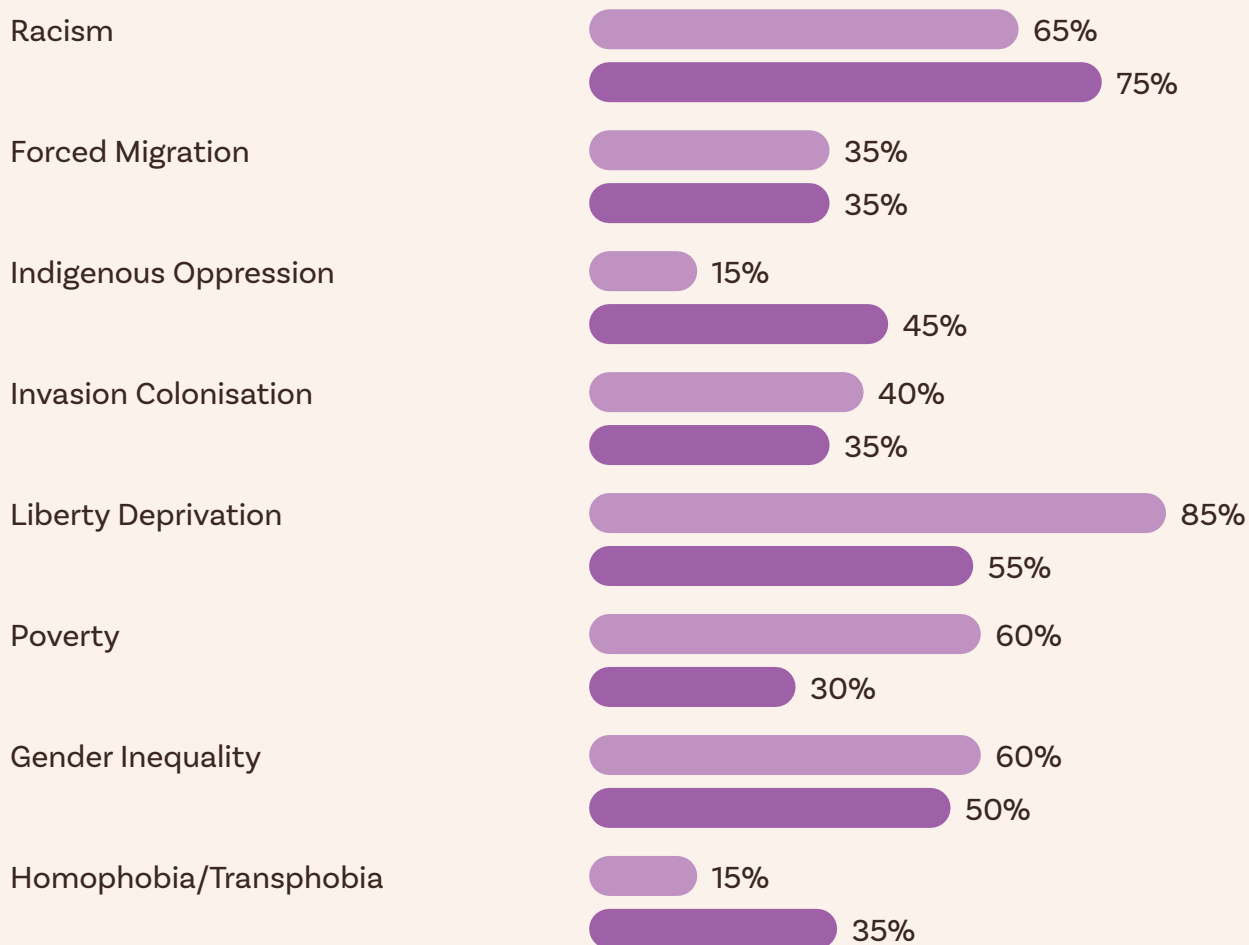
An analysis of major crimes as aspects of interpersonal violence (for example, murder, torture, child sexual abuse, and rape) demonstrated a striking difference between the commonly taught texts and contemporary texts. Commonly taught texts have an overrepresentation of murder (85%) and torture (50%), and an underrepresentation (relative to the occurrence of these crimes) of child sexual abuse (5%) and rape (25%). In contrast, contemporary texts have fewer instances of murder (35%) and torture (15%), and a stronger representation of child sexual abuse (15%) and rape (45%).

