New Zealand Young Adult Fiction:

National Myths, Identity and Coming-of-age

By

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Abstract

Tara, the 17-year-old narrator of *Dear Vincent* by Mandy Hager, struggles in the relationship with her mother and learns about her family's past on a trip to Ireland. She must decide whether she follows in the footsteps of her sister who died by suicide or whether she chooses life for herself and what her life will look like. Whiti Hereaka's *Bugs* follows the development of Bugs, who turns 17 about half-way through the novel. She faces low expectations and institutional discrimination at school and must make decisions about her future. While Bugs chooses to stay; her personal growth is like that of Tara who leaves. In Kate De Goldi's *The 10PM Question*, we engage with 12-year-old Frankie, who struggles with anxiety and a permanently house-bound mother. Like the protagonists of the other novels, Frankie must determine who he is by forming his first strong friendship with a teenager of the opposite sex and by questioning the adults around him. He, too, must make decisions which contradict the actions of his family. All three, Tara, Bugs and Frankie, are supported in this process by friends and extended family, and, as we will see, these characters come to play crucial roles in each protagonist's identity formation.

What this thesis shows is that their stories are both universal and local. All three novels include common elements of Young Adult fiction about identity formation and coming-of-age *and* they are firmly located in New Zealand by way of incorporating uniquely New Zealand national myths. These myths shape our collective identities and adolescence is a time when teenagers form theirs. It is during this time that they explicitly notice and, at times, question the myths that they have been raised to believe in. This thesis is concerned with Overseas Experience (OE) as a way to develop one's sense of self and broadening one's horizons, the egalitarian myth or the belief that 'we are all equal here', and the 'she'll be right' myth, the assumption that things will somehow right themselves. It seeks to explore what these novels suggest about the three different national myths of New Zealand and their role in identity formation. It will also discuss whether different views are presented.

Introduction

This thesis looks at three contemporary New Zealand Young Adult novels through the lens of national myths. The intention is to look at novels that have been published in the last decade (2008 - 2018). Typically, Young Adult (YA) fiction tends to tell stories of coming-of-age and identity formation. The separation from parents by young adults often goes hand-in-hand with a closer association with friend groups. It is also a time of learning and questioning. Adolescence is the time when we absorb, consciously or subconsciously, the national myths that shape our identity as a collective. And, at times, we can see teenagers and young adults challenge the myths that have become ingrained in the attitudes and behaviours of society at large.

Literature written for children and young adults tends to be ideologically driven, perhaps because of the natural inclination of adults to teach, and at times preach, to the next generation. However, it may also present different options. In *Juvenile Literature and British Society, 1850-1950 : the Age of Adolescence*, Charles Ferrall and Anna Jackson have argued that since its inception, YA fiction has provided a space inviting young adults to imagine what was perceived as not possible or uncommon at the time. They explain that "There were more novels, however, about women doctors than teachers, despite the fact, […] there were only seventy-two women doctors registered in 1889" (12). Their observation emphasises the possibility and long tradition of fictional characters serving as models for the reader. This makes YA fiction a particularly interesting genre to explore in the context of national myths.

All three novels discussed in this thesis were written by women who introduce a fresh perspective. They each problematise a different New Zealand national myth with which imagine New Zealand readers can be assumed to be familiar. The focus will be on how these writers position the reader towards the myths. A national myth as explored in this thesis is a belief or an attitude which informs people's values and actions or inactions. These myths are lived experiences for many New Zealanders, and they are repeated by families, friendship groups, in the workplace and by teenagers as they become aware of them. Such myths are often tied to specific terms or idiomatic mantras that reflect the underlying beliefs.

A close reading of these texts allows for a detailed look at the types of stories conveyed to teenagers. In each case, the focus is on the ways in which the authors reinforce or, more often, challenge these myths. In addition to their recent date of publication, these novels were chosen for their literary merit, and their reflection of a myth. It may be helpful, first, to clarify some of the national myths New Zealanders regularly endorse, before going into the specific texts and myths this thesis examines. In his book *National Myths: Constructed Pasts, Contested Presents*, Gerard Bouchard asserts,

> […] there are reasons to believe that myth is an inescapable, universal category of the mind, individual and collective. If this is borne out, then we better had learn more about the functioning of myths rather than vainly hope for their demise. (xiii)

This is exactly what this thesis sets out to do: explore and seek to understand what some of the myths are, how they are presented in recent New Zealand young adult fiction, and to what extent these texts reinforce or challenge the myths themselves.

Bouchard also offers a definition and explanation of what purpose these national myths serve in each nation, for of course, national myths are not peculiar to New Zealand. He explains the importance of myths for the population of a nation in times of crisis and confusion,

> Myths are universal […]. They feed identities, they inform powerful narratives to which collectivity can return in times of adversity, they provide a remedy to offset humiliation and defeat, they build togetherness beyond cleavages and conflicts, they provide security by projecting consistent visions of the world, they generate energy in times of war and other trauma, they mobilise populations towards particular goals or wide-ranging social change, they help overcome or conceal contradictions and shortcoming of the nation's creed, they secure the required support for institutions to function, and they allow a society to respond positively to any kind of challenge. (277-8)

Bouchard emphasises that myths can then serve as a moral compass to guide the collective towards a more ordered and controllable future.

New Zealand national myths are often reflected in small, throw-away comments and idioms that make a regular appearance in conversations. "Kiwis" enjoy 'punching above our weight' overseas, particularly in sport, and, related to this, stories of challenges. The phrase 'We knocked the bastard off', coined by Sir Edmund Hillary, is linked to this. It conveys the idea that more was achieved than initially expected, particularly when taking into account limited resources and

preparation. New Zealand's reputation overseas contributes to the narrative reiterated at home. New Zealand Tourism sells the image of '100% Pure New Zealand' or a '100% clean and green' country. 'Number 8 wire', a type of rural fencing wire that can be used for a variety of other purposes, has come to be a by-word for ingenuity, innovation and resourcefulness; the ability to think laterally to solve problems combined with a can-do attitude. As a myth it campaigns for pragmatism. This is not limited to sports though: Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern not only presents a self-deprecating attitude at times, she also recognises this as a national attitude. In 2018, she described New Zealanders to the UN General Assembly,

> We are a self-deprecating people. We're not ones for status. We'll celebrate the local person who volunteers at their sports club as much as we will the successful entrepreneur. Our empathy and strong sense of justice is matched only by our pragmatism. (Watkins)

Her comments reflect the national personality and she is explicitly aware of it. Ardern understands that both self-deprecation and pragmatism are part of the "Kiwi" national psyche. 'Number 8 wire' encompasses both. It is not limited to politicians, sport stars, and film makers; musicians like Lorde and Jermaine Clement and Bret McKenzie of "Flight of the Conchords", who would also qualify as comedians, present a similar humility when approached about their international success.

Myths are not necessarily valid, of course. Bouchard comments on the reliability of myths and explains that,

> Some […] emphasise the dark side of myths construed as false, malicious, manipulative , and dangerous [but] myths can be just the contrary: one thinks of several unquestionably noble ideals that have mobilized Western societies since the nineteenth century (freedom, equality, democracy, […]) or colonized nations […] who fought for their emancipation. […] Likewise it would be erroneous to say that myths are outright inventions. In their own way,[…] they are always somehow connected to reality which sets them apart from fables, legends, and other sheer fiction. (276)

This is, for instance, true of the '100% Pure New Zealand' myth. There is a degree to which New Zealanders would like to believe that other nations have less 'perfect' nature and less 'pure' environments. Within the scope of this thesis is the myth that Aotearoa New Zealand is often perceived as an egalitarian society, a myth which has persisted over time. But, as with all myths, the truth is more complicated. True, New Zealand is less hierarchical and has fewer class divisions

than England in settler times. Furthermore, New Zealand was the first country to give women the vote. But it was by no means all women who were able to have their voice counted. Moreover, in New Zealand today, minorities such as Māori and Pasifika communities are underachieving in the education system and overrepresented in the country's prisons. This myth has been portrayed as simply a myth recently by prominent New Zealanders – popular film director Taika Waititi and All Black star Sonny Bill Williams among them. Waititi has called New Zealand "racist" and Williams has observed that the coaching and management of the All Blacks is still Pākehā dominated despite the increasing number of Māori and Pasifika players.

Mandy Hager's *Dear Vincent* (2013) will be discussed through the lens of the Overseas Experience (OE), a New Zealand middle-class phenomenon which promises the broadening of one's horizons, both metaphorically and literally. OE is generally assumed to aid the process of self-discovery and the shift into adulthood and maturity. In "The Big OE: Young Travellers as Secular Pilgrims", Claudia Bell remarks "many young adults and their parents see OE as a valid alternative education" (144). The novel, as we shall see, clearly implies that one must come home from the OE to reap the full benefits and reconnect more fully with family. Whiti Hereaka's *Bugs* (2013) is the subject of the second chapter. The novel is read through the lens of the egalitarian myth. In her review of the novel in *New Zealand Books*, "Sex-free romance and YA cred", Paula Morris commends Hereaka, "It's refreshing, […] to read a contemporary realist novel which explores the myriad of social and emotional pressures on young people"(Morris). I will investigate which challenges are linked to the egalitarian myth and discuss how subtly Hereaka has constructed her characters to present different perceptions of it. To complete the thesis, I will offer a reading of Kate De Goldi's novel *The 10PM Question* (2008) through the lens of the frequently expressed notion 'she'll be right'. The myth becomes problematic for New Zealanders in the context of mental health and also reveals attitudes towards what constitutes masculinity and femininity.

In her review in *New Zealand Books* "Sweet and Upbeat", Paula Morris claims that the reader is "drawn deep into the terrors and social isolation of [the protagonist's] condition" (Morris) which is largely silenced in the novel as well as in New Zealand society. Former All Black John Kirwan has led the opposition to 'she'll be right' in relation to mental health and its corresponding attitude over the last decade. He presented this notion as "unhelpful", being the first All Black to

openly talk about his struggles with mental health and depression. De Goldi, in her novel, seems to have anticipated the public debate opened up by Kirwan. She creates a fictional world in which the conversation about mental health is evaded and where, consequently, until that conversation occurs, she will not 'be right.'

Perspective and Insight: "The Big OE" in Mandy Hager's *Dear Vincent*

In this chapter I aim to explore Hager's novel under the umbrella of teenage identity formation. The focus will be set on exploring how Hager uses a version of the Overseas Experience (OE) to structure her protagonist's pathway to self-discovery and independence. While many thematic elements, such as the mental health issues and experience of emotional neglect, play into this, they will not be the main point of discussion. Instead, I aim to explore how Hager contributes to and offers an alternative version of the OE as an identity-forming institution for middle-class New Zealanders. An underlying assumption of the myth is the belief that without an OE, the educational journey of the young adult is not quite complete because there is so much to be learnt and so much perspective to be gained during that independent time of travel. After a brief overview of the novel, I will begin by analysing Hager's OE set-up, then I will discuss how her cast of characters serves to display the options her protagonist has for her own development.

Hager's novel is a first-person narrative by 17-year-old student Tara, who is in her final year at school. She is the second daughter of Irish immigrants Kathleen and Paddy. Tara has been her father's primary carer since he suffered a stroke. Tara's mother Kathleen struggles to keep the family financially afloat and works two jobs. The relationship between Tara and her parents can be described as difficult at best. Kathleen appears emotionally detached; Paddy is an invalid and unable to speak. Tara's sister Vanessa (Van) died by suicide five years earlier, but Kathleen has initially attributed Van's death to a car accident, thus widening the divide between her and Tara, who now knows differently. Because of her responsibilities at home, Tara is mature beyond her age. She works at a retirement village to supplement her mother's income and has neither time nor energy to build strong friendships with her peers at school. As a result, she attends school sparsely. She prioritises art, which is how she copes with the stresses of her life. She has a strong interest in Vincent Van Gogh, whose work she finds fascinating and whose struggle with depression resonates with her and her sister's experience. At work, she meets Max Stockhammer, a Jewish immigrant from Austria, who introduces her to his grandson Johannes. Max and Johannes become Tara's mentor and friend respectively. They are the people who provide the emotional support that Tara does not receive from her mother.

As the tension between mother and daughter escalates, Max, Johannes, the school guidance counsellor Sandy and the art teacher Bella, all encourage Tara to follow her instinct and visit the site of her sister's death in Ireland to achieve a sense of closure. During her version of an OE, Tara discovers more details of her family history that have been silenced. She and her sister have suffered from what has been described as intergenerational trauma. Her aunt Shanaye tells her that her mother was gang-raped and became pregnant with Van as a result. Her father's brother, Billy, Kathleen's boyfriend at the time, witnessed the rape, blamed himself for not being able to protect Kathleen and suicided as a consequence. Paddy then married Kathleen in his brother's place to keep her from suicide and to alleviate religious and social pressure. Tara also learns that this is exactly what Van learned five years earlier. She realises that her sister concluded she was the child of the rapist and the reason for her parents' immigration to New Zealand – far away from their beloved home country. Tara understands that Van never stood a chance of being loved by her father. She also gains a better understanding of her mother's struggle. Kathleen married the brother of the man she loved when she was 17, Tara's age – the same age as Van when she died, and the likely age of the reader. With this new knowledge of her family's history, Tara's interpretations and judgements of her parents grow more nuanced and mature. On her return to New Zealand she completes the process of maturation that her overseas experience prompted.

First-person narration through Tara is a core element of the novel's structure. While the reader has privileged access to Tara's thoughts and her experience of situations, it also imposes limitations. As Wayne C. Booth explains in his analysis of Jane Austen's *Emma*, "By showing the story through Emma's eyes, the author ensures that we shall travel with her rather than against her" (243). The reader of *Dear Vincent* is also encouraged to "travel with" Tara. Without knowing the whole story, one is inclined to accept Tara's perspective as valid. And so the reader learns with Tara. In that way, Hager takes the reader through a process of reflection, a first-hand account of what that reassessment of one's perspective might look like.

Dear Vincent is a New Zealand version of the universal story and struggle of growing up. The novel follows a quest structure or the hero's journey. Tara, the quester, is faced with a challenge and, encouraged by her friends and supporters, travels overseas to gain closure on her sister's

death. While she achieves the stated purpose of the quest when she learns what caused the death, she also gains additional knowledge she did not know was available for her to learn. As is typical for a literary quest, this ultimately leads to better self-knowledge and greater independence, the same outcomes that many New Zealanders associate with an OE. In his monograph *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell explains the hero's journey in modern times, "One knows the tale; it has been told a thousand ways. It is the hero-cycle of the modern age, the wonder-story of mankind's coming into maturity" (387). This is also the story of OE; a familiar and, at least in New Zealand, recognised way of developing maturity.

The element that most strongly identifies the novel as a New Zealand text is Tara's OE. Though, as we will soon see, in *Dear Vincent*, this is a metaphorical OE as well as a real one. *The New Zealand Oxford Dictionary* (*NZOD*) defines overseas experience (OE) as a New Zealand English term describing "a young person's first trip overseas, especially to Europe" and emphasises that it is "viewed as an informal rite of passage" (Kennedy 809). It is not so much the definition itself but the fact that a definition for this concept exists in the dictionary that is worth noting. The OE or 'the big OE' is a concept widely known and understood only in New Zealand and likely only actually lived as an experience by middle-class and privileged New Zealanders. While young adults of other countries may engage in similar activities and travel, it is only New Zealand that understands OE as a concept, and as a perfectly legitimate way of developing one's personality, grow one's tolerance and broaden one's horizons. In *The Dictionary of New Zealand English*, Harry Orsman refers to a *Listener* article which offers this description of the OE, "As well as being vital to emotional and intellectual (and sexual) development, OE very nicely fills that awkward gap between high school and marriage" (547). For Tara, the trip to Ireland is more than just a gap-filler between school and settling down. She gains perspective.

The OE is closely connected to other national myths, and thus, a return from OE is an integral part of the rite of passage to be completed. In her essay, "The Big OE: Young New Zealand Travellers as Secular Pilgrims", Claudia Bell suggests not only that the OE itself can be compared to a pilgrimage; she also mentions that the return home is an integral part of the ritual and necessary for the rite of passage to be completed so one can move on to the next stage of life. Bell explains,

> Most return home for the 'lifestyle' This means sunshine, warm winters, relatively inexpensive quality food, less pollution, spacious houses for hospitality and entertaining, and access all year to varied outdoor recreation. These things have become highly priced. OE provides insight into the rest of the world. It also provides insight into one's own nation, and the value of being here. […]
> Conditions in New Zealand are by no means perfect, even though the traveler grew up informed, (like most Westerners) that their country is one of the best nations in the world. Most return because they believe this is true. But certainly living here is usually easier than being away. Returning home reinforces the values of home and suggests a commitment to planning the future. […] It is time to get serious about a career; or at least, find a job. (152)

Bell, by implication, touches on several national myths that are linked to the return from the OE. She mentions access and quality of nature which can be linked to the '100% Pure New Zealand' myth. The 'common' knowledge that New Zealand is 'one of the best' nations can be linked to the idea that it is perceived as an egalitarian country and therefore 'better' than other places. It is maybe also an acknowledgement that, after all, one is still 'just kiwi' and this is the place one belongs. This is home, even though the person returning is changed, and more educated in a variety of ways than the person who left.

Johannes spells this eye-opening function of an OE out for Tara. Over the course of multiple chapters, he explains what travel did for him. He refers to Van Gogh paintings which he has seen on his most recent visit to Europe, "'You know I have seen some of his originals. They blew my mind'" (85). He makes his experience and the insights to be gained explicit to Tara, who asks, "'What was Paris like?' 'Incredible. You feel like you're in one of the time travel episodes of *Dr. Who'*" (86). This is, of course, what Tara's metaphorical OE is all about: Time travel. His description pre-empts the experience Tara will have. Instead of traveling overseas and learning about different cultures, she travels into her parents' past and learns of their origins as well as their traumas which affect her in the narrative present. Her journey overseas is one that is directed inwards, a journey to understand her family and herself. She learns the inner workings of her parents' struggle more than she is exposed to an eye-opening bigger picture of the world. Rather than understanding her place in the world and New Zealand's place in the world, she understands her place and her sister's place in the bigger history of her family. In that sense, her OE is a metaphor for self-discovery. These are experiences New Zealand readers might have heard about already, as many people choose to explore their ancestry during their OE travels.

This may include trips to Gallipoli, a place that has become a popular destination recently because of the WWI centenary, or other WWI or WWII battle locations where great grandparents fought and perhaps died. It can also be visiting living relatives in their parents' or grandparents' country of origin. In many ways, Hager tells the Pākehā migrant story that links back to Europe. With 70% of New Zealand's population identifying as Pākehā (Census), she is bound to reach readers who can connect with the experiences explored in her novel.

From the start, the imagined readers are positioned to side with Tara. Her narrative voice is intense and her perspective subjective and limited. Her portrayal of Kathleen is narrow and one-dimensional. To Tara, she is the evil and unreasonable mother; Tara is the misunderstood daughter. As the novel progresses, Kathleen grows in complexity as a character. Just when Tara feels like she has fully understood Kathleen's perspective, Hager reveals more about her personal struggles. First, she was raped; then her boyfriend died by suicide; then she attempted suicide herself; then she married her boyfriend's brother to please their respective families; then they migrated to New Zealand to escape the conflict and the expectations. This, of course, means they became separated from any network of friends and family. As she understands the extent of her mother's experiences, Tara develops a more nuanced understanding of her mother's actions, but she still accuses her of not loving and supporting Van. She reflects, "Can't think how all this screwed up Mum. Horror for her tangles with anger. She still bloody punished Van for something out of her control" (213). It is not until later, when Tara is back in New Zealand, that Kathleen explains how her attempts to protect Van from more of Paddy's anger backfired,

> "I fought to keep her, when everyone insisted that I adopt her out. […] And the more I tried to protect her from his anger, the worse he got. It didn't help that she looked so much like me. When she hit puberty he couldn't handle it. He'd see her with a boy and he'd have flashbacks. He blamed himself for not fetching Daddy McClusky in time – and for not realising Billy was going to take his life." (261)

Tara's trip to Ireland is instrumental in enabling her to communicate more effectively with her mother. Before she left, any attempt at communicating failed and resulted in hot-headed arguments. Tara would not have gained the insight and developed the sympathy had she remained in New Zealand. It is only after her return from Ireland that she can have this conversation with her mother. Both Tara and Kathleen simply lacked the skills to communicate

effectively: Tara lacked awareness and ability to articulate her thoughts and frustrations in a way that would have allowed Kathleen to respond and Kathleen lacked the skills and the confidence to articulate her own story because she had been isolated and unable to process her trauma. Now, she no longer faces having to talk Tara through all the traumatic experiences. Instead, she can explain her reaction to it in relation to Vanessa. Her and Paddy's experiences in Ireland became a secret. The trauma was passed on to Vanessa and Tara without their knowledge of the issue or its origin. In her study of childhood adversity *Supernormal*, psychologist Meg Jay has explained that a lack of understanding can lead to an inability to discuss the trauma,

> All day, every day our ordinary moments link up with words and categories we already know. This is how we talk about what we see.
> Sometimes, though, things happen and we do not have the words or categories to match them. We have experiences we cannot name, and naming can be especially difficult for children who have lived less of life and who have fewer words at their disposal. In moments like these, children need others to help them articulate their reality. Otherwise, they are left with a sort of alexithymia, or the inability to put feelings and experiences into words. (44)

Hager portrays the McClusky girls experiencing a life shaped by their parents' trauma, which is never acknowledged. They feel the impact, but never learn why they are feeling the way they do. The parents were isolated. For them, returning to Ireland was not an option. And they did, of course, take themselves and their memories of the conflicts in Ireland as well as the personal trauma with them and found themselves in a foreign place with a child, Vanessa, who was the result of a rape. Hager's is a universal story exploring the struggles of growing up; trying to determine one's identity within the collective and developing an individual personality. As such, it is a coming-of-age narrative.

