This is the published version:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

[http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30077109](http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30077109)

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright: 2013, Conversation Media Group
The following, for me, were particularly notable in the year gone by.

**Sea Hearts**

*Sea Hearts* by Margo Lanagan is a fantasy for young adults. As with much of the author’s
recent work it blends the psychic resonance of fairy tale with elaborate construction of detailed social and material worlds.

The novel is set on Rollrock Island, an isolated community, bounded and sustained by the sea. But the island also hides a mystery.

The island’s population is a mix of humans and selkies, its children conceived from recurrent cycles of interbreeding with “sea wives”.

These tall, dark, ethereal women have been drawn from the bodies of seals to be brides for the island’s dour, red-headed fishermen.

As the story opens, this cycle of miscegenation with its traumatic consequences for the island’s men, women and children is about to be replayed.

Competition between compliant seal women and the cranky “red wives” forces an exodus of the human women – while the sea wives who remain constantly weep for their lost seal-selves. They grieve too for the sons and daughters with so much seal nature they must be given back to the sea in order to thrive.

We find out about the story through a sequence of child character-narrators as they grow towards an adulthood shaped by the island’s secretive culture.

Of these voices, Misskaella Prout – the sea witch – and Daniel Mallett are the most important. Misskaella begins the cycle as a kind of revenge for her own childhood trauma. It is finished by Daniel, the son with the courage to return all the island’s mothers to their natural home.

The absence of a story arc centred on a single protagonist and her motivations has proved challenging to some young readers, Daniel’s prologue – a scene in which the island’s sons hunt shellfish to comfort their “mams” – must be reread at the conclusion in the light of the cultural nuances learnt through the process of reading.

But Lanagan is a writer who is less interested in depiction of action than its psychological and ethical consequences. The shifting perspectives require the reader to piece together for themselves the significance of the story.

The novel’s evocation of imagined geographies and emotional nuances is well represented in a scene showing the children valiantly shielding their strange mothers from a party of well-to-do day trippers from the mainland port, Cordlin. The boys’ behaviour witnesses both their shame and their fierce protectiveness of their mothers’ culture which is perceived as by the outsiders an ethnographic oddity:

> The mams’ talk had quieted; they lifted their faces curiously to the visitors. I sat among the mole-builders, so that the Cordlin ladies walking the path were a little above me. Such complicated clothing they wore! […]

> I followed their gazes to our mams below, their crying blankets floating all about them,
their faces not composed at all the way the town ladies’ were. They held their entire selves out, all their thoughts and feelings, as if on a platter for the ladies to take as they would. They did not seem to realise that the ladies might laugh, or not understand.

The Children of the King

The Children of the King by Sonya Hartnett is a novel for younger readers. Like Sea Hearts, it is structured around an enigma that both the child characters and the book’s readers must puzzle out.

As a material object the book clearly announces its classic status – from the painted board covers with their vintage print feel, to the elegant grey-scale vignettes that mark each chapter. The illustrations are by Mick Wiggins, whose work has been commissioned for a number of Penguin and Vintage Classic reprints.

Homage to the classics extends to the story’s plotting and generic allusions. The trope of children evacuated to a mysterious country house peopled by mysterious uncles or ghostly children invites comparison with a number of writers of the second golden age of children’s literature, such as C.S. Lewis and Lucy Boston.

But this is not a tale of epic fantasy. The novel is set in England in the second world war. The corrupting influence of power is explored through a recurrent historical narrative in which young men, boys, women and children are deeply implicated.

In order to escape the bombing of their home, the Lockwood children – Cecily and Jeremy – along with their remote and self-centred mother are evacuated to Heron Hall, their family’s ancestral seat. The children are joined by another displaced child, May Bright. May is selected by Cecily from among the unaccompanied child evacuees as a kind of pet.

But May is too serious and independent to remain under Cecily’s thumb. The child of a soldier killed in action and mother who has taken work in a munitions factory, May becomes a catalyst for the discovery of the mystery that seems to be attached to the white marble ruins on the estate - Snow Castle.