The representation of major crimes in the commonly set texts draws our attention to certain forms of violence (murder and torture) as if they are normative; while truly common forms of abuse (child sexual abuse and rape) are underrepresented in the commonly taught texts. This pattern could be explained by censorship issues related to publishing and text selection, and the exclusion of such texts from the classroom, as well as the increasing number of contemporary texts that explore current social issues, such as violence against women, children, and sexual minorities.

### **Structural forms of interpersonal violence**

Both sets of texts represented structural forms of interpersonal violence. It is interesting to note that forced migration (35%), gender inequality (60%/50%) and colonisation/invasion (40%/35%) are reasonably consistent across the two set of texts. Invasion, like war and murder, are often part of the narrative studies in English, as in the case of the frequently set works of Shakespeare. Amongst the commonly taught texts, deprivation of liberty (85%) was most strongly represented, while in the contemporary texts, racism was the most coded form of interpersonal violence (65%). The commonly taught texts had less than half the representation of trans/homophobia than contemporary texts (15%). While invasion and colonisation are represented in both lists, we also see greater representation of Indigenous and First Nations oppression in the suite of contemporary texts selected, whereas established texts more frequently represented war or used allegory to explore issues related to structural forms of interpersonal violence. We are reminded here that the texts traditionally taught in English in Australia have whitewashed or ignored Indigenous histories, and are often framed within or by heteronormative world views.

## Structural forms of interpersonal violence coded across a selection of commonly taught and contemporary texts



Commonly taught texts Contemporary texts



Identified from the data were the top five coded texts from both commonly taught texts and contemporary texts across the fields of:

- ✦ Disrespectful relationships
- ✦ Interpersonal violence
- ✦ Major crimes
- ✦ Structural forms of interpersonal violence

If the argument is that commonly taught texts remain part of the canon due to both literary value and their affordances for teaching about complex issues, the inclusion of contemporary texts by diverse authors, featuring diverse genders, sexualities, and racialised characters also offer opportunities to engage with contemporary youth experiences. These literary texts are rich in examination of the issues relevant to young people in Australia and internationally, and offer renderings of issues concerning consent education, broadly and contextually understood. For example, *Foreign Soil* (Clarke, 2014), which is of indisputable literary value and set for study in Year 11 and 12, offers nuanced explorations of issues of consent across different registers, contextualising interpersonal relationships within broader social and cultural milieus.

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that teachers play a significant role in the way that texts are experienced by students. Our research has shown that it is not enough to simply set a text for study, the work that is done with the text in classroom contexts is key to the ways that students will engage with literature and its key ideas, regardless of the text chosen (Truman, McLean Davies & Buzacott, 2021; McLean Davies & Buzacott, 2021).

### Top 5 coded texts

Commonly taught texts	Contemporary texts
To Kill a Mocking Bird	Foreign Soil
Boy in the Striped Pyjamas	Meet Me at the Intersection
Jasper Jones	Fire Song
Romeo and Juliet	Stone Girl
Holes	Heat & Light

*Reading provides a safe avenue to engage with challenging concepts. It allows us to access voices or perspectives that may vary from those that we readily access. It also allows us to start challenging conversations and deeply engage with peers in exploration of topics that may not otherwise arise, or be safe to discuss. ... As a teacher, I believe English would be a great place to facilitate the establishment of more conducive and respectful values, and ideas and to share, celebrate and hone these. It also provides a safe lense for those who feel challenged by the ideas raised, allowing them to speak to concepts they may not fully understand or agree with behind the buffer of a text.*

Kirli Saunders



*Stories are the way we have always, as a species, understood these issues. They are the strongest teaching tool for teaching morality and personal ethics and have been for as long as there have been people.*

Claire Coleman



## Key contributions from the teacher focus groups

The data collected within the teacher focus groups sheds insights into the opportunities and challenges that teachers of English may face should they take a more explicit focus on discussing interpersonal and structural matters pertaining to consent when engaged in analysis of texts. Read together with the data collected from responding authors, their responses shed light on the ways in which structured engagement with key issues in a literary text may contribute to the broader commitment to social justice and respect that can be heard within proponents of consent education.