Throughout her novel, Hager presents to the reader different characters who illustrate the choices Tara has. These characters serve as potential models for Tara. She could take the same path as her sister Vanessa and choose suicide. The relationship with her parents is similarly tense as the one between Vanessa and her parents was just before her death, and Tara recognises these parallels but discovers at the last minute that she *is not* her sister. Johannes offers a different option. He initially follows the expectations of his mother, but later has a change of heart and pursues his own interests instead. Max and Shanaye model to Tara that it is possible

to discuss trauma and also to understand other people's perspectives through engagement in conversation. Tara does not experience this in her family where such issues are silenced. Through these two quasi-parents she gets exposed to a different model.

The exposure to different role models helps Tara develop a new sense of identity. Initially, Tara is defined by what is being done to her. She is passive. She complains. Towards the end, Tara is actively making decisions that contribute to her wellbeing. Tara has learnt that she can make these choices and that her identity also depends on whom she chooses to interact with and how. In their monograph *Tūrangawaewae: Identity and Belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand*, New Zealand researchers and lecturers Trudie Cain et al. point out that "An important part of appreciating that identity is social – something that occurs between people – is understanding that identities are socially constructed, fluid and dynamic" (14). They go on to explain that how someone experiences being themselves depends on their social context, and it might change. Tara is isolated at the beginning. She has frustrating interactions with her distant mother; she communicates with her dead sister and with Vincent van Gogh through letters; her father cannot speak. Later, she is surrounded by supportive adults and friends. Her interactions change from being mostly one-directional to interaction and discussion. Her OE and the practice of making decisions for herself give her self-confidence so that she feels no longer at the mercy of others.

Tara initially seems to have internalised her sister's voice. In internal monologues she tries to make sense of her sister's decision and the process that she went through to reach the conclusion to suicide. She seeks solace in communicating with van Gogh, who, like Van, is dead and cannot offer any actual advice or support. Instead he exists as a name, whom she can share the thoughts with that no-one else in her life will listen to; or at least that is what she thinks. Engaging with van Gogh is also much easier than engaging with real people. She has read his letters to his brother Theo. She knows how he has described his situation. This makes him a suitable addressee for the letters she never sends because it gives her a level of control that she misses in her life.

With this, Hager illustrates one of the two coping strategies Tara uses. She writes because she seeks answers that she cannot get from her sister anymore. Painting is another strategy Tara uses. She paints her sister and her mother how she sees them. She uses the techniques that van

Gogh has employed and that he was famous for. There is a sense that this may be overemphasised in the novel because Tara's skills are conveyed to be exceptional. In his review "Wearing their Ethics on their Sleeves", Jack Ross comments,

> One of my problems with Tara is the repeated insistence on how *good* she is at art, how extraordinarily talented – to the extent that the university lecturer her high school teacher shows her pictures to wants to admit her into their programme at once without further formalities! […] I wonder if it might come across as an implication that *unless* you're supernaturally gifted in some field, your life cannot be seen to be especially worthwhile. (Ross)

One must wonder if a less talented character would have received similar support. It does nonetheless indicate that Tara expresses her feelings through writing and painting while she does not have the skills to articulate her thoughts and feelings. She only recognises much later that she subconsciously uses these activities to alleviate stress.

Max is the first character to discuss with Tara the impact the past can have on the present. His is a voice of reason and wisdom early on. Without telling Tara directly what to do and what to think, he provides her with the insights he has gained over the course of his life,

> "All I am trying to say is look below the surface, Tara. We're all the product of our upbringings, the gifts as well as pain. Some people choose to fight the difficulties head on […] while the weaker of us run away."
> "[…] all life is suffering. One way or the other, damage attaches to us all. In the end it's how we deal with it – or don't – that makes us who we are. Now, we can let it poison us, and through us the ones we love, or we can grow from it. The choice is ours." (115)

Max'[s] comments remain unspecific as to who he is talking about. However, the mature reader can see that his observation applies to Tara's parents who let their own trauma poison their loved ones, their children. He is also talking about Tara, who at this point in the novel, still takes a very passive stance in dealing with her situation and trauma. His comments suggest that she can choose to deal with the problems head on, or she can choose to suffer through [it them] passively. Max makes these options explicit to her. He encourages her to take an active role rather than submit[ting cut] to self-pity. He refrains, however, from telling her exactly what to do.

The relationship that seems to have the greatest reciprocal benefit for the characters involved is the one between Tara and Johannes. They are of similar age and they seem to encourage each other at various points in the novel. Johannes is also Tara's first close friend since the loss of her sister. Tara envies Johannes initially for his relatively ordered live and his focus on his studies; later she discovers that he is neither as happy, nor as interested in his study as it seemed initially. He explains that he made his decisions based on what he thought his mother and grandfather expected of him. It was not until he witnessed Tara standing up for herself in a conflict with Kathleen, that he realised he could stand his ground, too. This illustrates two things for Tara. First, not everyone who seems to have their life under control is happy with how things are going. Second, Johannes's realisation shows that she can change the elements in her life that she cares about. This is a valuable model for Tara, because at this point, she is still uncertain about her idea of going to Ireland to resolve her grief.

During adolescence, friends become more important than family as the support system for teenagers. Johannes is an example of that:] he listens and encourages. He asks questions; he articulates strengths that Tara does not notice about herself. He is patient but persistent in persuading her to try what he thinks will make her feel better. At the same time, he is not prioritising Tara over his own ambitions. While he keeps in touch and he cares, he still aims to make changes in his life and goes ahead. He illustrates how to be a good friend. He helps her when she is drunk. He does not judge her, but he also jokes about the incident afterwards. Tara finds comfort and support in Johannes' attention.

The characters also demonstrate how resilience is developed and nurtured. It is not only Tara who finds a new identity. Her mother Kathleen also must redefine who she is, which illustrates to the reader that the process of identity formation is ongoing. Max provides a model of reflection, while Johannes illustrates that choices once made can be retracted in search of a better option. Alongside the development of her characters and the different models for Tara, Hager also includes quotations from letters exchanged between van Gogh and his brother. One of these quotations precedes each chapter foreshadowing a struggle that Tara might face over the next few pages. Chapter 15, where Tara contemplates taking her own life, only changing her mind an the last minute, is preceded by, "*I don't feel I have strength enough left to go on like this*

for long… I am going to pieces and killing myself" (218). The close connection to this artist who lived centuries earlier, and also died by suicide, indicates that Tara's and Van's struggles are more common than they might feel to the individual experiencing them at the time. Tara and van Gogh share a love of art and have turned it into a coping strategy, if a very grand one, to deal with pressures in their lives. In this way, van Gogh becomes another model for Tara to learn from.

Through Kathleen's actions, Hager shows what Max has already explained to Tara: everyone is the product of their upbringing and their experiences. Once she learns of Kathleen's past, Tara gains a much deeper understanding of her parents' relationship and begins to appreciate that Paddy saved not only Kathleen's life but also Vanessa's. He also gave up living in his beloved home country to allow Kathleen to stay alive. Claudia Bell observes that "The OE has resonances in its recapitulation of ancestors' journeys. Family history for all New Zealanders necessarily starts with a travel story" (151). However, it is not just the journey Tara learns about. She, for the first time, appreciates that her parents' move was one with no return option. Her mother's story models to Tara that there may be life circumstances that determine decisions in ways that are less obvious. Kathleen does not approve of her daughter's extreme reactions and constant attacks. She also views Tara as selfish and melodramatic. Upon learning her parents' story, Tara realises that her struggles do not compare to the struggles Paddy and Kathleen have experienced.

Max and Shanaye serve as mentors in a more traditional sense. They are literally the older people, a father and mother figure who Tara looks up to at a time when both of her parents are lacking the ability or composure to be mentors. Max's experience of the holocaust and migration mirrors the trauma of Kathleen and Paddy. He urges Tara to wait and see, to try and understand. Shanaye does the same when Tara is, literally and figuratively, painting her parents as plain evil. She also provides a different example of dealing with trauma and loss. Shanaye provides information, caring words and physical contact in the form of hugs. Her way of dealing with the terror in her life is through love and kindness towards the people in her life. Both Max and Shanaye offer examples of caring for someone whom you still might disagree with or find overly dramatic. They both independently explain historic context to Tara. In that way they show that a more measured and mature response to someone as opinionated and dismissive as Tara is possible and can be successful. Sandy and Bella, the school counsellor and the Art teacher, reinforce the importance

of non-parental adults in the process of identity formation of teenagers. Initially, both are trying to pressure Tara to attend school more regularly. Once they learn of the trauma in Tara's life, they change to a supportive tone immediately. This illustrates that help might be available from people least expected. Sandy is the first to support Tara in Chapter 9,

> "I think I need to see the place Van died," I blurt.
> "Somehow get to Ireland."
> […]
> "Actually, […], I think that is probably a really good idea. […] Have you someone you could go with? Or someone you can stay with while you are there?" (135)

Tara sees this as a way to achieve a sense of closure. When the thought first crosses her mind, however, she perceives it as unachievable because of the financial struggle. She also doubts that her mother will let her go. Johannes, Max, Sandy and Bella keep encouraging her to go. This moment, halfway through the novel, marks a turning point for Tara. So far, her idea of going had been hypothetical.

Sandy's questions prompt Tara to think about the feasibility of a trip. Her instinctive desire begins to transform into a goal with a plan to achieve it. Sandy also supports her in communicating this desire to her mother during a mediated conversation (151). In Chapter 11, Johannes urges her again, "'You should definitely go'" (162), and he helps facilitate the initial phone contact between Tara and her relatives in Ireland. Kathleen, while seeming reluctant, makes the funds available to her daughter, under one condition, "'Make sure that the flights are flexible. If you want to come home quickly you need to know you can'" (170). Hager illustrates the slow process of major decision-making and the complexities involved in transforming an idea into a plan. In these instances, Tara does have a strong support network of people who want to help her overcome her trauma. Tara herself only acknowledges and appreciates this group of people much later.

The conversations between Tara, Sandy and Kathleen shows one source of teenage conflict with parents and underlines the need for Tara to separate herself more strongly from her mother. She is determined to 'win' this particular argument, "I refuse to budge before Mum does. I'm over being the mat that she wipes her dirty feet on" (150). It is in this conversation that Tara has the first realisation about the relationship between her and her mother. "I'm exhausted, reeling from a battle I could never win. This is goodbye to Mum. Why keep wishing for some sign of love when

she has none to give. […] *None for me"* (153). Even before Tara has confirmation that she will be going to Ireland, she identifies this moment as a sharp separation from her mother that cannot be undone. The break and increased distance between mother and daughter are reiterated when they say their final goodbyes before Tara departs to Ireland,

> She pats my back three times, then shrugs me off. […]
> This really is goodbye. I won't be coming home to her. I see that now. I kiss Dad's dry forehead, trying not to gag at his stale breath, and stand for a moment longer by his bed, in case she has some regret. She doesn't speak or move.
> *Okay. That's it*. "Bye then." (187)

Hager portrays how ambivalent Tara is when it comes to her parents. She longs for their love and despises their actions. In the case of her father, she also feels disgust towards the vegetative state of his body, but, like any child's, her love for her parents has a degree of unconditionality, which is why she cannot help but long for her mother's attention and approval. This scene demonstrates that teenagers distancing themselves from their parents still remain affectionate and in need of love. Tara is aware that their relationship will be different when she returns. Leaving to go to Ireland despite her mother's initial resistance was a first step towards the greater independence associated with an OE. She gains awareness of her own agency.

Paradoxically, Tara begins to see her parents more clearly when she is most physically and geographically distant from them. This is in line with Claudia Bell's observations about the OE,

> Once away, the young New Zealander stops being an insider in a taken-for granted culture, and becomes an outsider somewhere else. […] A huge world of options and experiences has suddenly opened. During their absence they also develop an 'outsider' view of New Zealand. They can now claim far larger vision that those who stayed at home. (147)

In Ireland, Tara has opportunity to examine her role within the family as travellers can examine their position as New Zealanders in the world. Overseas, Tara can listen to Shanaye. With her, Tara also has the conversations she was unable to have with her mother. Here, she can ask questions about Van that no one else was prepared to answer. When Tara defaults to accusing and blaming her parents for not looking after Van, Shanaye also reinforces what Max has told her months ago, "'Life is never that straightforward, pet'" (207). Through their conversations, Tara engages in the grieving process. She begins to shape a new perception of her parents. Tara's aunt has the traits that Tara misses in her mother. She has enough distance to be able to discuss the

rape, pregnancy and unhappy marriage of her sister-in-law. As a character, she is crafted to provide the conversation that Tara should have with her mother. Shanaye tells her the harsh truth while providing comforting hugs at the same time, "She coaxes me back to my feet. Uncoils me. Envelops me. *This* is how a mother's embrace should feel" (209). She is the first female character to listen to Tara.

Upon reflection, Tara understands a comment made by her mother,

> A random comment Mum hurled at Van after Dad's stroke jumps out at me. They'd been arguing over Van's refusal to sit with Dad.
> "Why should I?" Van shouted as the argument caught fire. "You know he doesn't want me here."
> "Listen, missy, you wouldn't be here if it weren't for him." At the time I'd put it down to emotional blackmail: Dad was in Van's DNA. Now it all falls into place. (213-4)

In Ireland, Tara is finally able to infer what her mother was referring to all those years ago. Both Kathleen and Paddy treated the rape, Billy's death, and Kathleen's suicide attempt as taboo. These became a deafening silence in their family. As explained in the monograph *Haunting Legacies* by Gabrielle Schwab, children receive the trauma, but are unaware of the causes. She discusses this in the context of the Holocaust and similar observations can be made in relation to Kathleen's and Paddy's trauma and loss before they emigrate to New Zealand,

> Children who are transgenerational recipients of the trauma of the Holocaust are haunted by a death […] they did not directly experience. The experience of death comes to them secondhand, so to speak, through its effects on the parents. It comes in the form of moods, or emotions, taking on many shapes, including grief and anxiety, hypervigilance or numbness, emotional unavailability or uncontrolled rage. […] Commonly parents are supposed to function as protective shields against trauma on their children. Traumatised parents instead tend to pass their trauma on to their children. (125)

In Tara's case, this means she has no way of beginning to process her experience. She seeks the reasons for her parents' behaviour and poor treatment within herself and within her parents, when the actual trigger lies far beyond their control. She did not initially know that her sister's death is not the only suicide or suicide attempt that her parents have lived through. Without this knowledge, she in incapable of sympathising. She simply cannot know any better. As Schwab explains, parents enter an unspoken agreement to remain silent, to never mention the events that caused the trauma,

> Even though [the child] will not know the family secret for many years, it nonetheless generates distance and loneliness because [they] apprehend that there is something in their [parents'] strong reaction that is withheld from them, something unspeakable between them. Family secrets always create distance and loneliness. […] The family enters a pact of silence, all of them knowing more than they are willing to acknowledge. From that moment on, they will relate to one another through the veil of a tacit and uncanny knowledge, covering the unspeakable death of [a family member] that cannot be properly mourned. The family secret silences the entire violent and traumatic history. (129)

In Tara's family, there are many traumatic incidents and they have all been silenced. Tara's parents, if at all, can only be accused of not sharing the information and not actively engaging in their own reflection and grieving process. Hager strikes a balance between Tara understanding her parents and how their experiences have affected them and her and Vanessa, but not necessarily approving of all their actions.

Structurally, the novel is geared towards Tara's enlightenment in Europe. A shift in her perspective as well as a broadening of her horizon eventually allow her to see beyond what is right in front of her, beyond her own art and her own family. Once she is aware that she has been affected by the trauma of her parents, she can fully engage in a process of reflection herself. Witnessing her aunt cry also helps as, for the first time, she sees an adult expressing emotions to model that this is a *real* struggle and that it is reasonable to actively grapple with it for some time, "Shanaye […] drops her head into her hands and sobs for real. I pat her back, too shocked and sick to cry myself. Poor Van. How do you live with that?" (213). Initially, Tara's concern here is still for her sister. She has internalised Van's voice as her thoughts, which Hager indicates in italics. Her internal voice is quick to provide the answer to her question,

> *Come on, Miss T, you know the answer right enough: You don't. Impossible, when every time they look at you they see those rapists looking back…*
> […]
> Can't think how all this screwed up Mum. Horror for her tangles with my anger. She still bloody punished Van for something outside her control. (213)

Tara's feelings and attitude towards her parents, particularly her mother, become more complex. While it is confusing to her, she can tolerate and process both feelings at the same time. Tara discovers that her parents had a life before they became parents and that this life has significantly impacted on who they were *as* parents.

Before Shanaye reveals the rape, she prepares Tara and explains the general context everyone lived in. She also makes explicit the coping strategy that was used by most people,

> "You have to understand the kind of pressure we lived under: we were all raised dodging bullets and bombs. It does your head in – that kind of fear and horror never goes away."
> […]
>
> "The only way to survive that kind of constant terror is to shut it out. "(211)

Tara's parents had experienced a life of terror and their way of dealing with this was to push it aside. Naturally, they selected the same coping strategy to deal with the rape of Kathleen and suicide of Billy; however, Van served as a daily visual and physical reminder of the past, which made this an impossible coping mechanism. As Shanaye explains this strategy, Tara realises that practising art is her way of dealing with the pressures and terror in her life, "'That's why I paint.' *Is it*? My god. I suppose it is" (211). The reader can see that Tara has been using painting as a coping strategy all along. She has painted an image of her sister straight after she learned of her suicide. Van occupied her thoughts at the time and van Gogh's and Van's voices compete in her mind (178). She has also painted her mother as the Medusa during their falling out, the way she saw her at the time. Her behaviour resonates with Meg Jay's analysis of people engaging in absorbing and stress-reducing activities,

> Any absorbing activity involves a kind of selective attention – or selective *inattention* – a shifting of focus that allows us to narrow our experience and to shut out awareness of small stressors or even grievous misdeeds. While such activities sound like escapism, the mind strays from the here and now as much as 50 percent of our waking hours, suggesting that these distancing maneuvers serve some important survival functions. Indeed, researchers have found that absorbing tasks and preoccupations can be quite positive: they reduce stress, preserve feelings of safety and control, restore a neutral mode after bad things happen and sometimes result in a feeling of 'flow.' (84)

It is at this point that she begins to understand more about herself and her engagement with art, an understanding that is set to grow over the following couple of chapters before Tara is capable of articulating what art means to her.

First, for a brief heart-stopping moment, Tara considers suicide. The novel seems to lead towards her choosing the same fate as Van. It is at the last minute that Tara realises that she is *not* Van

and that she can choose differently. Her eyes are now also opened to all the support she has received and all the people who have tried to look after her,

> All Van's efforts to buffer me would've been wasted if I'd carried out my plan. And Royan – hauled in by the police to identify another godforsaken niece – and poor loving Shanaye – *and* all the trust May has put in me. God, even Ms Romano and Sandy would've felt betrayed. *You promised you'd seek help.* (236)

From a largely self-centered teenager, she develops into a young woman who can acknowledge that she too has a role to play in looking after people and that she too would cause incredible pain if she followed her first impulse. Instead, Tara takes the time to reflect and learn more about the circumstances of her parents' migration to New Zealand and how this affected her father. As Shanaye recalls,

> "Billy's death really knocked him arseways. Before then he'd cheesed off right enough always scrappin', but after Billy died he went real quiet, never laughed. I think the hate just got to him, and poor Kathleen was hurting too. Someone should've stopped them. Everybody knew it was a bad idea."
> "Do you think he loved Mum at all?"
> "Too right he did. Everyone loved Kathleen. But she was Billy's girl."
> "Was it his idea to emigrate?["]
> "Kathleen was desperate to get away. He agreed for her sake or else he never would've gone. Leaving Ireland broke his heart."
> I think about the nights he'd tuck into the booze with his few mates from 'home'. How they would sing old songs, make us recite, and reminisce. It was the only time he'd really come alive. […] Now it seems he, too, has a fine old list of hurt and loss to complicate my feelings for him. Especially when you add the fact that he did his best to rescue Mum. (237-8)

Tara can now articulate that her feelings for her father are more complicated than they used to be. In understanding him, she needs to consider how he came to be who he is now. This is much less straightforward than simply despising him for his behaviour towards Van. She understands that her father gave up his beloved life and home to save her mother, which ultimately also led to Tara's life.

