

An Intricate Web: Unweaving Strands of Convention in Children's Fantasy Series by Australians

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WRITING IN 2012, EDWARD JAMES COMMENTS THAT 'ONE OF THE MOST UNEXPECTED developments of the last decade has been the domination of the popular fantasy genre by Australian women (and some Australian men)' (76; see Wilkins 265). This trend has continued in the years since, with authors such as Emily Rodda, Kate Forsyth, Isobelle Carmody, Jessica Townsend, Garth Nix, John Flanagan, Michael Pryor and Jay Kristoff finding success in Australia and internationally. There is, however, very little distinctively 'Australian' about fantasy series by these writers, which largely conform to conventions of the genre that prevail internationally. Unlike Australian literary fiction, which values 'complex', original books that celebrate distinctive Australian features (Wilkins 267-9), genres such as fantasy value familiarity and commercial viability (Gelder 13-17, 26-7, 41). James argues that many Australian writers 'have only been a success because they have been able to market their books to publishers in the UK and USA' (76). Often, the global outlook of Australian genre fiction writers means publishers do not emphasise the Australian identity of these writers, and their books do not include extrinsically Australian features. In the highly commercial genre fiction industry, failure to adhere to the strict, if evolving, conventions that govern book production in a narrative and professional sense can mean that a writer does not get published, or at the least, does not achieve success in the global market.

Given the lack of 'Australianness' typically evident in genre fiction, it is curious that James draws attention to the nationality of the fantasy writers he discusses. Such emphasis raises the question of whether, despite the genre fiction industry's conventionality, the Australian identity of writers means something, and if it does, what and to whom. How does the production of children's fantasy series by Australians conform to or depart from the general tendency to downplay genre fiction writers' Australian identities? What does the nationality of these writers mean to them? Even though explicit markers of Australia are rare in children's fantasy by Australians, is there something intrinsically 'Australian' in these narratives? And if there is, how does this distinction fit with the genre's narrative conventions and Australian writers' application of these? This article explores the interplay between transnational convention and national distinctiveness through children's fantasy by Australian authors, predominantly using character as a focal point of its analysis.

I address the above questions through four bestselling contemporary (post-Harry Potter) children's fantasy series by Australians: Emily Rodda's *Deltora Quest* (2000-2004), Kate Forsyth's *The Impossible Quest* (2014-2015), John Flanagan's *Brotherband* series (2011~) and Garth Nix's *The Keys to the Kingdom* series (2003-2010). First, I consider the publication histories of these series and aspects of their marketing. Second, I discuss what being Australian means to Australian genre fiction writers by drawing on published interviews and interview-based studies. Finally, I focus on features that writers identify as 'Australian' to examine the protagonists of the series. I analyse these protagonists alongside the protagonists of four other series by Anglophone writers: J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* (1997-2007), Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2005-2009) (and *The Heroes of Olympus* [2010-2014]), Cressida Cowell's *How to Train Your Dragon* series (2003-2015) and Holly Black and Cassandra Clare's *Magisterium* series (2014-2018). The writers of all these series are established rather than emerging writers ('established' is defined here as writers with more than one series published), as established writers likely provide a greater wealth of information about the conventional workings of the industry and how Australian writers fit within the transnational publishing environment. Through this close and comparative textual analysis, I explore whether children's fantasy series by Australians contain intrinsic Australian characteristics despite their adherence to transnationally cohesive conventions, and examine Australian writers' engagement with conventional narrative elements of fantasy. This analysis is significant because, to understand the richness of genre fiction that literary criticism so often overlooks, we must investigate how conventions operate in this industry, including their role in the national and transnational contexts of its books and their publication.