### Opportunity and relevance

The teachers in the focus groups saw an opportunity to integrate aspects of consent education into the wider objectives of subject English. They noted that fiction can provide a shared point of focus, providing a safe space within which to open discussion.

*I do think literature is a way of talking about characters and there's an understanding that there is a distance between the reality and the creative world of the author. There is a space to talk about those real world issues and make them relevant for students in our classes and bring it these big issues into the classroom.*

Teacher participant

*Every time we care about a fictional character, we are practising a world view that positions their freedom, their choices, their consent, as worthy of our careful attention.*

Diana Reid



Further, as English teachers, they were already accustomed to leading discussions about the ways in which connections with the lives and experiences of key characters is evoked through the artistry and decisions of the author.

*I think it aligns quite nicely with ideas of empathy and what we intend to achieve in reading about different people and characters, and how we connect to characters and being empathetic as a means or an avenue into understanding their experiences and how things happen, or what could have happened differently.*

Teacher participant

The teachers believed that a focus on consent via the text studies might provide a safe space, whilst also enabling access to the relevant issues.

*Maybe it provides a safe space as well to explore those issues that they're interested in but they don't necessarily feel comfortable bringing up on their own or without that prompt from character or theme.*

Teacher participant

However, others recognised that some students and teachers would be amongst those directly affected by gender-based violence, and hence there was uncertainty about whether addressing subject matter relating to consent might be helpful or cause distress. There was also a strong view that teachers needed training and enabling frameworks to assist them to do this well.

*I think in terms of consent, specifically, there is one issue here, that would actually require staff training. ... If you're engaging with discussions about consent with a text ... that does very much open up the opportunity for students to want to discuss personal experiences where they've either been a victim, or they think they might have been a perpetrator. ... So, any framework that you were going to construct around that would, I think, need to involve something that would actually protect the staff teaching it or setting up a way to create some sort of dialogue between us and our students so that if they are making a disclosure of any sort, they feel safe.*

Teacher participant

*Literature can help the public find and use better language to discuss issues, and sometimes the way an issue is framed or spoken about can make a huge difference to whether or not it is cared about and/or acted upon.*

Bri Lee



*Humans are not the rational creatures we like to imagine ourselves to be. Rather, we are emotional beings who respond to story far more than facts and data.*

Yves Rees



*School should be a space to engage with uncomfortable truths and delicate subject matter, a place in which robust, respectful conversations highlight the complexities of these issues. Of great importance is an ability to listen and learn about opinions that differ to your own. Reading a set text offers a focal point from which constructive discussions can follow. It's not really about agreement – it's about engagement with ideas that shape the broader socio-cultural landscape that students live in. This kind of knowledge allows young people to participate in the discourse with authority and awareness. Young people are a critical voice in changing cultures through practising informed dissent and debate. Literature plays a major role in facilitating these exchanges between peers and other social communities.*

Cath Moore

## Barriers and concerns

Despite recognising the opportunity that could be harnessed in subject English, the teachers named a number of barriers that would likely present should English teachers be asked to take on consent education through literature, including concerns about fit with their role, lack of professional learning and curriculum frameworks, and concerns about the politics of text selection. Respondents noted that teachers may have some concerns about possible backlash or distress on the part of male students and questioned how they might address these themes “without frightening the boys” (Teacher participant).

English teachers recognised that text selection was a particular responsibility as well as an opportunity to direct attention to particular issues, as “different texts will present different opportunities to tap into different social concerns and issues that are meaningful for the students, as well” (Teacher participant). However, text selection was potentially also a controversial political act, as parents and community members may criticise inclusion of texts which represent a diversity of experiences or themes.