Her new insight and appreciation for her parents' situation is also reflected in her bird's eye perspective over Paris,

> From the viewing deck the city reveals itself: stone buildings laid out in the medieval grids around the river, with strategic roads and parks. We're nestled in the fraying clouds, the

> world below reduced. I take photo after photo, soaking in the novelty of this bird's-eye view. (254)

Like the medieval plans that still shape the skeleton of Paris, Tara's family's past still shapes her present. She reaches a new understanding of herself and her family like travellers reach a new understanding of themselves and New Zealand. Bell describes this transformation, "But what permeates the everyday is not just the new knowledge of new places, but a new consciousness of New Zealand. […] For a New Zealander with British or European heritage, the OE helps the individual understand their own nationhood" (154). It is the understanding of the past that has led to her gaining a bird's eye view of her own family structure and context. It is a new kind of insight that only her OE could have given her. Her OE is characterised by periods of introspection which are at the core of this identity-defining trip, an experience that shapes her character for the future, and allows her to see herself in the bigger context of her world, rather than as the centre of the universe.

Initially, Tara is set up as the poor, misunderstood, but very talented apprentice-artist, and for a large part of the novel, painting and letter writing seem to be the only activities through which Tara can find solace. It is not until later that Hager diverts from this path and indicates that Tara has a more active role to play in shaping her own life. With that the novel can be linked to the Künstlerroman. In her monograph *Waking Sleeping Beauty: Feminist Voices in Children's Novels*, Trites explains, "As a specialised form of the *Bildungsroman*, the *Künstlerroman* is a novel of development, but the development deals specifically with the growth of the artist" (64). Through her strong connection with van Gogh, Tara is set up as the artist. Art is her way of expressing her emotions which she is unable to articulate yet. At the same time, both her writing and painting have a reflective element and ultimately contribute to her growing independence. Trites explains the genre further, "another convention of the feminist *Künstlerroman* […] is a disruption of her (the female protagonist's) home life that causes her great grief" (66). This is true for *Dear Vincent* as well: Tara's homelife is already anything but enjoyable, but it is learning of her sister's suicide and the discovery of her parents' lies about Van's death that shock her and lead to additional tensions. In that sense, *Dear Vincent* fits into the tradition of the *Künstlerroman*. The reader understands that Tara has been painting and writing for a while already, but both artistic

expressions gain additional relevance as she engages in the process of separation from her parents and moves towards personal growth.

Dear Vincent can be viewed as a modern and feminist *Künstlerroman* in the sense that Tara continues to pursue and develop her art after she has gained insight and understanding of her family. Trites explains,

> The feminist children's *Künstlerroman* modifies the paradigmatic endings of the (adult) male, the (adult) female, and the children's *Künstlerroman*. As in the typical children's *Künstlerroman*, the feminist protagonist reconciles herself with her community, but with this significant difference: she insists on maintaining her primary identity as a writer [and, in Tara's case, painter], as the protagonist of a traditional male *Künstlerroman* does and as the protagonist of a traditional female *Künstlerroman* does not. (69)

Tara retains her interest in art, and she continues to produce art as well. Interestingly, from its beginning, OE has been perceived as particularly important for artists. As Bell explains,

> In the 1920s and 1930s a trip to Europe was considered a cultural necessity for artists and writers.
> […]
> Indeed, it was considered that a nice middle class girl needed such a trip as a sign of sophistication and world experience, to redress the sense of cultural un-sophistication of New Zealand. (148)

After spending time with her aunt and uncle in Ireland, Tara meets Johannes in Paris and the pair visit the Musée d'Orsay to see the Van Gogh exhibition. While she did not start her trip with the intention of experiencing van Gogh's art at the museum, she still goes to see it, and with that, mirrors the artists and writers Bell is referring to. She describes her experience in the dramatic fashion readers are now used to,

> I still can't speak. I tow Johannes from picture to picture, bending in as close as I'm allowed to study how the paint squirms in the frames. I'm floating above the floor, swept by a pure sense of transcendent joy.
> I spread my arms, encompassing this whole bloody extraordinary collection, and raise them above my head in exaltation. Spin around, the colours flashing past in vibrant bursts. I'm Julie Andrews, arms aloft, running free and barefoot in Max's Alps. Celebrating the sound of music that springs out of the glory of Vincent's world.
> I'm home. (252)

This sense of being at home around the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh highlights to the reader that Tara remains an artist and that she will continue to pursue her art in the future. Readers are bound to find her behaviour of spinning around in dance-like pirouettes in a public space like an art gallery slightly unusual. This, however, is an expression of her newfound confidence and self-assurance that has grown out of her learning of her past, her family's trauma and her position within it all. Here, surrounded by van Gogh's art, she feels at peace.

Painting and her "conversation" with van Gogh through her letters have been an integral part of her coping. Now that she has solved most of the mystery around her family, she can truly immerse herself in his art. She has been to the dark place of contemplating suicide and she appreciates being surrounded by the original works of the artist she has studied at home. This mirrors the experience Hager describes in the author's note at the end of the novel,

> I once lost someone I loved very much to suicide. And I have friends who've suffered this totally devastating loss as well. It causes hurt in people's lives that never fully goes away. Suicide does not just destroy one life; it's a tidal wave that sweeps up everyone on its path. There's nothing remotely glamorous, mysterious, logical or inevitable about killing yourself. It's a brutal and cruel end for everyone and the damage permeates for years and years. No one wins from it. […]
> I understand the suicidal desire to escape problems; to take the pain away. I have been to that dark place. But I am so incredibly grateful now that, at the last minute, I asked for help. […]
> By the time that doomed thinking was gone for good, I'd grown and changed, and life has continued to get better and better ever since. If I'd given in to suicide's call, I never would've seen my children grow to wonderful adults, my name on a book cover, or the Van Gogh paintings in the Musée d'Orsay! (272-3)

Through Tara, Hager illustrates that there is something after the struggle that is worth living for, that suicide affects more than just the person considering it and that there is help out there. Tara's experience in Paris suggests that a sense of belonging and connection may be felt in the least expected places and does not have to be associated with a place at all, but can be achieved by being with the people one loves or surrounded by items of great personal value. She shares this experience with Johannes, who is the first one to hear the details about her contemplation of suicide when she visited the site of Van's death on the night of the fifth anniversary of her death,

> "That makes no sense."
> "Jesus, you think I don't know that now? But you have no idea how seductive it seemed that night. I was convinced everyone would be better off. That was my destiny. Me, Van, Vincent, Billy…"
> He makes a grab for both my hands. "Don't you ever, ever pull a bloody stupid stunt like that again. You'd kill me too." (245-6)

The conversation between the characters models what Hager makes explicit in the author's note quoted above. Suicide affects the whole social circle and network of a person. Tara is now capable of sharing her suicidal thoughts with Johannes shortly after she has experienced them. This distinguishes her from her sister, her mother and her father. Their silence around the topic has been deafening and suffocated their family's relationships in the process. In her author's note, Hager further urges readers, "If such thoughts are in your head, take a big deep breath and ask for help RIGHT NOW. And, if necessary, ask again, until you find someone who hears and offers a helping hand" (273). This makes the point that sharing your struggles will allow others to help.

A phone call cuts their time spent in Paris short. When Tara learns that her father is likely to die within days, she chooses to return to New Zealand. She is a more mature young woman. When confronted with Brendon, her mother's boyfriend, her inner voice, now her own, urges her, "*Come on. Time to start acting like a grown up*" (258). She begins to engage with both him and her mother on a more mature level. Instead of seeking fights she is seeking further explanations to her questions. Instead of wondering about the reasons for her sister's suicide and her parents' poor treatment of them, she is trying to understand the underlying motivation of their actions, inactions and silence, "'Why didn't you ever say anything? It might have helped.' […] 'Why do you have to turn everything into a bloody drama? What's the good of looking back?'" (260). Kathleen assumes she is confronted with the same Tara. However, Tara has changed and is genuinely looking for conversation and explanation. Where previously the conflict would have escalated, Tara remains calm and explains what she needs,

> "It would've helped me, Mum. And Van."
> Her eyes meet mine, transmitting disbelief. "Helped? Look what your sister did when she found out."
> "Still I'm guessing, like, me, it broke her heart. For you, Mum. For what you had to endure."
> The stoniness she's trying to maintain is cracking round the edges, her chin wobbling with the strain. "She didn't kill herself from shame. She died from lack of love. The people she

> loved the most rejected her – saw her as Devil's spawn." The phrase comes out of nowhere and I see it slam into Mum. But she has to hear. For Van. (261)

At her father's funeral, Tara takes the opportunity to create public and explicit closure on her sister's death. In that moment, the quest structure Hager has integrated in her novel reaches closure. It is only once she is back home and she learns the final details from her mother, that she can say goodbye to both her father and sister. As New Zealanders experience at the end of their OE, this moment marks the end of her previous identity as Paddy's primary carer. Both Tara and Kathleen now can create new identities for themselves,

> I lie awake and think about the past few years, how every moment of our lives revolved around Dad's needs. It's going to take some time to adjust to the fact that he's gone. And not just missing in action, really gone. No longer festering in the corner. No longer tracking my every move with resentful eyes. Gone like Van is gone. (266)

While Tara's future may be uncertain, it looks brighter than her past. Her quest has led her to greater self-knowledge and more independence. She will no longer be under the watchful and often accusing eyes of her father and she has separated herself enough from her mother to lead her own life.

Hager closes her novel with a growing sense of understanding between Tara and Kathleen: for example, when Kathleen joins Tara and bids farewell to Van at Paddy's funeral, "'Actually, our Tara is right. It's time to bid them both farewell. They'll be forever in our hearts'" (269), but resists presenting them as reunited and in complete accord. Instead she illustrates the adolescent search for distance and separation from parents with the continued need for love and acknowledgement on the child's side. With Paddy's death towards the end of the novel, the energy and life-sucking silent force disappears from their lives, and both mother and daughter can redefine who they are and who they want to be when they cease to be primary carer and primary bread-winner. It is here that Hager lets her characters go and leaves the reader to imagine what they will make of this opportunity.

Hager constructs a variety of parallels that underpin her novel and encourage the reader to make comparisons. She depicts strong sibling bonds between Tara and Van, Vincent and Theo, and Billy and Paddy. Each sibling pair has lost one person to suicide and eventually this becomes what unites them all. The struggle of the surviving sibling is illustrated by Paddy and Tara, while the

struggle of the suiciding siblings is shown through van Gogh and Van. Upon seeing her father for the last time, Tara gains a greater understanding of her father's position and she acknowledges that they share some experiences,

> For a long time I just watch him, until I have formulated my last goodbyes. "I love you, Dad. I think I understand what made you like you were. Thank you for looking after Mum." *I wish you'd done the same for Van.* I want to say I forgive him but the words won't come. Not yet. It's still too raw. But understanding is a decent place to start. Max would be proud.
> […]
> "Goodbye Daddy, "I whisper, "you can go join Billy now." It is only as I say this I realise that we've both lost siblings to suicide. There is a lesson here, when I can figure it out. (264)

The extract illustrates Tara's increased maturity in two different ways: she shows empathy by being able to put herself in both her father's and Max's position, when she acknowledges that she can understand Paddy's behaviour better now and when she reflects what Max would comment on her thoughts if they were to discuss them, and she has understood that learning and understanding can take time. In the passage, Tara mentions that there is a lesson that can be learned from the experience she shared with her father, but she has not yet worked out what exactly the lesson is. Compared to the start of the book, Tara is now more comfortable and capable of sitting in a situation where she does not know and she has developed the ability to recognise when she has not quite worked something out yet. The distance from her parents during her OE-like experience in Ireland has allowed her to reconsider her earlier judgements and interpretations of her parents' behaviour. She ponders what Paddy's life might have been like if he had been born in New Zealand,

> What would he have been like if he'd been born here? Or if he'd loved Van for the girl she was instead of the embodiment of all his hate? Did he love me? I suppose he must have. Just had no skills to express it. The dream of doing up our rotten house was probably his attempt to put things right for all of us. (266)

Tara's reflections highlight one of the main challenges the family faced: their inability to articulate their struggles. The silence about their past and about Vanessa became deafening and physically manifested in the literal mutism of Paddy in the late stages of his life. Where he chose not to talk about the traumatic experiences early in his life, he was unable to speak later in life and instead became a character whose presence and accusations loomed over Kathleen and Tara. Once Tara

and Kathleen learn to articulate their struggles and concerns, they realise that this is a way to overcome them.

The last parallel that Hager draws is based on age. Significant events seem to happen to her characters when they are 17. Kathleen was 17 when Billy died. Vanessa was 17 when she suicided, Max was 17 when he witnessed the Jew being beaten up, Tara is 17 when she visits the site of her sister's suicide. The imagined reader is also likely around 17. It seems striking that all these characters were just under 18, when they experienced their respective trauma. It is an age of 'not yet' and 'not anymore'. Legally in New Zealand, 17-year-olds are not adults yet, they cannot vote or drink independently. Since they turned 16, though, they have been able to learn to drive and can engage in consensual sexual relationships. It is a time when teenagers are often asked what they want to do or be when they leave school and a time when pressure is applied to be or do particular things. These, of course, differ depending on who utters them, parents or friends.

Towards the end of the book, Tara regains her own voice as her internal voice. She thinks about having made a choice right for her, not for her sister. Hager ends her novel with a letter from Tara to van Gogh that turns to address Van halfway through. It is here that Tara can finally let go of writing to deceased people because she has gained understanding and confidence,

> *Dear Vincent,*
> *So here we are, about to say goodbye. Like you, I tried on black for size but colour just kept breaking through.*
> *Your words have kept me company; your paintings brought me warmth. You've proved to me that any uniqueness we create lives on – so long as someone chooses to sustain it in their hearts. I'll always love you, just like I'll always love Van. You two are my yin and yan. My Vin and Van. You've saved my life. Helped me find my path among the weeds.*
> As my work is so am I. *I won't forget*.
> *Forever yours,*
> *Miss T (271)*

It is, of course, a letter that Tara writes for herself to say goodbye to her sister but also to say goodbye to a time in her life when she relied on this form of expression to learn to articulate her struggles.

Dear Vincent is a New Zealand version of the universal story and struggle of growing up. Hager reinforce the life-changing nature an OE can have. Her character's OE is a journey that is both directed towards Europe in a literal sense and directed inward in a metaphorical sense. The journey of self-discovery leads Tara physically to Ireland but mentally into the depths of her own personality and into her family's past. As with many New Zealanders on OE, the initial reason to leave and the initial motivation to learn about foreign places and cultures is in the end replaced with an achievement much closer to home: a clearer sense of self and one's place in the world. Tara learns about herself in conversations with Johannes, Max and Shanaye and she learns to see the genuine support she is being offered by Sandy and Bella. By choosing a trauma that is the trigger for migration to New Zealand, Hager has found a way to tell a version of a story many New Zealand families will be able to relate to. Each migrant story is different, each trip "back" to wherever one's family is from is different. But the feeling of belonging, or not-belonging, and the feeling of being understood or not-being-understood is universal to migrant stories. New Zealand is made up of migrant families. Most Pākehās'] roots in New Zealand are younger than 100 years. Teenagers with migrant parents will be able to recognise elements of their family's story in this. Hager uncovers a truth behind the OE myth: what begins as a quest to learn more about the world leads to development of a sense of self. She illustrates that this path may well lead via places least expected.

Another version of the same old story? – New Zealand's Egalitarian Myth in *Bugs* by Whiti Hereaka

In this chapter I aim to explore the myth of New Zealand as an egalitarian society with equal opportunities and outcomes for all. The novel *Bugs* by Whiti Hereaka carefully develops Pākehā characters to be believers, repeaters, and reinforcers of this myth. They have the voice to retell that narrative. Hereaka's Māori characters, and Bugs in particular, are aware that the myth holds little or no connection to reality. They, however, do not have the voice or the power to change the narrative. In his chapter "We're all equal here, mate: Egalitarianism in Aotearoa New Zealand" published in *Tūrangawaewae: Identity and Belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand*, David Littlewood addresses this national myth of true equality, "Some commentators assert that the whole notion of an egalitarian New Zealand has always been more of a myth than a lived experience" (220-221). His observation indicates that the myth is a desirable ideal to hold up, and maybe strive for, but that it is not actually in existence in New Zealand, nor has it ever been. As a national narrative, though, it remains a powerful one. Who would not want to live in a country that offers equal opportunities to everyone? As will be discussed here, it is not just about equal opportunities. It is more equal *outcomes* across society that matter the most. Of course, the danger with a myth like this one is that it silences voices that would question or criticise it. It is only when society begins to investigate it that it can change. Hereaka adds to a growing body of New Zealand fiction that addresses imbalances in equality that fall along racial lines.

Bugs is set in Taupō. The three protagonists Bugs, Jez and Charmaine are Year 12 students at the same secondary school. Both Bugs and Jez are Māori, while Charmaine and her family are Pākehā. Readers are introduced to Bugs first, who ponders her name, Bugs, a nickname. We learn early on that Bugs is well-read; she refers to dystopian classics *Brave New World* and *1984* (2) and articulately draws parallels between these dystopian novels and her own life. Her narrative voice can be described as sharp, critical and observant. Jez is Bugs's best friend. Pākehā character Charmaine "Stone Cold" Fox is the new girl in town. The pair introduced at the start becomes a friendship triangle. Through interactions between the three protagonists and minor characters, Hereaka exposes the myth of New Zealand as an egalitarian society. She uncovers institutional

racism in schools and makes explicit whose history and heritage is valued and whose are not. She also explores the differences in opportunities available to the characters because of their race and class. With subtle observations and the interior monologue of the narrator Bugs, Hereaka points out differences that mark a wider power imbalance. What Charmaine has in wealth, Bugs has in family support. Jez lacks both.

As Year 12 students, Bugs, Jez and Charmaine find themselves at a crossroads of having to make choices that will affect their future lives and opportunities. Jez's formal education looks to end as he considers leaving school; Bugs on the other hand has her eyes set on going to university; but instead of prioritising subjects that will give her University Entrance, she finds herself drawn to subjects like Driver's Education because she knows supporting her to get her license will be a struggle for her family. Charmaine, on the other hand, pays very little attention to her subject or future choices. As far as she is concerned, she will go to university anyway. It is what her parents want for her and, because she is Pākehā and her parents are comparatively wealthy, the reader understands that she will be protected by her privilege no matter what choices she makes.

Bugs's willpower and attitude are challenged when Charmaine and Jez decide to leave to go to Auckland at the end of the novel. The reader knows that Charmaine's parents will step in to support her if her move to Auckland is unsuccessful or if she gets in trouble. Jez will not be able to access the same level of support. The choices Bugs makes are informed by her mother's and particularly her uncle's guidance who both wish for her to be better off than they have been. To achieve this, Bugs must succeed in a system designed for Pākehā. She needs to work out how she, as a Māori teen, can succeed in a Pākehā system. There are no role models to show her what succeeding *as* Māori would look like, nor are there mentors at school she can seek advice from; if anything, the interactions she has with school staff reinforce the boundaries she experiences. Bugs decides to stay in Taupō to finish her secondary education. Jez has the least choice and the least support. When he chooses to retaliate for a violent physical attack by tattooing the word "cock" on his stepfather's back, he cuts his ties with Taupō permanently. As the person with the least support, he is also the one who is taking the most drastic step away from home.

When comparing *Dear Vincent* and *Bugs* it becomes apparent that they reflect different versions of New Zealand. One is the story of Pākehā migrants living in the city, while the other presents small-town Māori experiences. Bugs lives in Taupō, a town with only two high schools to choose from. Anyone pursuing higher education leaves to go to a city that has a university. For people who stay, working in the tourism industry is the most promising pathway to vocational success. Most people in Jez's and Bugs's immediate social circle are from a lower socio-economic background and less geographically mobile than families like Charmaine's. The specific location of each protagonist in New Zealand is a factor that influences their day-to-day experience and how many, if any, choices they and those around them have.