This article draws on Howard S. Becker's conceptualisation of 'conventions' in *Art Worlds*. Becker identifies two types of conventions: those 'that artists and audiences can refer to in making sense of the work' (narrative conventions in this context) and those that 'make possible the easy and efficient coordination of activity among artists and support personnel' (professional conventions) (30). Although Becker does not speak at length about literature, Lisa Fletcher et al. argue that:

his conceptualization is particularly apposite for the study of genre fiction, which is organized by highly networked communities with a strong orientation toward professionalization and industry (conventional behavior) focused on fiction that reproduces and reconfigures well-known tropes (conventional texts). (998)

This article's methodology reflects an understanding of conventions as knowledge and experience that functions within and beyond books. The article combines industry analysis and textual analysis to approach children's fantasy, drawing in part on the way that Fletcher et al. approach the romance genre: as 'a sector of the publishing industry, a social formation, and a body of texts' (997). This understanding of children's fantasy as a multifaceted subset of the genre enables the article to address the roles and influence of convention from various angles. By unweaving the strands of convention in children's fantasy and examining how these work in isolation and together, we can build a comprehensive picture of this subset of fantasy.

Two features of children's fantasy make the subset particularly apposite for this analysis: it is highly conventional in a way that links to the industry's transnational imperatives, and it is a growth area in publishing. Kim Wilkins posits that fantasy is one of the most conventional popular genres because it has no 'viable national variant' (273). In other genres, subgenres (like rural romance) show that Australian settings can drive commercial success in the national publishing industry. In fantasy, however, 'reader expectations' are largely incompatible with distinctive Australianness, as fantasy is typically anchored in European mythologies, traditions and landscapes (Wilkins 272-3). The prevalence of European mythologies is evident even in the US market, because in the transnational Anglophone publishing industry, narrative conventions also operate transnationally. Children's fantasy is an especially conventional subset of fantasy because children's fiction distils conventions for young readers. Additionally, the perceived simplicity of both children's fiction and fantasy breeds a 'tendency to dismiss fantasy writing as childish: children read fantasy; adults read realism' (Armitt 3). The close relationship between children's fantasy and convention does not mean, however, that this subset of fantasy or the genre more broadly is bland, predictable or static. As Becker argues, 'though standardized, conventions are

seldom rigid and unchanging' (31), and even the most conventional artworks combine 'conventional materials with some that are innovative' (63). Children's fiction, and children's fantasy specifically, are also growth areas in the industry. Claire Squires writes that in recent decades, 'the children's book market benefited from a period of growth, of commodification, and of media attention' (161). Children's fantasy is at the forefront of this growth, following 'an explosion of fantasy books for children and young adults' in the wake of Harry Potter (Sekeres 403).

The publishing histories of the series by Australian writers listed above demonstrate the importance of the global market to these writers. All four are published in Australia and the US and were typically released in both countries simultaneously or slightly later in the US. Scholastic publishes *Deltora Quest* in both countries, with the first volume dated a year later in the US than in Australia. *The Impossible Quest* is published by Scholastic Australia and the small US publisher Kane Miller, the books appearing as new titles in Kane Miller's January 2016 catalogue. Penguin Random House publishes *Brotherband* in Australia, the US and the UK. The first volume was released simultaneously in Australia and the US (as hardcover and e-book initially) and the following year in the UK. Later volumes were released within a few months of each other, typically with the Australian editions released first. *The Keys to the Kingdom* series is published by Allen and Unwin in Australia, Scholastic in the US and HarperCollins in the UK. The first volume was released in the US several months earlier than the Australian edition according to the date on Nix's website (www.garthnix.com). This series and *Deltora Quest* were released as e-books several years after publication. The more recent series, *The Impossible Quest* and *Brotherband*, were released in print and digital editions simultaneously, which demonstrates an intention to expose the books to the widest international audience possible.