*I think text selection in schools is a really complex thing, and a very political thing. And, particularly in the context that I'm working in, we have had kickback from parents ... They don't consent for us to teach their children or expose their children to certain things. ... there is a desire from a lot of parents for their children, to remain innocent, to maybe stay a little bit naive for a little bit longer, until they then have to be exposed to some of the harsh realities of our world.*

Teacher participant

In response to these concerns, the teachers pointed to the importance of providing curriculum frameworks, policy guidance, exemplars, and professional learning. Without this guidance, there was the possibility of unintended negative outcomes or a job poorly done.

*I feel like there's also a danger in not doing things properly. ... if it's to be done, it really needs to be committed to curriculum in a really clear and explicit way. ... we need to go in with a really controlled idea of what we want to achieve to make sure that we remain sensitive within the classroom as well.*

Teacher participant

*People can comprehend justice but they feel unfairness and that is a compelling way to bring people with you.*

Evie Wyld

*Language makes the world. It generates categories and concepts that delimit what is and isn't possible.*

Yves Rees



# Findings and Implications

- 1. Interpersonal violence is endemic in literary texts studied in English.** All forms of literature engage with interpersonal relationships. Studying literature in English, therefore, has inadvertently engaged students in issues of consent for generations, albeit without an explicit framing. English teaching can therefore make a key contribution towards provision of consent education in the curriculum.

Reynolds (2021) points to the depth of scholarly research that underscores the role fiction plays in the social empathy young people experience, arguing that the English classroom is a site that presents possibilities to contest 'institutional cultures of oppression.' Students in our previous studies have requested consent education be foregrounded in English as well as across the curriculum. This research shows the value of considering cross curriculum priorities in school-based approaches, and the inclusion of those invested in English education alongside experts in wellbeing and respectful relationships when designing curriculum responses.

- 2. Literature can provide rich and diverse case studies.** The teaching and study of literature can provide a context through which to develop a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the ways in which complex forces, power structures, and language itself can influence sexual consent. Therefore, contributing to consent education through English may enable discourses about consent to be elevated beyond simple, decontextualised and transactional events, highlighting the ways in which social and cultural power structures influence behaviour and relational expectations, and social practices.

- 3. Text selection matters.** Texts set in different times and social and geographical contexts offer distinct insights into the ways in which consent is conceptualised and practised. An over-reliance on traditional texts is unlikely to adequately encompass these perspectives and experiences of diverse or marginalised groups. Lack of attention to the assumptions in these texts may inadvertently work to silence colonial histories, perpetuate white heterosexual relationships as normative, and function to perpetuate limiting or harmful stereotypes relating to gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, disabilities, abilities and religion.

An inclusive approach to text selection, along with critical readership of what the selected texts assume, include or evade, may provide a way to recognise that many intersecting forces are at work causing individuals to experience the world differently depending on their subject positioning and membership groups, as well as their locations in place and in time.

*The right literary works can teach not only about consent but about the ramifications of lack of consent and respect.*

Claire G. Coleman

**4. Pedagogy and assessment must be carefully considered when addressing issues of consent.** There has been concern that engaging with troubling material relating to violence, war, abuse or mental health may have a negative impact on student wellbeing (Medina, 2014; Cook, 2017). This is of particular concern in the senior years when students may be required to focus on particular texts within the constraints of high stakes assessment regimes.

However, research shows the importance of enabling students, and readers, to change, contest and reimagine oppressive social norms and sexual scripts that perpetuate or excuse sexual violence. In response, it may be that additional forms of literary response, beyond the traditional essay, could offer greater opportunity for students to examine causal drivers, explore new narratives and relationships, articulate ethical analysis, and propose alternative possibilities.

*[R]espect and consent can't just be taught through asking someone to read a book – it's in the practice of the thing, in discussion, in role play, in hypotheticals, in real situations, that the reading comes alive. It's in the living of respect and consent that they become concrete things, solidified principles to live by. No book on its own will teach a person that. Teachers and librarians can't just teach respect and consent through dry question and answer – multi-media, discussion, and real situations with their attendant conundrums, need to be worked through with students. People need to be challenged, and they need to be asked to articulate their understanding.*

Rebecca Lim



**5. Teaching texts which contain sensitive material presents challenges as well as opportunities.** It may lead to discomfort for those with parallel narratives and for those who engage empathetically with affected characters. However, it may also evoke student help-seeking, peer support and peer referral, and thus ensure that more of those affected by violence or abuse get access to help, or at least to a recognition that suffering of this nature is unjust.