Family and whanau relations differ across the two novels. Tara lives with both parents, though only her mother takes an active role in parenting her. Bugs lives with her mother, who is a single parent. The reader learns nothing about Bugs's father. Her whanau, consisting of her grandparents and her uncle, are supportive and involved. The reader learns that all four care deeply for Bugs and are not afraid to take a parenting role in raising her. They love her and are firm with her because of that. All four, her mother, grandparents and uncle, want her to succeed and are prepared to contribute what it takes to ensure her success. While the stories of the novels differ, they share an important similarity: the extended family of the protagonists plays a critical role in supporting them emotionally and helping facilitate successful communication between the young adults and their parents.

In contrast to Tara, Bugs has friends who support her. She and Jez have been friends for a long time and because Jez likes Charmaine, Bugs begins spending time with her, too. Bugs and Jez support and understand each other without needing many words to establish this. Charmaine creates a more complex dynamic in their friendship triangle, but, at its core, the relationship between Bugs and Jez remains strong and supportive. At school, on the other hand, Bugs experiences only a fraction of the support available to Tara. Bugs's Dean discusses her options with her and reveals her lower expectations for Māori students in the conversation,

> "Be like an eel."
> *Slimy and gross?*
> Mrs Lee wiggles her arm like and eel. "Strong, upstream.' […]

> And I wish I was stupid enough not to care about how *offensive* that is, not to even know it's wrong to think it. (102)

Mrs Lee's comment shows she believes Bugs will be swimming against a current if she is to succeed. She knows it will be difficult for Bugs. Bugs, however, misses the point Mrs Lee is trying to make about Bugs facing additional challenges in comparison to pākehā students. Instead Bugs finds the offensive because she interprets that her Dean has low expectations of students like her. In her classes, she feels unchallenged and judged based on negative stereotypes about people like her, Māori. The misunderstanding is a subtle way to indicate that Bugs makes assumptions about her teachers too. She assumes that her teachers are mostly unaware of her wit and ability to think critically and those who have noticed do little to challenge and extend her learning. She is presented as a self-motivated student who seeks her own challenges when those presented at school do not meet her ability.

The protagonists of both novels learn about their parents through conversations with their extended family, an aunt and an uncle. When Bugs's mother punishes her for consuming drugs, her uncle looks after her. With him, she can have a conversation about her mother's past and the opportunities Nikki missed because she chose to have Bugs. Initially, Bugs feels hard done by, but it soon becomes clear that her uncle genuinely cares for her,

> "Other people ask each other 'how are you' and don't really care about the answer, eh? We care, Bugs. You think about that." […]
> "Mum doesn't." […]
> "She wants better for you." […]
> "She's always put you first, so you just think about that." […]
> "What did she want to be?" I don't look at Uncle, just face straight ahead. He doesn't look at me; not because he's grumpy – well not *just* because he's grumpy – but because he's driving. "Before me, what did Mum want to be?"
> "I don't know. I don't think she knew, because your mum, she could have done anything, eh? Me, it was always going to be the farm. Not just because I'm a man, but because what I am good at has always been this." He moves his hands on the steering wheel so that they are close together, narrow. "One path, eh? But Nikki? She had a whole map; she's good at so many things. She could have gone anywhere."
> "And then I came along and ruined her life."
> "Not ruined." […] "Just changed it."
> We turn down my street and I see what I've limited her to – the route from the hotel to our house and back again, day after day, for seventeen years. I'm worse than a prison sentence: I'm the one stupid decision that cost her the world. I don't know if I'm angry at me or at

her. Because she could have chosen differently; she should have had her life instead of me. (171-2)

Discussing this with her uncle makes the exchange more rational and calmer than any of the conversations she could have with her mother. His gestures on the steering wheel illustrate that his own options were limited, not just by gender expectations but also by his skill sets. Nikki, on the other hand, was talented and hard-working in many areas. Bugs's uncle claims that Nikki has always prioritised Bugs. He is explicit about the potential his sister had and he acknowledges that Bugs's arrival has changed his sister's life. The information her uncle shares leaves Bugs to connect the dots. She begins to consider the life her mother lives and has lived for the last 17 years and compares it with the opportunities and the life she might have had. Hereaka sets up a comparison of choices. Bugs's uncle did not have many options because his skill set was, by his own admission, narrow. Nikki was more broadly talented, and she chose Bugs. This meant she also chose limitations. At the end of the novel, Bugs is confronted with the decision of leaving Taupō or staying to complete her education. She has to weigh up between expanding her opportunities or narrowing them through an unfinished secondary school education. It is the conversation with her uncle that makes her aware of the implications her decision will have. When Charmaine and Jez confront her with the choice, she can fall back on these reflections,

> This is how it happened. This is how I become what they expect. A statistic, not smart enough to pass. Not smart enough to make my own decisions. A car, a boy, one night and everything I hoped for, gone. Those shards of memory of mum sitting there staring at the wall, […]. And she's so young, and so tired. Tired of thinking about the stupid decision that led her here: a car, a boy, one night. And life is unfair, but a child doesn't have to know that, so she leans over me and picks me up, soothes my cries and says to me, *It's alright, you're OK*, because she knows I will be. (238)

Bugs's connection with her uncle lets her make a well-informed and considerate decision. She goes against the expectation of her friends at the risk of losing their respect and their friendship,

> "I can't. […] I can't."[…] "I can't go with you guys.["]
> "But it's just exams."
> "No, they're important."
> Stone Cold accelerates. "They say that, but are they really? You don't have to go back; you don't have to be what they expect of you."
> "It's what I expect of me." (238-9)

Of course, the decision Charmaine makes is very different to the one Bugs faces. Pierre Bourdieu describes social, economic and cultural capital in his essay "The Forms of Capital" (Richardson 241-258) and, as we have seen, Charmaine has enough of all these forms of capital behind her to lead a safe and successful life in the end, even if the mistakes she makes are her own. Bugs, on the other hand, does not have as big a margin for error due to inequality. Though Bugs has next to no economic capital, she has access to social and cultural capital. She learns through the conversation with her uncle. Exchanges like the one quoted earlier illustrate the importance of interactions with non-parental adults for the development of teenagers. It also conveys the influence extended family support can have. This is out of reach for Jez, who will likely struggle with this lack of social and cultural capital on top of very limited economic capital.

Like *Dear Vincent*, *Bugs* is a first-person narrative. Both novels are characterised by imperfect but reliable narrators. As they develop as characters, they also move to convey a more complete narrative. As with Tara, readers warm to Bugs as a narrator. She displays sympathy and witty teenage sarcasm from the start of the novel. While she is reflective, well-read and critical, she still lacks awareness and full understanding of Jez's situation or her mother's choice to have her initially. As the novel progresses, Bugs develops into a more inclusive narrator. Her character gains more detailed awareness of her position in comparison to the other two, Jez and Charmaine.

Both Mandy Hager and Whiti Hereaka use the houses their characters live in as symbols of the inhabitants' struggles or opportunities. Tara describes her family by referring to the house, "My family's disintegration never really centred round the state of our decaying house. That was just the outward manifestation of the rot within" (64). She sees it as the representation of the conflicts and distance that have developed between members of her family. In *Bugs*, Whiti Hereaka uses the description of the houses to illustrate differences in wealth. The buildings her characters inhabit act as markers of social status and an indication of the lack of equality in supposedly egalitarian New Zealand. Jez lives in a flat that readers interpret as council or state housing. His whanau does not own any land or property and the reader can also assume that a large portion of their income is used for rent. Bugs lives in an old, cold and damp house on the outskirts of town. Her mother works hard to pay the bills, but they own the house, which reduces

the expenses they have. Her extended whanau, her uncle and grandparents, own some land outside of Taupō. Property ownership exists across generations in Bugs's family. This puts them into a significantly better position than Jez and his mother. The characters Jez and Bugs also display an acute awareness of their social status, "Jez lives in a flat; he thinks we're pretty well off – Mum has a job and we have our own house" (10). This leaves readers to infer that Jez's mother is unemployed and affording rent is a struggle. According to Bugs, Charmaine's house "[…]*is* a frickin' castle" (10). Bugs and Jez are unsure how to react and how to behave there because they have never been to a place that displays so much wealth. The clash of social circles is evident when Bugs and Jez visit Charmaine's house for the first time,

> "Do … do we take off our shoes?"
> She (Charmaine) looks at him like he's mental or something.
> "No, just come in OK?"
> Jez goes in before me. I'm wiping my feet over and over again on the doormat as if poor will flake off like dried mud.
> "Far…"
> This isn't the kind of place where they'd have scrambled eggs for tea because Pop hasn't killed a beast lately. Bet their meat is wrapped up in plastic on trays. (10)

Both Bugs and Jez are clearly out of their comfort zone upon entering the house. Bugs's internal monologue illustrates that she perceives herself and Jez as 'poor' in comparison and that this social difference is somehow less clean and pristine than the space they are about to enter. She is acutely aware of what she might not know: how to behave like a wealthier person. Bugs shows awareness of social and cultural norms that differ across society. While she does not know how to behave, she is aware that differences exist; Charmaine, on the other hand, is oblivious to such differences. She underappreciates what she has because she sees items that are markers of her wealth to Bugs and Jez as essential. To Bugs and Jez, essentials are food, shelter, and for Jez also personal safety. The common colloquial expression "Far out!" is left as an incomplete exclamation. It expresses the surprise and sense of being overwhelmed that Bugs and Jez experience upon entering a house that displays more wealth than they have ever seen before. A phone, an Xbox or a car are luxuries to them; so are certain types of food. Bugs's family live off the land for meat; Charmaine's purchase all their food from the supermarket.

In *Bugs*, Hereaka criticises the persistent national myth of New Zealand as an egalitarian society. She crafts her Pākehā characters as reflectors and articulators of this myth. In their material superiority, though, they unconsciously uncover it as just that, a myth. Bugs recognises that the difference is difficult to communicate to Charmaine,

> "My mum says if I want a phone I have to pay for it, and since I don't have a job…no phone.
> "I may as well be speaking, I don't know, German or something – she has no way of understanding. Not the girl sitting in front of a couple of grand worth of stuff.
> "She wants you to pay for it yourself? Seriously? That's child abuse." (37)

Charmaine's and Bugs's perceptions of what qualifies as essential and what constitutes child abuse are very different. To Charmaine, owning and being able to use a phone is a basic need like food and shelter. Bugs, on the other hand, understands that her mother is already working hard to keep Bugs in school, to keep her well-fed and warm. Within her means, Nikki tries to give her daughter the best possible life. The reader may assume that Charmaine's family has benefited from intergenerational wealth, though this is not explicit in the text. Family Fox owns a large house; Mr Fox has a well-paying job and they can afford for Shelley, Charmaine's mother, to stay at home and not work. Bugs's family does not have intergenerational wealth and so Nikki works two jobs.

When discussing equality in New Zealand and the egalitarian myth, one must look at the different experiences of colonisation for Māori and Pākehā and the long-term consequences of it[1]. Max Rashbrooke, in reference to labour historian Melanie Nolan, observes that, "New Zealand's history of equality is "[…]'a rich amalgam of myth and truth,'" he also mentions the "disproportionate impact of income equality" on Māori and makes explicit that "[…]Māori were systematically excluded by settler governments from many egalitarian measures" (25). While there were concerted efforts to reduce inequality amongst the Pākehā population, "the disenfranchisement of Māori" (25) continued, their land was bought off them. In the 1950s many

[1] To unpack the true level of inequality and power imbalance in New Zealand, one cannot ignore New Zealand's colonisation, the Treaty of Waitangi, the Treaty settlements so far and the interests of corporate iwi organisations vs the interests of individual Māori. This thesis, however, is neither the place to have these discussions as it would go beyond the scope of analysing these fictional texts, nor am I knowledgeable enough to do it justice. I would like to acknowledge, however, that there is room to discuss the issue more thoroughly by exploring its history and its nuances.

Māori families migrated into the cities, where they lived in overcrowded and poor-quality housing. This had long-term consequences on Māori health and well-being (25). This challenging reality of present-day New Zealand is reflected in *Bugs*. Jez's family's struggles can be connected to a lack of land and home ownership. Their housing conditions are poor and so is their access to basic medical care. When Bugs first meets Shelley, Charmaine's mother, she cannot help but notice that "her teeth are perfect – straight and white, white" (11). This, again, is an indicator that straight and white teeth are not the norm, but rather the exception in the circles Jez and Bugs operate in. This apparently small detail is one of many that symbolise that there are significant health and well-being differences across the different communities. Stock summarised the statistics released by StatsNZ on 2 April 2019, "The first thing to go in households struggling for money are trips to the dentist" (Stock). What seems like an interesting observation to be made by a teenager, gains significant weight in this context. Shelley's teeth are a marker of her wealth that both she and her daughter are unaware of. Hereaka effectively presents Pākehā characters as assuming an egalitarian society while the state of their own teeth serves as a clear marker that New Zealand is not.

In his essay "What Kind of Equality Matters", Jonathan Boston discusses the difference between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome. He compares formal and substantive equality of opportunity and observes that the more important is substantive equality, because formal equality of opportunity merely perpetuates the status quo (75-78). Substantive equality of opportunity promotes a more equitable approach towards pathways to success, such as education. On the surface, Bugs, Jez and Charmaine experience formal equality of opportunity when it comes to education. All three have access to education; they attend the same school; they have access to the same class and teachers. Bugs, however, notices the discrepancy when thinking about Jez and his opportunities, "If the world was fair, Jez would have been born somewhere, I don´t know, chill. He would have been born to someone who recognised his talent, sent him to classes, bought him supplies" (57). Hereaka lets her character notice and articulate the differences and the inequality in New Zealand, using an example that school students can understand. Bugs is grateful that she has family who do care and try to support her within their means. She is acutely aware of the opportunities she is given through their hard work; she wants

to ensure she does not let them down. She also reflects on her attitude in the past and recognises now that the whanau support she receives is invaluable,

> I used to think that he (Jez) was lucky because it´s [the Course Information Evening] boring as fuck, but now I don´t know.
> At least my mum cares enough to think about my future.
> These are people who care. Engaged, involved, there. Well, some of the time. These parents are saying that they expect their kids to succeed […] Jez doesn´t have that. He´s all by himself. That sucks. (92)

Of the three characters, Bugs is the most engaged as to her own future; Charmaine thinks the least about her future. The quotation illustrates the lack of social capital Jez has access to and Hereaka conveys that Bugs is acutely aware; while Charmaine is oblivious to the abundance of her own privilege. She assumes her situation is the norm, as illustrated by her questioning the need for anyone to plan years ahead. When the characters are asked to develop a five-year-plan, she tries to get a glimpse of Bugs's plan,

> "Who the fuck knows what they're going to do in the future?"
> "B does, she's got it all planned out."
> "Do you? Let me have a look." I hide my page from Stone Cold with my arm. "What? I'm not going to copy you. Like I'd copy your life." What she means is *why would I want your life*. "I just wanted to see how you had done it. Besides my olds have already got my life planned out for me. School, then uni to study law..." (64)

Charmaine does not have to think or worry about the future. He parents have a plan for her, and her parents will support her financially for as long as necessary. By her ethnicity, the colour of her skin and by her name she is connected to the Pākehā majority which gives her considerable social advantages. Bugs and Jez lack economic capital. Bugs has slightly more cultural capital as this also encompasses education. For her, education is more accessible than it is for Jez because her whanau takes an active role in supporting her. Jez's mother, on the other hand, does not support him at school or at home to ensure he receives the best possible education. Readers can perceive her as painfully passive and unsupportive. Close reading, however, reveals that she does what she can to protect her son from the dangers most pressing in their immediate community. When Charmaine suggests they get drunk and tries to convince Jez to purchase alcohol because he looks 18, he explains,

> "Except everyone knows I am not." […]
> "My mum took me to each bottle store and told them how old I was."
> "Why?" (Charmaine)
> "Because she's OK if I drink with her, where she can keep an eye one me." I (Bugs) sniffle a laugh, but Jez carries on: "But she doesn't want me to be one of those people that drinks because they have to, not for fun. She doesn't want me to drink alone."
> Stone Cold looks down and is very still and very quiet, and all of a sudden it's got kind of heavy in here. (140)

Hereaka presents a more complex picture of Jez's mother and her level of care. What readers might initially have dismissed as an uncaring environment in his home is in fact more alert to the dangers in his immediate social circle than was first apparent. Jez's mother does care, and she wants him to be safe and well. She does not accompany him to school. But, within the realm she knows, she does what she can to protect him. Not only has she ensured that the store owners knew not to sell alcohol to him, she also let him know she does not want him to drink, especially not alone. She has taken the time to explain to him why, too. He knows she is concerned that he will become addicted. Interestingly, it is Stone Cold who gets drunk alone later. While she has many advantages, she lacks emotional connection and support from her parents.

The New Zealand Hereaka presents is one of formal equality of opportunity. However, her characters display a distinct lack of substantive equality of opportunity, because Bugs and Jez experience the education system with far fewer resources and support from home. While Bugs has accessed as much education as is available to her, she is still limited by financial constraints. She admires the dictionaries Charmaine has at home and she longs to explore them by herself, "She's got one of those huge New Zealand Oxford Dictionaries and a Roget. Man, if they were not at her house maybe I´d just spend some time with them, getting my geek on" (36). Charmaine takes these resources for granted and does not use them; Jez is much further removed from the education system; as a result[,] these resources of formal education hold no interest for him. In her chapter "Schools and Inequality" Cathy Wylie summarises the impact of income inequality on schools as follows,

> Children from low-income families often start school on a less stable platform than others. They have had fewer opportunities to develop knowledge and skills that schools build on and extend, often including less experience of good quality early childhood education. Their early development is more likely to have been affected by poor nutrition and health. […]

> With low incomes, their parents find it impossible to feed them adequately or keep them healthy, both in their early years and their schooling years. Clothes or shoes for school may be unaffordable; likewise, books and computers, paints, musical instruments or sports gear may be outside the family budget. Public libraries are free (and most offer internet access) but they are often out of reach without a bus fare. (134-135)

The reader sees examples of all these problems in *Bugs*, particularly for Jez. His whanau has no financial means to get him into art classes or buy him supplies for his art. He had to fundraise to be able to afford his second XV jacket (46). Neither Bugs and Jez, nor most of the other school kids, have a car. They walk everywhere. None of their families have enough money to support their children; for example, they cannot afford driving lessons, a fact that comes out when Charmaine gives Bugs a copy of the Road Code for her birthday,

> "Thanks for the present." I do mean that; it would be cool to get my licence.
> "You hate it."
> "No, I just… OK, say I did get my learner's; it wouldn't matter anyway because Mum's never home to teach me.["]
> "Oh God, is that all? My olds are always busy too, so I've just been taking driving lessons.
> "Sometimes it is amazing how thick Stone Cold is. "My instructor says it's better anyway because you don't pick up all your parents' bad habits."
> […]
> I´m still wondering where to start – how to explain *reality* to her – when Jez says, "Me and Bugs don´t need to drive, eh? We live in town; we can walk everywhere."
> […]
> ["]But you are not going to live *here* all your life, are you? *Are* you?" (82)

In this exchange, Charmaine strongly voices aspects of the egalitarian myth that many middle-class Pākehā take for granted. She thinks that they will all want to, be able to, learn and be able to afford to learn to drive. She also assumes that they will want to own cars eventually. She shows no appreciation that learning to drive, let alone owning a car is completely out of reach for both Bugs and Jez. It is vital here to notice that it is the wealthy Pākehā character who assumes equality while the poorer Māori characters are painfully aware of their limitations because of wealth differences. Charmaine also assumes that both Bugs and Jez will want to leave Taupō eventually. She is unaware that low-income families are less socially and geographically mobile (Boston 81-82). This means they often cannot break out of poverty; they are often bound to the same place and then limited to the same community. Jez breaks out of his place in Taupō at the end of the

novel, but he does so in a way that makes it near impossible for him to ever return. His move also brings attention to the fact that it is often the very poorest who have to move to urban centres to find work and which can lead to a disconnection from their culture.

This extract is also an example of many in the novel that see the protagonist silent. Bugs thinks about how she is unable to explain her reality to Charmaine. This makes the absurdity of Charmaine's assumptions explicit to the reader. Crucially, though, Bugs remains silent. She does not attempt to articulate their extensive differences in access to opportunities to other characters in the novel. Bugs's silence is a key feature of this novel and one of its core strengths because it draws attention to a voice that is not often, if ever, heard in the discourse about the egalitarian myth. The first-person limited narrative that privileges Bugs's point of view presents to the reader with a perspective that is missing from public discourse. However, the protagonist's silence in dialogue with the Pākehā characters and the fact that she has been set up as an intelligent, articulate teenager through references to classic novels from a 'white' canon can suggest something else: Hereaka imagines both a Māori and a Pākehā reader. She, perhaps deliberately, sets up a character well-read Pākehā readers can easily identify with, because Bugs uses a recognisible teenage voice and sarcasm. The texts *1984* and *Brave New World*, both written by white authors and with white, male protagonists, are often studied in the New Zealand school system, which is dominated by Pākehā[-]teaching personnel. Teachers are more likely to select teaching content that reflects them rather than their Māori students, who frequently are a minority in the classroom. The novel Bugs's class is studying in English, *Twilight*, a popular teen novel amongst Western readers, could not be any whiter in terms of its characters' colour of skin.