The mixed bag of Australia-first, simultaneous release and US-first publication in these four examples implies that even when children's fantasy series by Australians are published in Australia first, it is through no deliberate effort to recognise these books as products of Australian writers. The minimal delay between publication in Australia and the US in all cases also shows that these series were intended from the start for the global market. Additionally, Nix and Flanagan's official websites highlight the US editions of their books. Nix's website shows all three cover versions and purchasing options on individual volume webpages, but lists the publication details for the US edition and displays the US covers on the series page. Flanagan's website displays only the US covers of his series. By tailoring the sites so their books are immediately recognisable to US readers, Nix and Flanagan show that their focus is the US market rather than the Australian market. This focus further emphasises a concern with broad market distribution, global appeal and accessibility. The Australian identity of these

writers therefore holds minimal significance in the publishing process. Rather, the publication of the four series reflects internationally cohesive conventional processes that value commerciality and recognisable products.

Considering the above, it is perhaps no surprise that key marketing strategies of these series place little emphasis on their writers' identity as Australian. Squires argues that 'the marketing of literature... has a central role in constructing literary categories and literary value' (167) and that 'in the heightened age of marketing of the 1990s and 2000s, [marketing] might be thought necessary to a book's successful entry into the marketplace' (2-3). Similarly, Becker writes that 'so many novelists' books die the day they are released' because the marketing resources 'through which new books are called to the special attention of reviewers and others who might keep [them] from disappearing among the mass of other material published simultaneously' are allocated to more promising releases (83). The paratext of books is a form of marketing every book receives. Even though the Australian and US editions of Rodda's, Flanagan's and Nix's series have distinctive cover designs, neither version identifies the writers as Australian, further reinforcing the irrelevance of a writer's nationality to the local audience and international readers. Given the conventionality of children's fantasy, marking a writer as Australian might even dissuade non-Australian readers, who may perceive this to mean the book will not be the kind of fantasy they are used to.

Such a perception raises the question of whether marketing only downplays writers and their nationalities when writers are from outside the US or UK. Children's fantasy generally brands characters rather than authors, which suggests this is not the case. Children's fantasy is not the only area of genre fiction to employ this strategy: James Bond, Sherlock Holmes and Jack Reacher are all brand-name characters. However, the strategy is particularly well-suited to the subset. Those who produce children's fiction, which aims, as Jacqueline Rose puts it, 'to take the child *in*' (59), are aware that heroic and engaging child protagonists are more likely to enchant young readers than the ordinary adults who write about them. The propensity for children's fantasy cover designs to feature characters is one reflection of this. While this is not exclusive to the subset by any means, Harry Potter's children's and adult editions demonstrate that characters are typically more significant to marketing children's fantasy than adult fantasy. Harry and other characters feature prominently on most covers in the various children's versions, while realistic photographs of key items from the books adorn the adult editions. Characters are also extremely useful tools for merchandising. As Diane Sekeres writes, character-based merchandise means the ways readers can 'bring a character to life in the imagination are no longer limited to the kind of text we call a book', but rather, 'the reader constructs the imaginary characters of the fiction through the multiple experiences of buying and living with the multiple products of a brand' (399). Examples of this at play include Deltora Quest

character trading cards, Percy Jackson character figures, Harry Potter character costumes and video games where players become characters. This central role of characters in the marketing of children's fiction relegates the author to the background.

One recent initiative, however, shows that writers and their nationalities can be used as marketing tools as effectively as characters can. Disney-Hyperion's 'Rick Riordan Presents' imprint publishes books by writers from 'underrepresented cultures and backgrounds, to let them tell their own stories inspired by the mythology and folklore of their own heritage' (Riordan, 'Rick Riordan Presents'). This imprint markets these writers and their uniqueness in terms of nationality and cultural heritage. It also markets Rick Riordan, who uses his 'platform at Disney to put the spotlight on other great writers' who can 'tell their own stories' better than he can ('Rick Riordan Presents'). While part of the emphasis of this imprint is on writers, part is also on sharing various cultures and mythologies in children's fantasy. This goes against the narrative conventions of fantasy wherein the familiarity of European mythology is valued. However, Riordan is so prominent a writer that his involvement makes such an unconventional move commercially viable (there is also a precedent in 'Alfred Hitchcock Presents'). In this sense, 'Rick Riordan Presents' is an example of how 'established artists exploit their attractiveness to the existing system' to instigate change or manipulate convention (Becker 130).