This interconnection between discomfort and potential insight and support is not limited to issues of consent specifically, but is the case more generally with subject English, where students do reflect on their own lives in relation to the texts studied. Given this, it is important to provide teachers of English with tools for leading difficult conversations and compassionate and enabling responses (McLean Davies & Buzacott, 2021).

*The intentional absence of engagement with a text could also indicate a lack of understanding of the concepts within or an inherent disconnection for the values present in a text or a lacking literacy ability to explore that concept. Refusal to participate with texts could also indicate the shift in culture needed to engage audiences in consent & respect exploration.*

Kirli Saunders

**6. Support and resources are needed in order for teachers to contribute to consent education within subject English.** Our analysis shows that issues of consent, contextualised within broader power structures, are central to both commonly taught and more contemporary texts, and therefore a core aspect of literary reading. However, teachers have not necessarily been supported to discuss issues of interpersonal violence, particularly those pertaining to consent or to intimate relationships. Teachers identified that they need frameworks and resources for reading literature with a consent lens, and that this should be part of both pre-service preparation and in-service professional learning for teachers.





## Next Steps:

This research has drawn attention to the value and possibilities, and also the challenges, of teaching and reading literature with a focus on contributing to consent. Some proposals for further research as consent education becomes mandated in the curriculum include:

- ✦ Draw more explicitly on the voices of students and parents regarding text selection and the teaching of consent through literature and English.
- ✦ Develop pedagogical frameworks for advancing age-appropriate consent education within subject English informed by input from key stakeholders—students, parents, teachers, school leaders and experts in wellbeing, sex and gender education.
- ✦ Investigate and recommend how consent education can be understood and supported in the context of current curriculum and assessment practices and expectations.
- ✦ Develop guides to text selection which address ways to include diverse authorial voices, characters, and contemporary narratives in literary education.
- ✦ Develop and pilot professional learning for pre-service and in-service teachers, and develop recommendations to guide capacity building efforts with regard to teaching ‘consent’ in subject English.

*[A]n education program talking about consent would have been invaluable in my youth and beyond, and is essential today – but more so, a foundation of learning that is based on restorative justice where individuals are guided to confront and transform what hurts, a place where conversation matters... all this would not only be an invaluable personal skill to take into the world but would be an education worth having.*

Anna Krien

## About the authors

**Larissa McLean Davies** is Professor of Teacher Education at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne. Larissa McLean Davies leads large-scale Teacher Education research which mobilises partnerships with Government agencies, Education Departments, and not-for-profit organisations. She is the co-convenor of the Literary Education Lab (with Dr Sarah E. Truman), where she leads research which draws together the digital and environmental humanities, literary studies and education around core issues related to teacher professional learning in the context of justice and sustainability imperatives. Her co-authored book *Literary Knowing and the Making of English Teachers* will be published by Routledge in 2022.

**Emeritus Professor Helen Cahill** leads a body of research addressing child and youth wellbeing. She has developed a number of disaster recovery, violence-reduction, social and emotional learning, gender rights, sexuality, and drug education programs for use in schools and community settings in Australia, as well as a range of countries across the Asia-Pacific and East and Southern Africa regions. She has authored over 100 publications, including over 40 wellbeing education programs for use in school and community settings. She is lead author of *Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships*, an open access, evidence-informed social and emotional learning and respectful relationships education program for Australian students from ages 5-18, and the UNESCO *Connect with Respect* program for prevention of school related gender-based violence.