May’s moral seriousness on questions of politics and her faith in the ability of children to have agency in wartime is paralleled by that of 14-year-old Jeremy Lockwood. Jeremy must decide whether to stay safe in the country or return to London to serve in a more active role.

Hartnett’s novel uses the device of embedded narrative – a tale within a tale – to gradually impart clues. This strategy keeps the reader a little ahead of the child characters in solving the riddle of the quaintly dressed brothers that inhabit Snow Castle.

The ending is open-ended. Have the liberated ghosts intervened to save Jeremy during the Blitz? Were they really the Princes in the Tower from the time of Richard III? The reader must actively piece together fragments of story information to interpret the significance of the novel’s closure.
Today We Have No Plans

Today We Have No Plans is a picture book for younger readers, written by Jane Godwin and illustrated by Anna Walker.

This is no mystery – but rather a tale of the mundane. It dramatises the theme of the over-scheduled child, making a case for the importance of free play and unstructured time.

From the opening illustrations the book captures the chaos of the early morning rush. The parents, dressed for work, are multitasking, performing caring duties for the children while half their minds are already on the work day ahead.

Walker’s pencil, ink and watercolour illustrations capture the texture of everyday life – fuzzy charcoal lines escape the firm outlines of figures and objects, underlining the cosy clutter of a busy family life.

The story is narrated in the first person by a school-aged daughter. Her week is full of planned activities that add variety to her experience but also add to the time-poverty of the family. Tuesday has after school swimming lessons with Mum and baby waiting on the sidelines, Thursday orchestra practice, Friday sport and shopping.

Parents are clearly a secondary readership for this book. The mother works late on Wednesday while the older children stay at school-based after-school childcare. The dilemma of the working mother who balances toddler, children’s activities and work is clearly etched on the harassed face of the Mum as she shepherds the kids round the supermarket on Friday nights.

Finally Sunday comes round. Jane Godwin’s verse text is staggered over a double-page spread, giving a visible pause to the rhythm of the book. Colours become more vibrant and a vista of green space opens from the daughter’s window, signalling the freedom from structured, externally imposed routines.

The word “might” is repeated in the text as the children revel in the surprising chances and opportunities to just be thrown up by the day:

I might plant an apple pip
And wish for it to grow
See a magpie’s shining wings
Notice all the little things
So small, so quiet, so slow.

Unforgotten

Unforgotten by Tohby Riddle shows that the contemporary picture book is no longer something just for the very young.

Elaborate graphic novels and artist-led books such as Unforgotten are hybrid texts. They are visually evocative, even allusive, with layers of signs and potential meanings that reward reading by adults and re-reading by young people as their multiple literacies grow over the
Unforgotten is a twist on the myth of fallen angels. In a timeless set of urban landscapes, warscapes and streetscapes, swarms of guardian angles flock down to “watch, warm and mend” humans in need. Riddle’s evocative artwork traces the hidden, barely registered presence of these beings, or, at other times, their comic out-of-placeness on trams, train stations, and streets.

Amid an all-too-modern battlefield, one small angel is overcome by its labour and finally comes to rest on a bench in a city park. One of my favourite images shows the angel, invisible to all but the city’s innocent, non-human creatures. This is drawn as fully-inked, cartoon style layered in Photoshop over a digital photograph.

Turned almost to stone, the angel is relegated to a storeroom for superannuated statues. Here the book repeats the motif of perceptive innocents. A bold team of children, dogs, ducks, a clown and a pantomime horse stage a mission to rescue the broken angel from its warehouse.

Many of these creatures will strike chords with readers of Riddle’s other picture books for very young children.

This motley crew has not forgotten, reciprocating the care, warmth and healing of the wounded angel.

The book’s artwork holds a conversation with artifacts from the global repertoire of art and ritual. Riddle’s collages blend images sourced from various art museums – particularly the statutory heads or masks that combine in surprising fashion with the historical costumes that adorn the citizenry.

They add a monumental quality to the lived routines of the book’s imagined cities. As cultural signs in their own right, on the other hand, they point outward to another realm of memory and cultural literacy.
Children's literature

2013 in review