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee also features as an allusion in a comment made by Charmaine in the context of discussing Bugs's potential pathway towards becoming a lawyer (65). The reference is an interesting choice because Scout, the adolescent protagonist of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is female too and, like with Bugs, it can take readers a few chapters to establish her gender. Like *Bugs*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* addresses race relations and deeply ingrained belief systems of the population. Both young protagonists witness events and experience situations that strike them as unfair. As they mature, they are beginning to understand more complex social dynamics of the adult world and learn that life is not "fair". Bugs and Scout also both begin to

develop an awareness that changing the mind of the adult population is rather difficult. If Hereaka is imagining both Māori and Pākehā readers, then one can assume that she intends to point out that New Zealand is not as equal as the egalitarian myth suggests. Her characters demonstrate that those belonging to the dominant group are also dominating the discourse without questioning their perspective, while those with opposing experiences and viewpoints do not speak up. Parts of the population are silenced because they do not know where to start with an explanation of how they are not equal. The inequality they experience is multi-layered, complex and nuanced. It cannot easily be explained and so Hereaka lets Bugs remain silent, articulating her frustration in internal monologue only, even though the reader might wish for her to speak up. To the Pākehā reader, this also indicates that, while it may not be articulated to them openly, there may indeed be differing views on this myth.

The lack of equality of opportunity, the novel implies, then, must measurably lead to a significant inequality of outcome, a point emphasised by Jonathan Boston, who explains, "The broad aim [of a society] should be to ensure that everyone's basic needs are satisfied and that all citizens have the opportunity to participate as full and equal members of their society." He adds, "[…] high income inequality is associated with greater inequalities in certain outcomes, such as education and health outcomes, as well as a larger average amount of social ills, such as imprisonment rates and the spread of preventable diseases" (81). Hereaka's portrayal of Jez illustrates this. He lives in the family with the lowest income. He drops out of school, because, in his social realm, his talents are neither valued nor supported. He engages in drug dealing and he is exposed to domestic violence to which he retaliates by tattooing "cock" on his stepfather's back.

The education system as presented in the novel illustrates what is known as the "leaky pipeline"[2]. It 'leaks' Māori and Pasifika students. A disproportionate number of Māori and Pasifika students leave formal education early, many before achieving NCEA Level Two which is currently the crucial level to gain University Entrance. This leads to fewer Māori and Pasifika in tertiary

[2] In this section on education, I am drawing on my knowledge as a New Zealand secondary school teacher. Elements of my comments are informed by professional development courses I have attended over the years and it is, at times, difficult to identify the source of the original idea.

education. Each extra year at school also increases employment chances and the likelihood of living a healthier lifestyle. As David Littlewood has observed,

> New Zealand's greatest points of inequality are along racial lines. Its Māori and Pasifika populations sit at the bottom of nearly every social indicator: from income to imprisonment, from education to employment, and from health to housing. Indeed, the 750,000 New Zealanders who are living in poverty comprise around one out of every 10 Pākehā, but around one out of every five Māori and Pasifika households. (226)

All indicators listed by Littlewood can be connected to education. The more successful students are in the formal education system, the more likely they are to lead a more successful life in terms of health and wellbeing and wealth and employment. He further explains,

> Opportunities and outcomes are not two separate things, but are instead intrinsically linked together in a cyclical relationship. For example, children from poorer families tend to go to schools located in more socio-economically deprived areas than those from wealthier families, and are likely to experience worse nutrition, less domestic stability and greater health problems during their formative years. This gives them a reduced chance of succeeding in the education system which in turn means they are less likely to obtain a well-paid job. These poorer adults then find it harder to provide opportunities for their own children, and so the cycle begins again. (227)

Hereaka reflects this pattern in her novel. Jez's family is stuck in this cycle. They only look for opportunities for him in Taupō; his mother suggests he learn Te Reo Māori, not to better understand his culture and heritage, but because "she reckoned the tourists would like it" (72). Bugs's family, on the other hand, is working together to help her move beyond this cycle. Her mother, uncle and grandparents provide support and show interest in her development.

Hereaka presents a microcosm of the education system in the form of the school that Bugs, Jez and Charmaine attend. From Bugs's perspective, the teachers have little interest in seeing Māori students succeed. The students are grouped based on ethnicity, suggesting a racist bias,

> Anyway, there's all us kids – OK, all us Māori kids – rounded up for a 'seminar' on Māori achievement. What it really was – a bunch of loser seniors saying how hard they'd worked to *pass*. Just pass. And then they hit us over the head with statistics about how most of us would fail. (21)

Not only are Māori students grouped together based on ethnicity rather than interest or ability, but, according to Bugs, teachers also lack basic interest and initiative towards building a

meaningful relationship with their students. It seems the school wants to show they are committed to raising Māori achievement through the seminar, but what might have started well-intentioned ends with disillusioned students and racist prejudice from teachers. Bugs, who has ambitions to do well, finds herself frustrated with the low expectations people have for her and her peers, "Last term, even Miss Shaw said to us, *You're really nice kids, I'm sure. It's a pity you are all going to fail.* That's the kind of shit we put up with every day, you know?" (19). The interior monologue employed by Hereaka is powerful, because it makes a version of experiences in the New Zealand education system explicit, one that is often silenced. It addresses a distinct lack of engagement with students by teachers, and it shows that teachers may have lower expectations for Māori students than they have for Pākehā students in their classes. It is unclear whether the teachers in the novel engage more fully with Pākehā characters; however, the reader infers that they do because the narrator emphasises that it is Māori students who have been singled out to attend this seminar and they are the ones being told that they will fail. The text choices within the English classes also suggest that much of the teaching reflects the dominant Pākehā culture.

Under these circumstances, it comes as no surprise that Jez is disengaged at school. He faces humiliation by teachers; he cannot take the subjects he is interested and talented in because the system of prerequisites keeps him from gaining subject entry. He is stuck and cannot see a way through the education system. He sees leaving formal education as the better option. Hereaka supports this idea with the motif of the tape being stuck in Charmaine's car, of all cars it could be stuck in. It is the Pākehā's vehicle that will transport Jez out of the world he is stuck in. Like the tape, Bugs and Jez are stuck in a Pākehā world. Interestingly, they struggle to remove the tape and consequently listen to the same songs repeatedly. This not only mirrors the frequent retelling of the egalitarian myth. On a more direct level, it also parallels the frequent lectures particularly the Māori characters hear about being likely to fail. But Hereaka does not stop here. While none of the songs are explicitly named, it is implied that one they listen to repeatedly is Pearl Jam's *Jeremy*,

> It's some sad old song about a kid who spoke in class, like that's some kind of a big deal. The singer sounds like he's nitrous or someone has slowed down his voice. I wonder if Jez would like it. It's not really his thing, but you gotta like a song that's named after you, don't you? (106)

And later Bugs reflects on a decision, “My mind is busy trying to remake my choices, brick by brick” (119) which alludes to Pink Floyd’s *We don’t need no Education.* By referring to these songs Hereaka, connects Jez’s experience in the school system with the experiences of the narrators in the songs. She refers to “we don’t need no education” because Jez thinks another year at school will be of little benefit for him. It can be argued, of course, that Jez does not need Pākehā education. He needs Māori education. The second quote refers to the lines, “Hey teachers, leave those kids alone, all in all, you’re just another brick in the wall” (azlyrics). The ‘wall’ in a New Zealand context is one of limitation of choice and opportunities for Māori students. Bugs recognises that the choices she makes will impact on the wall that she will have to overcome. Jez is already disengaged. School does not offer him any opportunities he would like to take. Bugs initially tries to convince him to stay at school and later encourages him to come back to school when he has left, but Jez is very aware of his situation,

> “We don’t need to [talk about staying at school], because here’s how it goes. I say that I want to leave school, you rabbit on about choices and opportunities, but you just don’t see that there are *none*. Not for me. Not now.“
> “Now that you can’t play rugby?“
> “I was in the second XV, B. That was never my ticket out.“
> He’s rolling his sleeve up higher. “It’s a waste of time; there is nothing there for me.“ (135)

Jez knows that there are no equal opportunities and certainly no equal outcomes available for him if he stays in the school system. Even his friends cannot hold him at school. To him, the formal education system is not an option. Much like the song suggests, the teachers at the school are not helping Jez progress, but rather build up the walls that he is trying to overcome. Bugs has more choice because she has more support from home and she is ambitious, like her mother. Jez is much more exposed to limitations and institutional discrimination because he experiences so much less support from home and from adults at school. It is interesting that Hereaka chose to let her characters touch on a career in rugby as a possible way out of this situation. Rugby is one of the few areas where New Zealand proudly presents Māori role models to the general public.

The education system in the novel also sees the colonial history continued by what is valued and referred to at school. In a chemistry class, a student leaves to get potatoes because he wants to

make vodka. When the student does not return for a while, the teacher makes the following reference to the past,

> "Yes, I know, he went to get potatoes, but how long does it take to get a potato? We´re not in Ireland in 1845, are we?" The class is quiet – we are not sure what he means. Someone down the back says, "No?"(127)

The reference made here is to the potato famine in Ireland 1845. This history is not only distant in time, it is also referring to a place some 18,000 km away. It is the absence of teaching and learning on New Zealand and Māori history at the school that is noticeable, particularly when Jez learns of his whakapapa from Bugs's grandmother. His history and his heritage are not taught and therefore, by implication, less valued at school and there is nothing that makes him feel included when he is at school. Bugs assumes that Jez is being told off for riding in the car with Charmaine despite her being on her Learner's licence, but instead Bugs's grandmother decides to tell him two Maui myths and how they connect to him,

> "She wanted to tell me what my name meant."
> "What, Jeremy?"
> "Nah, Muka." […]
> "Well what does it mean?"
> "It´s what it is."
> "Eh?"
> "It´s the stuff in flax. If you peel away the outside, it´s what´s inside. They use it for weaving because it´s strong. It binds things together. It´s what Maui´s ropes were made of when he fished up the North Island and when he tamed the sun."
> "She told you stories?"
> "Yeah, but is wasn´t just *stories*; it made me feel… she said I carry it in here."He touches his heart. "The muka, eh?" (119-120)

The story of his name is ultimately one of whakapapa, one of heritage, one of place and belonging, one of potential and of promise. The whakapapa of the Māori characters is barely addressed in the novel; in fact, this is the only time there are explicit references to tīpuna or ancestors. It does allude to what Jez is and could be, the line of people he is from and what strengths he might have. None of this is valued at school, though. Bugs's grandmother, through kōrero, provides a connection, a kind of grounding and a place of belonging Jez has not experienced before. The information plays on his mind; he is moved by it. Bugs observes, "Nan looks at Jez. Nah, she *sees* Jez" (116), which suggests that few people fully appreciate the

challenges and the disconnect he experiences. He later draws rope on his forearm, a symbol of connection and linkage, maybe even strength. But Jez's rope is not connected to anyone or anything and with his actions at the end of the novel, he moves further away from his mother, and his return to Taupō seems unlikely. One must wonder if his situation would be better if the connection with his whanau and his sense of tūrangawaewae, the right to stand, reside and belong, were stronger.

The Māori myths the author selected were *How Maui fished up the North Island* and *How Maui slowed the Sun*, which are both myths many New Zealanders, Māori and Pākehā alike, are familiar with. The choice is an interesting one though because Hereaka had the opportunity to refer to lesser known, more regional myths that connect the iwi and hapū around the Taupō region. Yet she chose not to. She chose instead to focus Jez's connection with one of the key ancestors, one that most readers will have heard about and with that she ensures an element of familiarity for some readers uncomfortable and unfamiliar with the version of New Zealand day-to-day life presented in her book. Her choice to refer to these well-known Māori myths seems to reinforce the possibility that Pākehā and Māori, with and without knowledge of Māori mythology, are part of Hereaka's imagined audience.

Jez's is not the only name of interest. The novel opens with Bugs pondering her own name and trying to change it to something that sound harder, "When I started college I tried to change it to Rāpeti. Not because I am a born again Māori or anything, just Rāpeti sounds harder. Harder than Bugs anyway" (1). The nickname given to her by her family stuck. The reader never learns Bugs's real name. When she meets the Dean, Mrs Lee, to discuss her subject selections for Year 13, she is greeted with, "'Now, Al…' 'Bugs.' Mrs Lee smiles at me. 'Still going by that nickname?'"(101), and the reader almost learns her first name. There is no letter 'L' in the Māori alphabet, so her name must be Pākehā. Instead of going by that name, Bugs chooses to be known by her nickname, though, which itself is one based on a Western cartoon character. With her initial attempt to change it to "Rāpeti", she is trying to turn it into something more Māori. Names are integral parts of identity and Hereaka made interesting choices here. Both her Māori characters have European first names. Bugs's mother Nikki also has a Pākehā first name. The names she selects not only reflect that the characters need to hide their Māori identity to achieve

the highest possible level of success in a Pākehā-dominated world, it also conveys the sense that their parents and ancestors know this and have deliberately selected names accordingly. It may lead the reader to infer that at least outward cultural assimilation is seen as the best strategy to be successful.

Charmaine, on the other hand, claims that she received the nickname 'Stone Cold Fox', describing her as 'hot', from students at her previous school. Bugs reinterprets and shortens it, "Stone Cold all right. Not because she is a fox, but because she's a bitch" (8). Bugs is annoyed by Jez's attraction to Charmaine and frustrated with her initial lack of emotion and empathy. It is only later that the readers sees that this is a façade to protect herself from emotional turmoil and vulnerabilities. In the first chapter, Hereaka introduces Charmaine Fox with her full name and the reader can see the names as a set-up of a new version of the 'Rabbit vs. Fox' fable. As the story goes, the Fox chases the Rabbit to kill and eat it. To survive, the Rabbit must use its wits to stay alive in a power dynamic that clearly disadvantages it. Hereaka uses this image to support the idea of inequality of circumstance and opportunity in New Zealand society. Bugs, the rabbit, is set up as the more likeable underdog character who must work much harder and smarter to retain the same sense of power and freedom Charmaine, the fox, already enjoys.

Hereaka also demonstrates how aware teens are of the prejudice held about them as Māori. When Bugs and Charmaine are caught smoking weed by Charmaine's parents, Bugs articulates how she thinks Mr Fox sees her and her mother. Nikki argues with Mr Fox to avoid both girls getting in trouble with the police, but it is Bugs's internal monologue that shows her acute awareness of the Pākehā beliefs about Māori,

> "Let's just give them the benefit of the doubt, eh?"
> Mr Fox tilts his chin and looks down at mum. It's that word *benefit*. His mind automatically connects it to: *drug taking, drug dealing, pokie machines, breeding for money, uneducated, unemployable, special privileges, parasites*… and because Mum's there in front of him that's how he sees her: *feral bitch*.
> But he won't say this to us, to our faces; oh no. He'll wait until he's had a couple at a dinner party or at the pub and then he'll say, *Y'know the problem with those people – they think they're entitled. All those special privileges the government gives them – gives them over us, mind you – makes them uppity. She just stood there and told me that it wasn't her daughter; implied that Charmaine had something to do with it. Look at how we bring up*

our daughter and then look at hers. It's a no-brainer, isn't it. But you've got to be careful around those people, don't you? Because of all the PC bullshit. (160-161)

The author makes a point of presenting this as internal monologue by Bugs. Bugs imagines the conversation Mr Fox is going to have with his friends over dinner or at the pub. She is so familiar with the prejudice and the comments that she can fully play out in her head what Mr Fox would say. This makes the reader aware of how Bugs perceives she is seen by Pākehā. Bugs is confronted with stereotypes about people like her that she cannot change. Again, it is crucial to note that Bugs does not actually *say* any of this. Her silence speaks louder than her words. She and Nikki know it is best not to talk about the unconscious or conscious biases they face. Hereaka has created a narrative voice that can articulate all the stereotypes and prejudice without ever saying them out loud. Bugs's teachers and the Dean at school make assumptions about her and her ability based on her ethnicity. The same happened in this situation with Mr Fox. Based on a common stereotype, he made a misjudgement because the possibility that his daughter could have initiated the drug purchase and taking is impossible in his version of the narrative. Bugs's internal monologue imagining Mr Fox's conversation with his friends can also demonstrates that Hereaka is critically engaging with the race relations in New Zealand. The prejudiced comments Bugs imagines Mr Fox making show that these are stereotypes and assumptions that Māori are fully aware of. In Bugs's thoughts it becomes clear that she has been confronted with the 'us' (Pākehā) and 'them' (Māori) narrative that focuses on challenges of difference rather than value and assets of difference. She has heard people speak politely about Māori and then saw this negated or ridiculed by an additional comment about needing to be 'politically correct or PC'.

Like Tara in *Dear Vincent*, Bugs has a job. Many of their peers do not. While Tara works to contribute to her mother's income, Bugs works as a punishment for breaking the law. Both meet people at work who prompt them to reflect. Tara connects with Max and Johannes who help her see different perspectives, not just her own. Bugs works with Tracey who alters her perception of her mother's work and who encourages her to work hard so that she can be successful one day. As Bugs contemplates her future options, she is struck by a new perspective. Tracy, a Māori cleaner, tries to encourage Bugs to make good career choices,

"You should take your brain off to university and get a good job, like your mother."

> You'd think a simple word like 'good' would mean the same thing to everyone. I've never thought of my mum's job as good. Many, many other things, but … good? I suppose it depends on where you are looking from. (165)
> […]
> Good.
> Good.
> *Good.*
> I'm still thinking about that word: good day, good job, good girl. I know the theory of relativity is about time and physics and shit, but maybe it applies to language too. The meaning of a word depends on who is using it. (175)

These thoughts towards the end of the novel demonstrate that Bugs has grown and her perception of the world around her is growing to become more complete. Her contemplation of the word 'good' puts this thinking process in the reader's mind. Hereaka raises a personal question here. What do you consider as good? And to what extent is your perspective on this influenced by your position in society? The situation is also a vivid illustration of equality being a myth. A 'good job' looks very different from different positions and perspectives within society. Bugs, who still has the potential to do well within the education system, considers her mother's job to be not very good. Tracy, on the other hand, has little opportunity to move beyond the position as hotel room cleaner she is currently in. To her, Nikki is in a position of leadership that offers her more opportunities and a better income. The exchange shows that there are significant differences in how people perceive what is possible for them. What Bugs learns here is that New Zealand is also not equal in what people perceive to be realistically possible for them. The myth of equality is false.

If Bugs is to succeed, if she is to get a *good* job, she needs to succeed in a Pākehā system, the Pākehā way. Like all Year 12 students in New Zealand, the characters must make educational choices: vocational pathways or university-approved subjects, stay at school or leave. All teenage New Zealand readers will recognise this situation. It is remarkable, then, that Hereaka finishes her book so powerfully. With purpose, she disappoints the reader's expectations of a kind of happy end, a kind of knowledge that Bugs's and Jez's relationship will continue and that Bugs will succeed in the end. Instead, she lets her narrator address the reader directly,

> So what did you expect? Did you think that maybe you'd find out what happened to us in the future – me and Jez, Jez and me?

> I should apologise. I'm the one who put that rifle in your hands; made you look through the cross hairs at the rabbits to be picked off, one by one. I made you think that you'd have that feeling too, like a god, knowing everything.
> I should apologise.
> But I am not going to. (241)

The ending is powerful, not only because when reading the novel with a Year 12 class in New Zealand, many students say they did not like the ending; they wanted to know what happened to them; this leaves them thinking and wondering. It is also powerful because it tells the reader that they have a role to play. How does the story of Bugs and Jez and Charmaine continue in their heads? How have they seen it play out? One reading of the ending also suggests that it is Māori, who are the rabbits, like Bugs, and that Pākehā, who are the Fox, have been given the rifle. They hold the power to stop the rabbits in their tracks and all the rabbits can do is try and dodge the bullets.

Hereaka's novel holds up a mirror that shows how the lives of three teenagers in New Zealand could pan out. It draws on the popular, rose-tinted, myth of New Zealand as an egalitarian country, a country that is inherently fair and offers the same opportunities and outcome to its citizens. She shows that it is the Pākehā part of the population who reinforce and strengthen the myth, the part of the population that has more voices and more voices in stronger positions. She shows that the view of the egalitarian society is not necessarily shared by all and not felt by Māori characters in her text. As the teenage readers grow up to become adults, they have a choice whether their want to reinforce the myth or challenge it. They have a role to play in shaping the New Zealand they live in and Hereaka assists this process by drawing attention to the myth, which in principle, is desirable to achieve, but which is also far from the reality.