**Sarah E. Truman** is Senior Lecturer at The University of Melbourne and co-convenor (with Prof Larissa McLean Davies) of the Literary Education Lab. From 2022-2025 Dr Truman is an ARC DECRA Fellow whose project focuses on youth creative writing of science fiction in mining and metropolitan communities in three commonwealth countries (Australia, Canada, and Wales). Dr Truman's most recent book is *Feminist Speculations and the Practice of Research-Creation* (Routledge, 2022).

**Natalie Calleja** is a Research Fellow at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne with a background in teaching. They are currently involved in a research project that aims to examine the provision of the *Resilience, Rights and Respectful Relationships* intervention program in secondary schools. Natalie's research interests include centring the voices of young people and understanding how the identities of young people are informed and shaped. Natalie uses equity and social change as critical lenses to explore how education can continue to meaningfully engage with young people.

**Michèle Hinton Herrington** has a PhD in linguistics and contributes to several large research projects in education. Michèle is passionate about education research and is particularly interested in how language and language systems function in and across the school disciplines and how theory translates into teaching practices. Michèle is co-author of *Multimodal Literacy in School Science: Transdisciplinary perspectives on Theory, Research and Pedagogy* (Routledge, 2022).

**Troy Potter** is Lecturer at La Trobe University. His research interests include critical literacies and the ways in which texts for young people construct, engage with, respond to contemporary concerns, particularly those relating to gender, sexuality and disability. He is the author of *Books for Boys: Manipulating Genre in Contemporary Australian Young Adult Fiction* (WVT Trier, 2018).

For me, there's an intersection in sovereignty of land and therefore body, the First Nations writers and particularly First Nations and Queer writers outlined above have expanded consent awareness for me. **Bindi** explores climate change, and Cultural Care for Country, as well as the perspectives of a First Nations Girl growing up in Community during a community crisis (bushfire). **Kindred** explores First Nations and Female identity, connection to Country and the need to care for and connect to the places that nourish us. **Returning** (forthcoming) examines decolonisation, truth telling and feminism.... These texts add to the body of First Nations, Female, Queer and Environmental writers in the literary landscape here. To this I would especially add the work of Jess Hill, Yumi Stynes, Clementine Ford, Dr Yumiko Kadota & Sonya Renee Taylor.

Kirli Saunders

## Influential readings identified by Contemporary Australian Authors

Contributing authors include Alice Pung, Bri Lee, Cath Moore, Claire G. Coleman, Rebecca Lim, Yves Rees, Kirli Saunders, Anna Krien, Fiona Murphy, Evie Wyld

**What literary texts (written by others) have most influenced your understanding of key social and environmental issues?**

*In Defence of the  
Bad White Working  
Class*, essay, MEANJIN  
2017

Shannon Burns

*The Lorax*  
Dr Seuss

*The Master's Tools  
will Never Dismantle  
the Master's House*

Audre Lorde

*Top Blokes*  
Lech Blaine

*Minor Feelings*  
Cathy Hong Park

*Foreign Soil  
The Hate Race*  
Maxine Beneba  
Clarke

*The Arrival  
The Red Tree*  
Shaun Tan

*Dropbear*  
Evelyn Araluen

*The Slap*  
Christos Tsiolkis

*Throat*  
Ellen van  
Neerven

*The White Girl*  
Tony Birch

*Revenge*  
S. L. Lim

*Songlines*  
Margo Neale  
and Lynne Kelly

*Animal Farm*  
George Orwell

*After Australia*  
Michael Mohammed  
Ahmed (ed)

(anything by Anna Krien  
or Benjamin Law)  
*The Quarterly Essays*

*One Hundred  
Years of Dirt*  
Rick Morton

*Am I Black  
Enough for You?*  
Anita Heiss

*Fathoms*  
Rebecca  
Giggs

*Feral Kid*  
Libby Hathorn

*The Heart is a  
Lonely Hunter*  
Carson McCullers

*The Future of Us*  
Liz Allen

*In Cold Blood*  
Truman Capote

*No Friend But the Mountains*  
Shaun Tan, Behrouz Boochani

*Mullumbimby  
Too Much Lip*  
Melissa Lucashenko

*My Place*  
Sally Morgan

*Carpentaria*  
Alexis Wright

*Silent Spring*  
Rachel Carson

*Eating Animals*  
Jonathan Safran  
Foer

*Bury My Heart at  
Wounded Knee*  
Dee Brown

*The Animals in that  
Country*  
Laura Jean McKay

*The Colour  
of Water*  
James  
McBride

*Bila Yarrudhanggalangdhuray*  
Anita Heiss

*Song of the Crocodile*  
Nardi Simpson

*Love Objects*  
Emily Maguire

*The Lord of the Flies*  
William Golding

*Archival  
Poetics*  
Natalie Harkin

*Assembly*  
Natasha  
Brown

*How to Make  
a Basket*  
Jazz Money

*Stone Sky Gold  
Mountain*  
Mirandi Riwoe

*The Overstory*  
Richard  
Powers

*Room for a  
Stranger*  
Melanie  
Cheng

*My Year of  
Meats*  
Ruth Ozeki

*Watership  
Down*  
Richard  
Adams

*Rogue  
Intensities*  
Angela  
Rockel

What literary texts (written by others) have most influenced your understanding of key social and interpersonal issues relating to gender equality and gender-based violence?

*The Argonauts*  
Maggie Nelson

*The Death of Vivek Oji*  
Akwaeke Emezi

*The Newcomer*  
Elizabeth Laura Woollett

*See What You Made Me Do*  
Jess Hill

*Euphoria Kids*  
Alison Evans

*Detransition Baby*  
Torrey Peters

*Nevada*  
Imogen Binnie

*Eggshell Skull*  
Bri Lee

*Beloved*  
Toni Morrison

*Bad Feminist*  
*Difficult women*  
Roxanne Gay

*Why I'm no Longer talking to White People About Race*  
Reni Eddo-Lodge

*Monkey Grip*  
*Joe Cinque's Consolation*  
*The First Stone*  
*This House of Grief*  
Helen Garner

*The Colour Purple*  
Alice Walker

*The Mother Wound*  
Amani Hayder

*Once Were Warriors*  
Alan Duff

*White Tears, Brown Scars*  
Ruby Hamad

*Tiger Daughter*  
Rebecca Lim

*Woman of Substances*  
Jenny Valentish

*Emotional Female*  
Yumiko Kadota

*An Isolated Incident*  
Emily Maguire

*Car Crash*  
Lech Blaine

*Black and Blue*  
Veronica Heritage-Gorrie

*The Handmaid's Tale*  
Margaret Atwood

*Amateur*  
Thomas Page McBee

*Generation F*  
Virginia Trioli

*The Grapes of Wrath*  
John Steinback

*The Cost of Living*  
Deborah Levy

*The Great Believers*  
Rebecca Makkai

*The Road*  
Cormack McCarthy

*Stone Butch Blues*  
Leslie Feinberg

*The Natural Way of Things*  
Charlotte Wood

*The Right to Sex*  
Amia Srinivasan

## What literary texts have framed, challenged, and changed your understanding of consent?

*A Lonely Girl is a Dangerous Thing*

Jessie Tu

The books of  
Emily Maguire

*The First Stone*  
Helen Garner

*Prima Facie*  
Suzie Miller

The books of  
Cynthia Voigt

*The Right to Sex*  
Amia Srinivasan

*Witness*  
Louise  
Milligan

*Red Azalea*  
Anchee Min

*A Girl is a Half-  
Formed Thing*  
Eimear McBride

*In the  
Dream  
House*

Carmen  
Maria  
Machado

*Asexual Erotics:  
Intimate Readings  
of Compulsory  
Sexuality*

Ela Przybylo

*The Boy from the Mish*  
Gary Lonesborough

*Ace: What Asexuality  
Reveals about Desire, Society  
and the Meaning of Sex*

Angela Chen

*Night Games*  
Anna Krien

Kimberlé Williams  
Crenshaw's essays



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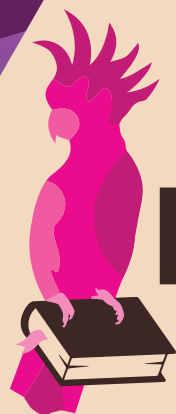
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