Hereaka does not go as far as to provide an example of what succeeding *as* Māori would look like for a Māori student. However, this might not have been her intention. To an extent, she repeats a narrative that is all too familiar. If a young Māori is going to succeed, it is a big deal because they are going to be the first. She adds to a body of narratives that show Māori as a traumatised people, as a people suffering from intergenerational trauma. She also writes for an audience of

colonisers and colonised[3]. She seems to support the notion that Māori should, if they can, try to succeed in the Pākehā system. The reader cannot blame her for that, though; until recently New Zealand lacked widely visible examples of Māori succeeding as Māori beyond the rugby field. It can be difficult to imagine a specific future as a teenager when there is a lack of examples. Hereaka does, however, allow her readers to imagine what New Zealand might look like if New Zealanders were to begin broadcasting Māori living their culture, if there was reporting on the work Māori scholars do, if we frequently looked at Māori within the arts, if we listened more to what Māori have to say rather than talking about 'them' and 'us'. The international success of Taika Waititi's work in recent years and Hereaka's own achievements show that large[-] scale success is possible for Māori, though it remains less visible.

Bugs's and Jez's world is fragile. Charmaine has stability she is oblivious to. One wrong choice can change everything for Bugs. She is much more reflective when it comes to her own decisions. During the night on the farm, after Charmaine has driven them out there on her Learner's license, Bugs anticipates her mother's anger and frustration, but she also reflects, "Stone Cold is already asleep […]. But I can't sleep. My mind is trying to remake my choices, brick by brick." (119) She knows that Nikki will be upset with her, but she also knows that Nikki will be disappointed and she knows that she did not want to drive to the farm in the first place, but she was too passive to stand up for what she wanted. This contrasts with her final decision to stay in Taupō at the end of the novel. She does not succumb to the peer pressure to go. Instead she has learned to make decisions that will be right for her.

[3] There is a case to be made for New Zealand readership needing to be decolonised. This idea was first mentioned to me in a conversation with Anahera Gildea and Hinemoana Baker. Gildea prompted me to think about whether it is possible to write a novel about Māori succeeding as Māori when the readership expects an element of trauma in all texts they read about Māori. This of course is a topic that goes beyond the scope of this thesis. It is nonetheless important to mention it here, because it changed my perception of the novel. Initially, I saw it as inherently hopeful for its Māori characters; now I am not so sure. Now I wonder if addressing the myth of New Zealand as an egalitarian country explicitly in the narrator's thoughts is enough, or if more is needed to promote a shift in attitude and visible possibilities for Māori tobe successful *as* Māori in New Zealand. Does this text only reinforce and repeat the story we have heard so many times? Leave your Māori identity behind, try to succeed in the Pākehā system, and try to claim your Māori identity back once you have made it?

Hereaka establishes the fragile situation of Bugs and Jez in Taupō early on. Bugs describes the view the tourists see from the northern shore of the lake and contrasts it with the locals' perception and the knowledge,

> In the dark you can't really see the mountains, but you know they're there. In this place you can't escape them. I reckon tourists who sit here and look at the mountains, who wonder when they might erupt, forget about the crater in front of them. Yes, the big fuck-off volcano that we're standing on. Just because it has been asleep for so long they think it will never wake. But we know different, us locals. We know that it still smoulders. We know that it is alive. If you look you can see proof of life everywhere. The steam hole down by Tauhara Primary, an open sore weeping sulphur fumes. The ancient trees, burnt black and toppled over away from the blast, exposed under the soil when the banks are cut away for new roads. The weird contrast of cold water of the lakefront and the warmth beneath your toes when you dig them into the lake bed. If your swim has frozen you, stick your cold feet on the belly of the sleeping giant – I'm sure he won't mind. (57-58)

Locals like Bugs and Jez live with the mountains every day. Tourists and people new to Taupō, like Charmaine, do not appreciate them as living beings of the region. The extract illustrates a connection to the land that neither Charmaine nor Jez display in this way. It also serves as a metaphor of the fragility of Bugs's circumstances. Her worlds could quite literally be blown up by a volcano eruption. Metaphorically speaking, though, she could also blow her chances if she makes one wrong choice. She knows how fragile her situation is. She is aware that it is up to her to ensure she gives herself the best possible chances. The title of this chapter "Another Version of the same old story? – New Zealand's Egalitarian Myth in Bugs by Whiti Hereaka" asks whether Bugs is another version, another retelling of the egalitarian myth. It turns out it is not. Instead, Hereaka it shows the egalitarian story from a different perspective, a perspective that is usually silenced. With her three protagonists, Hereaka creates examples of small-town teenage life in New Zealand. She makes the myth of an egalitarian nation explicit through her Pākehā characters. She illustrates the power imbalances and she shows the challenges Māori students face in some New Zealand schools. She exposes the dominant narratives of equality in comparison to less equal experiences that are also a reality in New Zealand. With skill and care, Hereaka draws attention to a less dominant narrative. She explores the perspective that is much less heard, and she criticises that the dominant narrative of an egalitarian society is incomplete.

Kate De Goldi's *The 10 PM Question:* The 'she'll be right' myth and mental health or "Why does everyone just accept it? Why doesn't anyone ever, *ever, ever* talk about it?"

The 'she'll be right' attitude will be at the core of this chapter which analyses Kate De Goldi's novel *The 10PM Question*. In particular, I am concentrating on 'she'll be right' as a myth and attitude that tends to be applied by New Zealanders in times of hardship or challenge. The chapter will offer a definition of 'she'll be right', examine underlying gender stereotypes, and ideas of masculinity, before turning to addressing the silence 'she'll be right' generates when it comes to mental illness. I will explore how Frankie, the protagonist, deals with the mental illness of his mother and with his own anxiety in an environment that proves to generate more questions than answers for him. The novel illustrates a recent development in New Zealand towards a broader understanding of 'she'll be right' by using the example of one family. The Ministry of Health began running ads, featuring Kirwan, promoting more open conversations about mental health in 2006 and De Goldi adopts the developing zeitgeist early on when her characters begin to articulate the need for a more explicit conversation about mental health[4] and depression.

'She'll be right' is a phrase commonly used in casual conversation in New Zealand. Other phrases to similar effect are 'It'll be fine' or 'It'll work out.' There are a variety of definitions available for this phrase. According to the *New Zealand Oxford Dictionary (NZOD)*, the phrase is a New Zealand and Australian colloquialism which suggests "that will be all right; all is under control"(Kennedy 966), while the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) suggests the phrase is an "Australian and New Zealand colloquial [which means] 'everything will be fine' [and] designat[es] an attitude of blind optimism" ("she'll be right: Oxford English Dictionary"). Depending on the context, it may be read positively or as an expression of indifference, unconcern, or a way of brushing off. In *The*

[4] The novel was published in 2008, two years into the Ministry of Health's National Depression Initiative which was aimed at reducing suicide and improving mental health and wellbeing of New Zealanders between 2006 and 2016. John Kirwan's book *All Blacks Don't Cry* was published in 2010 and, like the ads in 2006, acted as a catalyst for the conversations about mental health becoming more public. In an interview in 2010, interviewer Megan Banks's question highlights this. She asks Kirwan, "There are people coming up to you saying. 'Thank you for making this so public.' There was no one before you doing this?"
The National Depression Initiative has been extended and the current Labour Government has set aside a Wellbeing budget to address the growing number of mental health concerns in New Zealand.

Dictionary of New Zealand English, Harry Orsman notes that the first recorded use of the phrase was by Dan Davin in 1947, but it is likely to have been used in conversation well before that. The phrase is said to be "expressing confidence in a happy outcome, reassurance, agreement [and] also often, an over-confident or couldn't-care-less attitude" (Orsman 671).

Orsman describes this kind of use of "she" as "Australian and New Zealand colloquial […] when referring to a thing to which female gender is not conventionally attributed, often replacing the impersonal pronoun *it*" (717). The *NZOD* offers a similar definition, describing it as a pronoun "applied to things which the female sex is not conventionally attributed" (Kennedy 1037). Common examples are the use of 'she' when referring to ships, boats, cars, and other vehicles. "She" is often used as a way of feminising an issue or a problem and, with that, lowering its significance or reach. The novel explores the unspoken assumptions that come with this attitude. The phrase 'she'll be right' is used more frequently by men. It can be used to make a situation or problem seem less urgent or severe, perhaps because it feminises the problem and thus increases distance to it if the speaker is male. This suggests that those using the expression and attitude prefer not to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation. It does however not mean that speakers are unaware of the seriousness or urgency of the matter at hand. Furthermore, the effect of the expression on a listener is often to convey that the speaker is really saying 'I don't want to talk about it' or 'Let's not talk about it.' This approach was well captured in the 1981 ironic song "There is no depression in New Zealand" by New Zealand band Blam Blam Blam. While it focused mainly on socio-economic challenges, verses like "We have no dole queues, we have no drug addicts, we have no racism, we have no sexism, sexism, no, no" ("No Depression In New Zealand | Nzhistory, New Zealand History Online") also brought attention to issues such as racism, sexism and health concerns. The song's irony critiques the deliberate ignorance and silencing of core issues. Such silencing has also been widespread in New Zealand when it comes to discussing mental health. In *The 10PM Question*, we see a literal 'she', Frankie's mother Francie, who just so happens not to be right. Yet, her family either do not know how to or choose not to talk about her mental illness, hoping that, eventually, she will be all right. It is her son Frankie who first articulates a frustration with the lack of verbal acknowledgement that there is a problem.

De Goldi's novel is character-driven. A new character's arrival and later her departure drive the rather vestigial plot along. Readers learn about a traumatic event in the narrative past; there are no major events in the narrative present. Frankie Parsons is just short of becoming a teenager. At 12 years old, he is the youngest brother of Louie and Gordana. Frankie's parents, Francie and "Uncle" George, and their extended family live on the South Island of New Zealand, in a city whose details recall Christchurch. Frankie is a nervous child and his identity formation and increase in maturity are fuelled by internal forces. The reader learns through Frankie's reflections on his conversations with his new friend Sydney that his mother Francie never leaves the house. She has not left the house in nine years and Frankie has no memory of the last time she did.

Frankie tries to keep his world as predictable as possible. He has established routines for himself that he follows religiously. The structure of the novel reflects this. The chapters are set out like reflective diary entries. Each chapter is a fortnightly diary entry, titled with the weekday, day and month of the entry. To the reader, this conveys Frankie's appreciation of routines and structure. He writes his reflections on Tuesdays. Each chapter follows a predictable structure, too. He first shares the events of the fortnight and then ends the chapter with a recounting of one of his 10PM questions with Francie. To indicate a separation from the rest of the narrative, the 10PM questions and conversations with his mother are in italics. (A similar visual distinction in the printed version of the novel can be observed in the structure of *Dear Vincent*, where Tara's letters to Vincent and the letters to Van are in italics to separate them from the core narrative.) This mirrors Francie's separation from the rest of Frankie's life. She spends most of her time in her room, but she does regularly bake in the kitchen because she runs a cake business from home. Otherwise her existence is more distant from the rest of her family. In *The 10PM Question*, the reader comes to expect this structure as the novel progresses, much like the characters in Frankie's life who find his actions predictable.

To explain: Frankie struggles with anxiety and he uses his 10PM questions as a coping mechanism to calm his worries and fears. Every night, at 10PM sharp, he visits his mother in her bedroom to ask questions and share his worries with her. These range from questions about replacing the smoke alarm batteries to what a mysterious rash could be and whether he might have food poisoning. Francie addresses all questions calmly and reassures Frankie that he has nothing to

worry about. De Goldi's decision to name her male protagonist Frankie and his mother Francie is no coincidence. Rather she sets the two up to be very similar which points the readers towards one of Frankie's biggest worries: is he like his mother? The real 10PM question is not revealed until the end of the novel, when Frankie can finally bring himself to ask it, "'Why can't you go out to the world? What's wrong with you? Why can't you leave the house? Why can't you just do it?'" (238). All other questions he has asked up to this point are place-holders for this, the most important question. Francie is clear in her response,

> "I just can't do it, Frankie. I've tried. But I can't."
> […]
> "Staying inside is how I manage," said Ma. "It's how I keep it all okay. Outside just became more and more terrifying. Inside is manageable." (238)

Frankie also reveals his biggest worry, "'I don't want to be like you,' Frankie said quietly. 'I don't want to be terrified of the world'" (239). Before Frankie finds the strength to ask the ultimate 10PM question, though, he has to explore what his concerns are and why he struggles to ask the question. In asking the question, he conveys to Francie that he expects an answer while he may, at the same time, not be ready to hear it.

Frankie's appreciation of predictability and control is also reflected in his interactions with his friend Gigs who is happy to play along and so their trips to school are characterised by the same routine, identical interactions and predictable structures. In her review "Sweet and Upbeat", Paula Morris also comments on Frankie's need for predictability, "At school, Frankie is kept sane by routine, mainly thanks to the firm hand of his teacher, and best friend Gigs, with whom he converses in an invented language called Chillun" (Morris). The secret language has two advantages that appeal to Frankie: he and Gigs control the vocabulary available and with that the conversations that can be had and no one else can understand what they are discussing. Thus, Frankie knows his thoughts are safe with Gigs. That is until, one day, a new girl gets on the bus. The arrival of Sydney in Frankie's life marks a turning point. She is direct and inquisitive and acts as a catalyst for change. She speaks her mind and asks the questions Frankie, for years, has been unable to ask. Yet, it is Sydney's impending departure that throws Frankie into a spiral of depression and anxiety until he finally opens up.

Sydney's curiosity and her cricket skills challenge Frankie's and Gigs's expectations of what girls do and are and that makes her interesting. Frankie is not incapable of adapting to this kind of change, rather he approaches it with curiosity. It does, however, take him a while to warm to a change in his routine,

> Sydney seemed oblivious to rules […]. She was an independent operator […] Independent operations, Sydney-style, apparently meant making friends with a boy in the class rather than all the other girls. This really was very interesting, Frankie thought. He had never seen it before. (41)

Gigs does not initially like or accept Sydney which Frankie finds remarkable. Gigs, who is normally more flexible and capable of coping with change than Frankie, opposes the arrival of the new girl. This, for the first time, puts Frankie in the position of being the more open-minded and flexible of the two. Frankie observes this fact with interest and wonders what Gigs's hesitations are based on. It is, however, through cricket that the three soon connect. Sydney turns out to be a rather good bowler, despite Gigs's insistence that "Girls can't bowl" because "They've got stupid elbows" (42). The reader's attention is drawn to gender stereotyping. According to Gigs, girls cannot possibly bowl well, because they are physically and anatomically not suited to it. De Goldi's choice to have Gigs articulate his stereotype is interesting, particularly in the context of Frankie later struggling with his own body image because he perceives it as substandard.

Over the course of a few weeks, Sydney demonstrates her skill and her personality and both Gigs and Frankie expand their assumptions about what it means to be a girl. In the context of 'she'll be right', the critical reader can see that De Goldi is challenging narrow understandings of what constitutes being a boy or being a girl. Learning that Sydney can, indeed, be good at cricket, an area that Gigs and Frankie had so far perceived as limited to boys and men, serves to suggest that Frankie, too, can be a boy or a man who has interests, physical features, and worries that are traditionally more closely associated with girls or women. Not only is Sydney comfortable in her independence, she is also proactive about making new friends and she has decided to connect with Gigs and Frankie. Frankie, on the other hand, is timid, he over-thinks and, at least at the beginning of the novel, he is more passive.

Once Sydney has won Gigs's approval through her cricketing skills, Frankie and Sydney can become close friends without Frankie having to fear it might compromise his friendship with Gigs. This is Frankie's first close friendship with a girl. Over the course of the novel, Frankie learns to live with the unpredictable nature of Sydney. While he is fascinated by her life, which is full of unforeseen changes that Frankie would find upsetting, he comes to appreciate Sydney's direct questions because she has the courage to ask about an issue straight up. This is a novelty for Frankie who struggles with the fact that his family do not ever talk about his mother's mental health issues. Instead, they seem to have an unspoken agreement that his mother's condition is not to be discussed and that things will right themselves eventually. With that, Frankie has a literal "she" living, and not ever leaving, in his house, who will not be 'right'; at least there is no evidence to suggest that Francie will change her behaviour.

Sydney's life is unsettled; she moves frequently, thanks to decisions made by her mother who gives her little to no warning about the next move. She needs to form relationships quickly, which is why she asks the obvious, but direct and difficult, questions. Frankie knows the questions are coming and he is agonizing about them before Sydney asks. He both admires and fears Sydney's ability, because he does not know how to respond to the question he anticipates her asking at any moment,

> He could hear Sydney's questions clearly. He'd been hearing them in his head for two weeks. "Question," she would say in her raspy way […] "How come," she would say, with a bluntness that would make him flinch, "how come your mother never leaves the house?" (87-88)

As is typical for Frankie, he has already thought about all the possible answers. He is anticipating the question his friend will ask him, yet he is unable to ask the question of his mother himself. With Sydney, De Goldi has created a character demanding answers to questions on a topic that has been avoided for many years of his life. Yet, through her innocent and sensitive male protagonist, she manages to illustrate the struggles some New Zealanders used to face and are still facing behind closed doors: the suffering of both those directly affected by mental illness, and also that of their relatives and friends, in part due to the 'she'll be right' culture which means the struggles cannot be talked about.

Throughout the novel, Frankie continues to strive for normality which he associates with a certain kind of masculinity. He seeks to establish a sense of appropriateness for himself by comparing himself to his family members and by comparing his physical build with different sports positions. He notices that he is built differently to many of his immediate family and, because of his anxiety and hypochondriac tendencies, he questions whether he has a medical condition that makes him more feminine than a boy should be. He compares himself to his father,

> Uncle George was dark, too – […]. He wasn't particularly tall, nor was his body god-like in its proportions. It was large and comfortable, […]. He'd always locked the scrum, Uncle George said, whereas Frankie was more your nippy half-back. Or a rowing cox. (78)

Frankie's self-perception here hinges on a lack of physical build and strength. He tries to meet physical ideals that he cannot achieve. He contemplates his father's role on the rugby field, a national sport that has generated an ideal of a male New Zealander that only a few men actually meet. Rugby players are traditionally associated with the blokey 'she'll be right' culture that both De Goldi and Kirwan criticise. At 12 years old, Frankie is yet to reach puberty, during which he will experience significant physical changes. So, naturally the comparison with a strong rugby-playing father must disappoint.

In his book *A Man's Country? The Image of the Pākehā Male, a History*, Jock Phillips observes,

> The All Blacks provided by far the most significant role model for males in twentieth century New Zealand and they came to be accepted throughout the society (by some women as well as men) as the purest manifestation of what a New Zealander was. […] It was the 1905 tour, however, which created idols of the All Blacks and turned them into formal representatives of the nation's manhood. (109)

Frankie, who is trying to find his place in his community, and in a sense in society, tries to work out which position he would play on the rugby field. He identifies a role that requires less strengths when he mentions the half-back, before comparing himself with an athlete outside the national sport rugby. While coxswains play an important role in a rowing boat, they need the least amount of strength of the whole crew; they are usually significantly shorter and lighter than the rest of the crew and they face in the opposite direction to their crew. In any coxed boat, there are at least four, at most eight, rowers, but there is only ever one cox per boat. A coxswain's performance, steering straight aside, is mostly measured in their ability to communicate clearly

and continuously, make the right tactical decision, read the race, and motivate the crew. Their contribution is one of mental not physical strength. They are, as far as rowers are concerned, the exception. As such, Frankie's observations about himself and his body separate him from the stereotypical New Zealander as strong, silent, rugby-playing ideal of a male. He perceives himself as small, weak, talkative, and with that unable to adopt the silence a 'she'll be right' approach would expect. None of these characteristics meet the expectations of a stereotypical New Zealander. Despite his best efforts, "to fill out and grow up by way of two-egg, three-scoop smoothies" (78), Frankie has, thus far, been limited to a height of 1.2 m. Teasing from Gordana does not help the situation as she regularly accuses him of having "a surplus of female hormones" (78).

De Goldi has Frankie begin to believe and naturally worry about this possibility,

> Once in the night, when the thought of a galloping girlishness became too much for him, Frankie had thrown himself on Ma's bed and asked her to tell him straight up if he had a secret feminising condition, and could it be fixed by drugs? Naturally, she insisted that he was perfectly normal. She said it was only a matter of time before he filled out. No mention of his face. Frankie remembered distinctly that Louie had thrilling adventures with Uncle George's electric shaver by the time he was thirteen. And his legs had been thick and solid as a Kauri trunk. Frankie's thirteenth birthday was only six months away and his skin was as smooth as a baby's bottom. Nor were his legs promising. He pulled up his jeans for a hopeful check. Just as he'd expected: slender and hairless as a ballerina's. (78-90)

In this passage of free indirect discourse, Frankie's simile compares Louie's legs with a kauri trunk, Kauri being New Zealand's largest native tree. They serve as a symbol for strength and quiet, yet strong, leadership. Frankie's experience is set up in contrast to that of Louie. While the reader might wonder what exactly Louie's "adventures" would have looked like, the association with manliness is obvious. In Frankie's eyes, Louie is comparable to an All Black. He, on the other hand, is not.

It was this ideal that was challenged by Kirwan and the Ministry of Health in 2006. A *New Zealand Herald* article at the time quoted Waikato University lecturer Dr. Richard Pringle, "I think it is challenging some stereotypes of masculinity, I think the fact that he is who he is and is doing this makes it more powerful" (qtd. in McKenzie-Minifie). Pringle pointed out that being an All Black, and a role model because of that, was key to Kirwan's success in educating New Zealanders about

depression. To the public, a struggling All Black was a walking contradiction. He provides a real and relevant example of complexity. He was an accomplished player, despite his suffering. In many ways Kirwan provided the living proof that the masculine stereotypes and the 'she'll be right' attitude are anything but accurate and, at the very least, they are unhelpful. The campaign encouraged New Zealanders to discuss their struggles more openly with loved ones, and, with that, promoted a departure from the silence-encouraging 'she'll be right' when it comes to mental health. Once it gained momentum, researchers were astonished to find that, for the first time, there was an equal, and at times higher, number of male callers contacting help lines about their struggles. The *New Zealand Herald* article elaborates,

> Former All Black John Kirwan's vivid description of his experience with depression in a series of TV commercials is being credited with a rise in men asking for help. Half the callers to the National Depression Initiative helpline had been men, bucking the trend of women callers to counselling lines outnumbering men two to one, […] "It is quite astounding," Mr Wilshire [LifeLine CEO] said. "It's had its moments when it's more than the female figure." (McKenzie-Minifie)

Previously, female callers had made up about two thirds of the calls and the shift indicates a development in people's understanding of what constitutes masculinity and femininity. The developing ability to discuss mental health issues also suggests a broadening of the previously narrow understanding of masculinity.

De Goldi's descriptions of Frankie's immaturity, for example "baby's bottom" and "ballerina", vividly suggest weakness, dependence and fragility. Frankie ultimately perceives his own appearance as feminine and immature, and he worries this could be a medical condition. Appearing feminine to him means not meeting the expectations, not being masculine enough. He experiences insecurity about his lack of facial hair, the absence of which is a sign of immaturity. Frankie lacks muscles and facial hair as well as hair on legs and arms, the markers of puberty and a transition into manhood. His insecurity and sense of inadequacy come from a comparison of his own development to that of his brother. Similarly, young adults engage in comparisons at school and De Goldi illustrates what the impact of this ongoing measuring against others can develop into. She also emphasises that stereotypes and ideals are not necessarily useful.

De Goldi's novel draws attention to the fact that the stereotype or ideal of the All Black New Zealander may not be wrong: after all, Louie and Uncle George seem to fit it to some extent, but that it is simplistic and outdated. This is echoed in a discussion of the depiction of male New Zealanders in New Zealand texts. In his book *Whole Men: The Masculine Tradition in New Zealand Literature*, Kai Jensen observes that the public expectation of what men do and how they behave does not match reality. He continues by saying,

> This indeed is the problem. Public images of masculinity (say the ones in beer advertisements or Barry Crump novels) […] are far from being the whole story of male experience. Men are enjoined to be strong, inexpressive and so on, but what purpose do those injunctions serve in their contexts. How many men actually follow them and do men present themselves differently in different situations? (12)

Frankie's emotional experience is not what is expected of a boy. In *All Blacks Don't Cry*, Kirwan identifies a disconnect between what boys and men think they should be feeling and what they are feeling, as a New Zealand-wide challenge,

> I think there's an aspect of New Zealand culture and upbringing that's sort of macho, and because of that, males in particular struggle to come to grips with their emotions. What they think they *should* be feeling has a lot of weight, and they can find it really hard to deal with full-on emotion – maybe crying or opening up. But every time a man says 'harden up' to a son who is dealing with a really difficult issue, it's another nail in the coffin. (52)

Frankie's family does not directly tell him to 'harden up', rather they do not address his struggles and Francie's struggles at all. The approach is very much one of 'she'll be right' – they hope that, eventually, things will work themselves out.

De Goldi's choice to use cricket as the sport the children connect through is significant. In terms of gender expectations, Frankie is measuring himself against a role model with which he is not in the least compatible. In many ways, this makes cricket an appropriate sport for Frankie to play and follow. In New Zealand, cricket, unlike rugby, is less strongly associated with masculinity and cricket players are not usually perceived as stereotypical "Kiwi blokes". Instead, cricket is a gentler game of many variables. The structured nature of the game and its extensive records would appeal. The ball, pitch, weather, and temperature affect the statistics. Players, in part, identify themselves by averages. There are many different roles and tactical decisions are very important. As the recent Cricket World Cup illustrated, the game is precise because everything is

regulated – if, at times, controversially so – but it retains unpredictability. The rules and averages appeal, the rhythm is structured and there are patterns within. Frankie loves the rules because it means he can know a lot about cricket. This sense of control suits him.

De Goldi's narrative resonates with this kind of mental health "awakening" which New Zealand society has been experiencing since 2006. Her characters show a variety of ways in which to engage with mental wellbeing. Published in 2008, *The 10PM Question* is one of the first and one of the few young adult novels whose protagonist directly asks why no-one is talking about mental health. In the novel, the characters begin to find ways to address their struggles without directly discussing it. In a telling episode, Frankie and his brother Louie identify family members with different birds. Instead of directly addressing the issue, they develop a bird metaphor which explores their mother's, and thus their problem – the issue of confinement. Their procedure draws attention to the overwhelming silence in the family. Frankie is becoming acutely aware of the lack of acknowledgement around his mother's choice not to leave the house. As we shall see, he is unsure if this is entirely normal. When Frankie joins Louie in his delivery truck, he reflects in a long passage of free indirect discourse,

> Clearly, Louie didn't want to talk about Ma. […] Now […] Frankie knew […] that he had not in fact once in his twelve years ever had a conversation with Louie about Ma. Not once had they ever discussed the startling fact of their family life: that their mother stayed permanently and irrevocably – and, who knows, maybe unnaturally – at home; that she had not left their property for nine years or more; that she seldom ever left the four safe walls of their house. They had never discussed the extremely odd fact that their mother had not, for nine years been in a car, a bus, a shop, a movie theatre, an aeroplane. That this long time she had never been to the beach, the library, the art gallery, the Aunties', the doctor, the dentist, a café or a kebab house. How could they have never talked about this? Frankie could hardly believe it. (114)

They then try to establish which bird each family member would be, and Frankie notices that he has not ever discussed his mother with Louie. As he reflects, this strikes him as unusual. He is also unsure whether his mother's behaviour is unusual, presumably because he has had no one to talk with about this. Instead the family have focused on other topics of discussion. The brothers fall back into this pattern. Louie sees Gordana, their sister, as a screech owl and Uncle George as a puffin. Both birds reflect elements of their respective personalities. Alma, one of the aunts, is initially considered to be a pelican before they decide all the aunt are rocs. Comparing the aunts

to this legendary bird is a well-selected pun because all three of them, and Alma in particular, have been and continue to be Frankie's 'rock'. They are a constant in his life and provide stability and certainty when his mother's availability fluctuates, and his father is more distant than is good for an anxious son. Frankie sees Sydney as a woodpecker. But when Frankie repeats his question and asks what bird their mother would be, Louie falls silent,

> For some reason Louie was deliberately ignoring Frankie's question about Ma. Instead, he began to recite the catalogue of Ilir's driving offences, which was long and not at all interesting. When the light turned green he revved ostentatiously and roared across the intersection.
> […] Louie was parking, […] still rattling about Ilir;
> […]
> And then it came to Frankie what Louie reminded him of. Himself, him, Frankie. Himself babbling away to Sydney, going on and on and on about the Aunties that day, trying desperately to fill the air between them with words, any words, to summon up a cloud of words so big it shut out the intensity of her focus, deflected her questions about his times at the Aunties' house, her inevitable questions about Ma. (113-4)

The brothers struggle to directly talk about their mother being house-bound. Instead they change the topic, which is a typical example of New Zealand's 'she'll be right' attitude. Where people are uncomfortable with a topic, they seek to steer the conversation in a different direction. The conversation with Louie has prompted Frankie to reflect on more than one level. Not only does he think about which bird his mother embodies, he also discovers, perhaps for the first time, that there is a behavioural pattern of silence. He first notices that Louie is avoiding answering the question, but then he quickly moves to recognise the pattern that he himself has so often used in conversations with Sydney, when he has kept talking about more trivial topics in an effort to distract her to avoid the conversation he really needs to have about his mother. These reflections are a sign of Frankie's increasing maturity. He engages with the interactions and conversations, or lack of, in his family on a meta level, something his younger self would not have been capable of. As he grows older and more independent, he begins to wonder and ask questions about why people behave in the way they do. The reader begins to wonder with Frankie why no one ever talks about Francie's situation and her condition, about the silences in their conversations, and the impact of all of this on family members and friends. The siblings in the novel have learned to distract themselves, with any other topic that comes to mind, to keep themselves occupied, because thinking about their mother is confusing and painful.

The bird metaphor serves to elaborate on the roles in the family in a more figurative way. While they carefully begin to talk about their mother, they are not very explicit about her. The metaphor still allows them to keep this highly emotional topic at a tolerable distance. At the same time, there is an implied acknowledgement that they have both wondered about and been affected by their mother's condition. Speaking metaphorically about Francie is the beginning of a conversation that until that point has not taken place at all. It is progress. By assigning the birds to the family and friends, the characters make judgements about their personalities and traits. We learn how Frankie and Louie see the other family members. Frankie probes for long enough this time. He repeats the question and offers suggestions about what kind of bird their mother could be for Louie to understand that he wants to continue the conversation. Ultimately this leads Louie to articulate his thoughts to Frankie for the first time,

> "She has to be a caged bird, doesn't she?" He kept looking ahead. "Something that's had its wings clipped. Something really pretty, but a bit sad."
> […]
> "Yeah, a canary," said Louie. "One that doesn't sing much. Doesn't sing at all."
> "She sings," said Frankie in a small voice. "But not really," said Louie. (115)

The image pains them both and the conversation moves on. The exchange shows that they are both trying to see their mother and her circumstances as positively as possible, while they perceive her existence as sad. Frankie, who lives with his mother and who visits her in her room daily, has a slightly more positive view of her situation. Louie, on the other hand, perceives her situation as tragic. He is older, has left home and now witnesses the situation with more distance and possibly more mature reflection than Frankie. He struggles to see the positives.

Interestingly, Frankie also thinks about what kind of bird he would be, "A kingfisher. He could be a kingfisher. Perched on a powerline, still and watchful. Spying out the land and the water. Waiting" (122). The metaphoric bird he chooses for himself is characterised by passivity when it comes to actions but a mindful and attentive observer. Like a kingfisher, Frankie observes the world around him, his family life and the world beyond the house. When it comes to taking actions and moving beyond what he knows, he prefers to stand back, wait and watch. This, the reader comes to understand, can be debilitating. The lack of active and positive experiences contributes to his worries and feeling of powerlessness. The worries then keep him from trying

new things – a self-perpetuating cycle of passivity and anxiety. It is a state of waiting for things to work out, for things to 'be right' without actively engaging in efforts to improve the situation. It is also a lonely position to be in which can be connected to the potentially isolating 'she'll be right' approach to mental health. With this image of the kingfisher, Frankie establishes his position in the family and his approach to life to the reader. On the cover of *The 10PM Question*, readers can see an illustration of the aral bird that features in Sydney's and Frankie's story (186). During a discussion of their school project Frankie and Sydney come to a consensus, "That was the good thing about writing and drawing, he and Sydney had agreed. You could have all the things you yearned for, but could never achieve. Including easy solutions" (185). Both characters experience a lack of control when it comes to their mothers, and so creativity becomes an outlet they have full control over. It also offers opportunity to create a world they way they would like it to be and so Frankie has invented a bird species which is "[…]a perfect composite of all his favourite bird bits (186).

As illustrated by the discussion above, Frankie experiences a degree of isolation within his family. Francie's depression affects all family members, and, while the narrative privileges Frankie's voice, it is clear that struggles are experienced by his siblings, too. His brother is not prepared or not able to talk to him about his mother in explicit terms. The relationship with Gordana, his sister, is characterised by teasing and egging on. She is hard for Frankie to approach because she is quite temperamental. This makes her an uncomfortable option for Frankie, who likes to keep his world predictable. The "Aunties" visit regularly. They provide a sense of stability and, in times of his mother's greatest struggle, Frankie was sent to live with them. Most interesting in the family dynamic for the purpose of this chapter, however, is the overly detached father. Everyone calls him "Uncle" George and his status as Frankie's father emerges only gradually. Uncles are usually less engaged with their nephews than fathers with their sons. Uncle George waits for his children to take on responsibilities. He rarely directs and takes a stand. Many of the reader's questions are articulated by Sydney, and this also happens here, "Why do you call your father Uncle George?" (63). Frankie finds Sydney's question unsettling but has to concede that it is a legitimate thing to wonder,

> See. That was her style. She lobbed tougher questions hard on the heels of a dolly. It was exactly like her bowling. "He has always been called that," said Frankie. "When he was born he was already an uncle, so they called him Uncle George. "
> […]
> "I thought he mustn't be your father," said Sydney.
> That was perfectly understandable, Frankie conceded privately, since, once upon a time, he had thought precisely the same thing. (63)

This moment is an illustration of the conversations that rarely happen in Frankie's house. After worrying about whether Uncle George really is his father, Frankie had asked his mother and Francie had assured him that,

> Uncle George was indeed his dad, and Uncle George [had] proved it by demonstrating that the hammer head second toe on Frankie's left foot was identical to the hammer head second toe on Uncle George's left foot. It was a small but fetching genetic malformation, Uncle George said. (64)

The comparison of the genetically deformed toe is humorous. Instead of focusing on physical similarities that do not have negative connotations, unlike a malformation, Uncle George focuses on what can be perceived as a weakness. The only thing he points out that Frankie has from him is a flaw. There is no discussion of personality traits, talents or interests they might share. Uncle George, it seems, is either unaware or unable to understand and deal with the anxiety and self-doubts his youngest son experiences. Instead he indicates an additional abnormality about him, which is bound to be unsettling for Frankie, who tries so desperately for him and his family to be "normal".

Frankie only remembers one instance when Uncle George insisted. When Frankie tried to get out of flying to the North Island to visit someone with the Aunties, Uncle George insists, even though Frankie has been worrying about it and discussing it with his mother for weeks,

> Eventually Ma said perhaps he shouldn't go, but Uncle George had unexpectedly put his foot down. This was such a rare event that everyone had been startled. Uncle George almost never gave his children instructions; he rarely disciplined them; he said it wasn't in him to act the paterfamilias. (75-6)

The family was so perplexed by him taking a stance that even Gordana, who had made fun of Frankie for fearing planes, inquires about Uncle George's reasons,

> So when Uncle George said that Frankie was getting on that plane or his name wasn't George Llewellyn Parsons it was so surprising that neither Frankie nor Ma had argued. Gordana's, who had been loudly derisive of Frankie's plane phobia, but who could also be contrary at a moment's notice, demanded why Frankie should fly if he didn't want to.
> "Because it's important," said Uncle George.
> "Why?" said Gordana.
> "Because then he'll have proof that none of those things happened." (76)

The situation is so startling that the family follows his directions. There are no further discussions, Frankie flies to the North Island with the Aunties and has a good time. It is a rare glimpse of the fact that Uncle George does, in fact, think about Frankie's anxiety and wants him to be able to lead a "normal" life. He understands that Frankie gets caught in "*what if…"* thoughts and, in this instance, Uncle George uses his parental authority to ensure his son has an experience that is reassuring. This moment is one of the very few when Uncle George takes the role of the traditional male leader in the family. It is a case of stepping into and acting the role of "paterfamilias" (76), which he claims is not usually in his nature. Clearly though, he perceives this to be an important experience for Frankie to build resilience and to prove to himself that he can engage in the activities he fears.

Frankie ultimately fears to become like his mother; he worries he too might turn into a caged bird. Early on, Frankie mentions "rodent thoughts" (76) in his narration with reference to the thoughts and worries that overcome him when he feels out of control or when he does not know what to expect. He is concerned about all the things that could happen, even though his family reassure him to the contrary,

> But they might, they might, said the rodent voice that colonised Frankie's head at these times. The rodent voice was thin and whining and the perpetual bearer of unpalatable facts. When the rodent voice was ascendant nothing Frankie tried would shut it up. (76)

Rodents are often pests and, as such, a nuisance and not welcome. The same is true of Frankie's thoughts. De Goldi personifies them when she compares the thoughts to colonisers who intrude into his mind. Like colonisers, the thoughts take over He feels powerless when they are approaching and nothing he has tried works to keep the worries at bay. It is not until he talks to Alma close to the end of the novel that he uses the word "rodent" when referring to his thoughts in conversation *with* someone else. Up until this point, these thoughts are another silence in Frankie's life. Because the 'she'll be right' myth is deeply ingrained, silence is common when it

comes to mental health issues. Frankie does not have a role model who shows him how he *could* articulate his thoughts. With no example available, Frankie has to simply assume that he must remain silent.

Frankie becomes incapable of seeing Francie for their usual 10PM catchup and, as his anxiety grows, he finds himself struggling to manage his mental health. He is sleep-deprived, moody, lacks care for his personal hygiene and can no longer regulate his emotions (209). After days of struggle Frankie realises that,

> He had to find help, he needed help, he knew it, he really did. He had to talk to someone, and soon, or he wouldn't be able to go on.
> […]
> Yes, he had to talk to someone.
> […]
> He wiped his eyes, though the tears just came and came, he wiped and blew and wiped, and then, like a rider approaching from a long way off, the thought came slowly through the pounding and the blowing and the tears: Alma.
> […]
> He would find Alma, and somehow, he didn't know how, somehow it would be better. Alma would save him. (220-221)

Frankie has concluded that things will not simply right themselves. 'She'll *not* be right' and neither will he. He himself needs to act and ask for help and support. De Goldi not only intimates the fact that sharing the struggle could be the beginning of recovery; the decision of itself improves Frankie's situation. Just the prospect of talking to Alma helps him feel better, as for the first time in a while, he is able to fall asleep, "An immense force was drawing him under in a heavy rush, down and down and down, and he was asleep" (221).

Alma does not, of course, have all the answers. But Frankie can talk to her and, for the first time, voices some of his deeper worries and some of his troubling reflections. To her he first mentions his "rodent thoughts" (227) in conversation and she acknowledges them, rather than trying to fix them. She praises his courage in opening up, "'This is brave,' she said. 'Talking like this. You know that, don't you?'" (227) and she also confirms that the situation is difficult, "'Oh Frankie,' she sighed. 'Isn't it hard?'" (229). Alma models how one should respond in cases such as Frankie's. It also exemplifies how those suffering like Frankie might approach their difficulties. De Goldi

provides an encouraging, but not simplistic, portrayal of a difficult conversation about a difficult topic.

Once he has opened up to her, Alma encourages Frankie to have the conversation with his mother who is unaware, like everyone else in the family, of how much pressure Frankie has put on himself. Most of the novel is a third-person narrative, and while the readers have privileged access to Frankie's thoughts through focalization and moments of first-person limited narration, it is unclear how aware the family is of Frankie's struggles. The reader knows that Frankie has lied to avoid going to camp so he can be at home to support his mother; they know that Frankie is stressed about having to do the grocery shopping and we see that all the extra roles Frankie has taken on are overwhelming. Presumably, others are overwhelmed, too, and because they believe that 'she'll be right', they have decided that it is better to act as if everything is "fine", rather than dealing with the problem. Then again, there is a possibility that they do not know how to address the issues.

De Goldi presents characters who are traumatised in different ways. Francie lost her parents when she was a child. She was the only survivor of a car accident that killed her parents. She herself grew up with the aunties. And while Frankie is in despair about his own situation and seeks to understand his mother's condition, Alma explains Francie's condition,

> "You used to say that Ma was resting up," Frankie said. "So she was," said Alma, stoutly. "Resting from life. Temporarily. I told you she'd be back, too." "And I tell you what," she continued. "I was very pleased I could say that to you, you understand? Very pleased. I couldn't say it to your mother when she was the same age."
> Frankie stared at her; the terrible truth of Ma's childhood bereavement was written on Alma's walrus face. He closed his eyes, taking it in. Ma never got her own mother back. She hadn't got her father (232).

In explaining this to Frankie and ultimately the reader, not only does Alma remind him of his mother's struggle, she also explains her own role in supporting the family. Not only has she supported her niece, Francie, through the loss of her parents, she must, at the same time, have grieved for the loss of her own sister and brother-in-law, then supported Francie's husband and her children when Francie herself was unable to look after him in her own home. *The 10PM Question* resembles *Dear Vincent* in the way in which it draws attention to intergenerational trauma experienced and resolved by the characters. Both novels show how the New Zealand

myth at stake – the OE or 'she'll be right' – can generate strategies to deal with these traumas. While OE was positive for Tara, 'she'll be right' is negative for Frankie.

Frankie knows that his mother is still affected by flashbacks. Emergency vehicle sirens serve as a trigger for her and so she tries to avoid hearing these if possible,

> The siren grew louder. […] Frankie stole a look at ma. Her eyes were closed. She hated sirens. Uncle George has told them years ago that siren sounds were the only thing Ma could remember about her parents' car accident. Ma had been in the car too, unharmed, but she could remember nothing just that high-pitched unrelenting wail and the flashing lights[.] (179).

His father has made the children explicitly aware of this trigger to explain Francie's reaction. This enables them to respond to or at least tolerate their mother's reaction to the regular sirens in their neighbourhood. As much as Uncle George seems like a rather detached parent, he does as much as he is capable of to support his children and his wife.

Frankie has difficulty articulating the challenges he faces and experiences frustration when everyone around him can. They do not seem to experience the same hesitation and limitations when it comes to discussing the issues at hand,

> "Is that what did it to Ma?", he said finally. "Her parents dying? It that what made her –"
> He never liked to think the word that hovered there, much less say it. There were so many of these, the words he didn't like to think or say.
> "Break down?" said Alma. She was like Gordana, Frankie thought. And Sydney. They were able to say hard words, all of them. They didn't cower and snivel like he did, hearing and seeing and speaking no evil. (232-233)

The passage draws attention to silences. Frankie finds it challenging to articulate his struggles and his worries. He cannot bring himself to use the words 'break down'; Alma completes the sentence for him. Frankie perceives this as another weakness, because everyone else around him seems to be able to use the necessary words. At this point in the novel, he has been able to start the sentence, though, giving Alma a chance to complete it. Earlier on, none of his thoughts were expressed to anyone. He cannot find the right words and seems to censor his own thoughts, stopping himself to even think of his mother's experiences as 'break down' or trauma. Instead he circumscribes, alludes, and omits. And his siblings are doing the same at times. While many characters are affected, each individual suffers in isolation. Frankie's omissions and ellipses

embody a typical coping strategy. Frankie controls his thoughts as much as he tries to control his day-to-day life. By not thinking the words that relate to his mother's and his own mental struggles, he avoids getting upset, and he also keeps himself from engaging with and processing the trauma. It is only when he can no longer bear the silence and when he has been unable to speak to his mother for a while, that he opens up about his struggles to Alma and asks the question that has been bugging him for a long time,

> "I couldn't sleep, I couldn't stop the rodent voice, but I couldn't talk to Ma, Alma. I don't want Ma to love sad endings. And I don't want her to *have* a sad ending either. I don't want to be just like Ma, Alma! I want her to leave the house. Why can't she? Why *won't* she? Why does everyone just accept it? Why doesn't anyone ever, *ever*, *ever* talk about it?" (228)

Frankie finally articulates the question that has been looming over him for the whole novel. This is the real 10PM question. All other questions he has thus far asked Francie are place-holders.

Once Frankie has disclosed his own worries and struggles, he finds his family to be very supportive. He also accesses help of a counsellor and, again, De Goldi presents one of the important aspects of addressing mental health issues: getting professional help. A passage of free indirect discourse reflects that Frankie's personal connection to his counsellor is just as paramount to effective help as practical support and strategies to address the worries,

> The newspaper had arrived, but Frankie had temporarily stopped reading the newspaper. He was taking a break from national and world affairs at the suggestion of Petrus, the guy he had been chatting to for the last couple of weeks. Petrus was South African and worthwhile for two reasons: one, he was extremely keen on cricket, and two, he had some quite useful suggestions for combating persistent worry. (241-2)

Just as he connected with Sydney at the beginning of the novel, Frankie connects with Petrus through a shared interest in cricket. He values Petrus's knowledge of the sport and because of that first accepts and then follows his advice when grappling with his anxiety. To help Frankie develop strategies and skills to deal with his mental health, Petrus discusses these with him and makes pragmatic suggestions such as not reading or watching the news which tend to focus on negative stories. These could be unsettling for someone like Frankie, who worries disproportionately. Frankie appreciates the specificity of Petrus's advice,

> At Petrus' suggestion, Frankie made a list of all the things about the household that were (a) mildly irritating, (b) very irritating, (c) plain unworkable, (d) actually dangerous. *Unreliable source of bus fare* had been in the very irritating column. Uncle George has

> agreed to address columns (b), (c) and (d) promptly and had been as good as his word, which meant that, among other things, that the smoke alarm batteries were fresh and everyone (except Ma) had had a flu injection.
> Gordana said she didn't see why Frankie should be the only person to have a fix-it list, so she had made one of her own. She has put *Uncle G walking around without underpants* in the (d) actually dangerous column. (245)

The counsellor is giving the family practical strategies, that help Frankie feel a sense of control. In her review "Sweet and Upbeat", Paula Morris comments, "The end of *The 10PM Question* is […] serene: there's therapy, a new household order, and a pan-sibling business venture, and an aunt-sponsored trip to Australia" (Morris). De Goldi's novel models that there are practical steps that can be taken to alleviate pressures. The siblings share responsibilities for the household more evenly, Gordana, for example, is now taking on the responsibility of ordering groceries from the supermarket which takes away some of the load Frankie was carrying (241). With this passage, De Goldi stresses first, that working with professionals can help overcome the challenges of mental health struggle and, second, that a family member struggling with mental health issues can affect the wider family. Like Kirwan, she emphasises that the impact of mental health issues can be more wide-reaching; that it can require people to seek support even if they themselves are not personally affected by the mental illness. De Goldi's choice of the name Petrus, meaning rock, is again deliberate. Petrus and his suggestions regarding how to deal with the anxiety and worries act as a rock and anchor for Frankie to keep his emotions and mental health steady.

The 10PM Question, like the other novels discussed in this thesis, explores in depth the relationship between a child and their mother. Reading the novel through the lens of the 'she'll be right' myth allows readers to explore an example of what one family's life could look like if they fail to address the topic that urgently needs to be discussed. The tension and silence between family members perhaps epitomise the relationship between the younger and the older generations in New Zealand. Frankie's question about why no one ever talks about the mental health issues of his mother and instead carries on as usual challenges the traditional 'she'll be right' attitude. It moves this question to the forefront of the reader's mind and promotes a rethinking of New Zealander's relationship with mental health. It specifically focuses on the widespread impact an attitude like 'she'll be right' can have. It is not only Frankie who is affected;

many of his family members also struggle in the situation. There are, however, characters who contribute to the silence. Gigs does not attempt to discuss Francie's mental health issues with Frankie, nor do Frankie's teachers engage in conversations with him about this. His siblings prefer to remain silent and his father does not raise the topic either. Even his aunts, who care for him *because* of the mental health issues of his mother, do not explore the topic with him until he brings it up. Francie's condition and her associated behaviour loom over the family, yet everyone acts as if nothing is wrong. This is one manifestation of the 'she'll be right' attitude. De Goldi's novel is powerful because it demonstrates possible consequences of that silence at a time when the discussion of mental health issues is becoming more public in New Zealand.

Conclusion

All these three novels offer the reader versions of teenagers who are finding their voice and their identity by determining who they are not. This process of demarcation of their personality is one where they compare themselves to their peers and their parents and decide who they want to be like and, more importantly, whose model they are not going to follow. Often it is their parents they want to set themselves apart from, but not all protagonists maintain this perspective until the end. While Tara and Frankie firmly establish that they are not like their mothers, even though they come to understand them better, Bugs goes through a phase of distancing herself before understanding that she shares a lot of values with Nikki. Integral to the process of identity formation are the national myths and attitudes that so firmly locate these three novels in New Zealand. All three authors create versions of the universal coming-of-age story. While it is the additional layer of New Zealand national myths that allow "Kiwi" readers to reflect on whether they would like to reinforce or challenge the myths and attitude of their parents' and grandparents' generation, these novels are also connected in five additional ways.

First, all three protagonists go through the process of discovering their parents' lives before they had children. All three protagonists learn to appreciate that their mothers have had experiences that shaped their lives, which now impact the children, but have little to do with them directly. With a greater appreciation of their parents, young adults reach a greater understanding of the world around them, their sense of the world is widened beyond themselves. The authors have captured a developmental stage that is well recognised by psychologists. In *Adolescence and Beyond: Family Processes and Development*, Patricia Kerig et. al. explain that "Those [teenagers] at more mature levels of ego development have an increased tolerance for ambiguity, a more complex awareness of inner life, and a greater concern for balancing the needs of the self with those of others" (70). All three protagonists show this additional awareness of their parents' needs by the end of each novel.

The unexpected observation across these novels is that all of them seem to advocate for the young adults to come to a better understanding of their mothers. Is the real purpose of children's and YA fiction then for adults to articulate to their children an anxiety to be misunderstood by

their children? Does the genre itself serve as a tool to model the reaching of greater understanding of one's parents, rather than illustrating the growth of the young adult? Jacqueline Rose has argued in her book *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Literature* that by addressing children through stories, "[…] the only story we can ever tell the child is the story of the child's (and our) coming-to-be" (26). Does this then mean that all children's and YA fiction is always also a coming-of-age story of adults? In his article "The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism and Children's Literature", Perry Nodelman expands Rose's idea of children's literature being a form of colonisation. He describes the genre as "inherently adult-centered" and elaborates that

> […] Child psychology and children's literature are primarily for the benefit of adults. We may claim to study childhood in order to benefit children, but we actually do it so that we will know how to deal with children; […]. By and large, we encourage in children those values and behaviors that make children easier for us to handle: more passive, more docile, more obedient – and thus more in need of our guidance and more willing to accept the need for it. (30)

Analysing the novels under this umbrella could provide interesting perspectives on the authors' work, their crafting of the adult characters and the relationship between these and the teenage protagonists.

Second, perhaps because all authors were adults when writing the novels, it seems the texts all address adult anxieties for their children. The adult authors ultimately present what they witness in children and teenagers as they go through adolescence and move towards greater independence. By inference, the reader could interpret that it is the parents' belief systems that are much more static. They are concerned about how this process of coming-of-age will go for their children and how it will affect the relationship between parents and children. This raises the question whether there is such a thing as YA fiction or if it is, after all, just a place for older adults to ponder their angst for their own children and the children in their lives. If one were to explore the question whether these are adultist books because they address adult anxieties, one could explore the behaviours of the adult characters in the novels and whether they can serve as role models to the adult reader.

A third element that could be explored separately are the relationships between the teens and their mothers. In all three novels these relationships are put under strain. This goes beyond the protagonists; the other teen characters in the novels are also affected by tension between them and their mothers. In *Dear Vincent*, Johannes and his mother are arguing about the best way forward in his education. In *Bugs*, Charmaine has a rather distant relationship to both her parents. While Shelley is trying to please her daughter's friends, she misses her daughter's need for emotional support and leaves her at home by herself when she needs her the most. The relationship between Jez and his mother is not in focus, but the reader does learn that she has expectations for her son and that she makes suggestions about educational choices. Jez explains, "'She wanted me to learn te reo, eh? But not to get to know where I came from or anything, not for me, eh? But because she reckoned the tourists would like it'" (72-3). Jez is disappointed by this because with this suggestion he perceives his mother having limited expectations of what he can become. The proposal ignores his talents and interests and shows a disconnect between the teen and his mother. In *The 10PM Question*, both Gigs and Sydney struggle in the relationships with their mothers. Gigs is displeased with his siblings and the amount of time he must spend looking after them, a task assigned to him by his mother. Sydney's mother, in a way, is the polar opposite to Frankie's mother; the struggle and detachment the teens experience, however, are very similar. In all three novels, the authors create teenagers who feel misunderstood and would like to be treated as if they were more mature than, perhaps, their age suggests. In her article "7 YA Novels About Mother-Daughter Relationships of All Kinds", Caitlin White observes that this portrayal is common across the genre,

> For YA novels that do include mothers, the relationship [between the teen and their mother] is often portrayed as troublesome or strained. And while this is a common issue for teenagers and adults alike, it's important to also include positive relationships with parents, particularly for young women, their mothers. (White)

White observes a limitation in YA narratives: the portrayal of relationships between teens and their mothers as strained or troublesome suggests that this is a typical and universal stage in the development and life experience of everyone. One could argue that Bugs's relationship with Nikki is the most amicable; however, there are still significant arguments between the two characters. None of the novels offer an example of a functional and positive relationship between a teenager

and a parent. During adolescence, teenagers develop a greater sense of self. In this process, they learn they are independent, and they desire to act as such in relation to their relatives. Part of this is also the realisation that their parents are more than just that. Tara's mother is also Kathleen, Bugs' mother is also Nicki and Frankie's mother is also Francie.

Fourth, in all novels, quasi-parents play a crucial role to assist the growth of the young adult's identity and understanding of their mother. Tara's aunt Shanaye, Bugs's uncle, and Frankie's aunts are the ones who provide information and context. They explore the personal struggles each adult, specifically the protagonists' mothers, had to face and encourage the protagonists to see their perspectives. In *Dear Vincent*, Shanaye shares with Tara the backstory of her mother's rape, the resulting pregnancy, the suicide of her father's brother, the attempted suicide of her mother, and of her parents' marriage. In *Bugs*, Bugs's uncle explains with patience that Nikki, Bugs's mother, made her choices deliberately to support Bugs, but that she also sacrificed opportunities in her own life because of Bugs. He is present; he cares and takes Bugs's side at times. When Bugs is grounded and feels miserable, he invites Jez over to hang out with them, despite knowing that Nikki does not allow Bugs to have friends over while she is grounded,

> "I'm not allowed to have friends over." "You're not. But I can have *my* friends over. He's here to see me, not you" (173).

In *The 10PM Question*, the role of the aunts in Frankie's upbringing is slowly revealed and turns out to be much bigger than the reader could initially have anticipated. When Frankie struggles the most, it is his aunt Alma to whom he decides to speak. All three authors recognise the roles quasi-parents play in child-raising. All three novels share the element that the protagonists turn to non-parental adults, such as extended family members, teachers or counsellors, for guidance and support when the communication with their respective parents is unsuccessful. The positive impact of engaging with non-parental adults has been summarised in "Supportive Non-Parental Adults and Adolescent Psychosocial Functioning" by Emma Sterrett et. al., who have observed, "that adolescents who receive non-parental adult social support have more positive attitudes, or cognitive and affective appraisals, toward school […]" (286). They also mention that non-parental adults can provide support to curb "emotional and behavior problems" (285).

The novels reflect these other important adults: teachers, mentors and counsellors. In *Dear Vincent*, Tara finds a mentor in Max, the elderly man she meets at work in the retirement village and grandfather to Johannes who will end up becoming Tara's close friend. Max takes an interest in her and supports her in making decisions. She also, to a lesser extent, has the support of her Art teacher who supports her and encourages her to use her talent which ultimately provides an alternative pathway for Tara. Bugs finds support in her Dean. While she is not the most sympathetic supporter, she does see the value in supporting Bugs, even if it is for reasons that are less focused on Bugs's success and more focused on the school having a Māori student performing well. Bugs receives the support nonetheless. Frankie also turns to a teacher when he is worried about Sydney. Because he is aware of Sydney's mother's feckless lifestyle and because he has heard Sydney was crying, he fears they will leave. He turns to Mr. A,

> "You could ring up," said Frankie. "You could make up some reason something about the book project, or about Camp anything, you could just check that they haven't …" he stopped, seeing the look on Mr A's face, hearing his voice, all high and wobbly, "… you know," he finished lamely, dropping his voice, "you know. You could check they haven't … gone." (138)

And Mr A later replies, "'I'll give Sydney's house a call,'" said Mr A. He patted Frankie on the shoulder. "'Take it easy, Frankie'" (139). All authors recognise the value of the extended adult network. Deliberately or not, the three authors have included additional support for their protagonists in the form of non-parental adults and their narratives exemplify what has been observed in child and adolescent development.

As a further similarity, all authors also put a strong focus on the importance of friendship as a kind of selected family or support system and they illustrate how friendships gain importance for young adults as they are gradually trying to separate themselves from their parents. The protagonists of all three novels rely on the strong connections with their close friends. Tara has Johannes, Bugs has Jez and, to an extent, Charmaine, and Frankie has Gigs and Sydney. Interestingly, all three authors choose the closest friend to be one of the opposite sex. Adolescence sees an increased interest in the other sex and both, same-sex and opposite-sex, friendships help adolescents to connect and understand each other. These friendships are part of the process of reaching individuality and independence from the family and they contribute

to seeing the world from different points of view. The friends become the people the protagonists share their thoughts and concerns with before they are prepared to discuss them with the adults in their lives.

Lastly, I have been concerned to demonstrate that these novels are universal in their presentation of identity formation and coming-of-age and at the same time uniquely New Zealand texts through their presentation of national myths. All novels reflect a New Zealand myth and corresponding attitudes that influence their respective protagonists' experiences of identity formation and coming-of-age. While the stories are universal, their placement and connection to local attitudes and contexts are "Kiwi". What remains is, of course, the question whether these texts reinforce or challenge the myths or elements of them.

Tara's trip to Ireland in *Dear Vincent* meets the notion of the OE as a rite of passage, an experience that helps change perspective and that opens the teenager's or young adult's mind to individuals beyond themselves. In many ways, her journey reinforces the OE myth of gaining greater understanding, maturity and a broader perspective. It is important to note that her journey is a metaphorical one, too, though. She travels to Ireland and into her family's past. Upon her return, she is more self-assured. Bell explains, "After travel many New Zealanders are more aware and confident of their distinct identity" (153). This is true of Tara , who when she returns has a firmer sense of self and also a more distinct understanding of herself in the greater dynamics of her family. Her perspective becomes more open and flexible to make space for her mother as Kathleen. Hager's novel adds depth to the understanding of OE as an educational journey because she demonstrates that it is both a physical and a psychological journey.

Bugs criticises the egalitarian myth and suggests that it is promoted most by those whose interests it serves. It is the Pākehā characters who display and articulate the myth and the Māori characters, especially Bugs and her uncle, who critique it. Charmaine makes assumptions about goods, for example access to cell phones and cars, that she believes should be a basic human right for everyone, when in reality they are markers of her privilege. Readers come to dislike her, because she appears obnoxious and ignorant. Through Charmaine, Bugs learns about the nature of the myth. It becomes clear that 'we are all equal here' is an appealing idea, but it is not realised.

While it might seem possible from Pākehā characters' point of view, Bugs, Jez and their respective whanau know it will not manifest for them. The novel draws attention to the silence the myth generates between those who seek to reinforce it by retelling it and those for whom it is so clearly non-existent. Hereaka invites her readers to ask whose myth the egalitarian myth really is.

The 10 PM Question explores the increasingly challenged 'she'll be right' attitude of New Zealanders towards mental health. De Goldi is an early adopter of the topic in fictional form. Frankie's development mirrors that of many "Kiwis" who desire a more open conversation about mental health. The novel challenges the myth, explores the expectations of femininity and masculinity it conveys, and introduces a new, more sensitive and thoughtful example of masculinity: Frankie. He recognises the unhelpful silence the myth creates and becomes a catalyst for his family to begin to talk about their mental health. His version of masculinity confronts the stoic "bloke" who plays rugby.

These novels treat, as we have seen, quintessentially New Zealand themes. It is their respective presentation of a national myth or attitude that locate the texts firmly in New Zealand. The issues raised make them texts New Zealand readers can connect with. At the same time, the issues raised are uncomfortable and invite reflection on whether the reader seeks to reinforce or challenge the myths with their own actions and interactions. It is rare that we step back and examine where these beliefs, stories and attitudes come from. The strength of each one of these novels is that they engage, intentionally or not, with national myths. It is encouraging to see three female New Zealand writers take on the task of creating young adult fiction that tells the universal teenage story while firmly locating them in a New Zealand context. All three strike a balance between telling the story of the individual and exploring the issues, myths and attitudes that affect many in New Zealand. In a time where teens are increasingly connected beyond the boundaries of countries, it becomes more important for readers to engage in thinking about locality and the contexts that shape their identity and their belief and value systems.

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