Given an appropriate platform, Australian writers could market their Australianness and the distinctiveness of Australian settings in much the same way 'Rick Riordan Presents' markets its writers. However, as Wilkins recognises, many non-indigenous Australian writers 'have European heritage', which means that European mythology and culture is 'natural' to these writers (272-3). Hence Australian writers who employ Australian settings or cultural elements are not presenting a coherent variant on the conventional European mythology, but are rather transplanting this ingrained mythology to an unconventional context. Such a combination does not necessarily present issues in a narrative sense. For example, Jodi McAlister's paranormal romance series, *Valentine*, combines an Australian setting and conventional fantasy elements like fairies extremely successfully. In some cases, however, readers struggle with books that blend conventional and unconventional more than they struggle with a story based on an unconventional mythology addressed in context. Wilkins discusses how Sara Douglass received critical responses from readers who disliked seeing Australian place names in her medieval fantasy books (273). This risk has not wholly dissuaded others: Flanagan's *Ranger's Apprentice* contains creatures called wargals, and fans have noted this word's similarity to 'warrigal' ('Wargals'), an aboriginal word for a large dog or savage ('Warrigal'). Flanagan also mentions 'Drop Bears' in *Brotherband* (Flanagan, *Invaders* 51). However, cases like

Douglass' demonstrate that the blending of extremely conventional elements with unfamiliar Australian features is jarring for many readers. This perhaps makes children's fantasy with an Australian flavour a harder sell than the kinds of stories 'Rick Riordan Presents' publishes.

Interviewers in the media rarely ask the four Australian writers at the centre of this article about their decision to draw on non-Australian settings and cultural elements. European settings and culture are so conventional, it seems, that journalists/bloggers do not see the lack of Australianness in genre fiction by Australians as noteworthy. In interviews sourced from up to the first ten pages of internet search results of the relevant author names and the word 'interview', questions that pertained to or elicited responses about Australia occur in around 15 percent of interviews per writer at most. Less than half of these relate to Australian identity or Australian elements in these writers' fiction. Flanagan explains that he is 'more comfortable' with European history because he is 'more familiar' with it, and 'could hardly base it [his world] on an American or Australian medieval model because nobody really knows what was going on in either of our two countries at that time' (Wood). Forsyth sees herself as a 'global citizen' with European 'cultural ancestry', and notes that she grew up reading books by British writers (Aldred). Nix responds to the question of how being Australian factors into his writing by saying he is 'not sure that it does' and adding that even when he uses elements influenced by his Australian experiences, he does not 'make these things explicitly Australian' (Arasu). However, he also says, 'everything goes into a writer's head, so I imagine there's a lot more that is Australian too' (Subramanian).

Wilkins et al. argue that Australian writers are 'very aware of the mismatch between their national identity and the work they produce' (3). Through interviews with Australian genre fiction writers, they find that many writers identify as Australian even when they do not necessarily set their books or centre their careers in Australia (3-4). For example, Cecilia Dart-Thornton sees herself as Australian on a personal level but positions herself as a writer on a global level. Additionally, Forsyth 'identifies strongly as an Australian author' even though 'only one of her 40 books is set in Australia' (Wilkins et al. 3). Romance writer Kelly Hunter makes the particularly significant point that Australian writers are writing from an Australian perspective even if they do not employ specific markers of Australianness. Some of these writers also identify textual elements they consider to constitute a distinct 'Australian voice' that infuses genre fiction by Australian writers (Wilkins et al. 4). Wilkins et al. list 'egalitarianism, anti-authoritarianism, humour and casual language' as essential elements of this voice (4). In other words, genre fiction writers suggest that genre fiction by Australians is characterised by stories about people who change their circumstances and stories that hesitate to conform to rules (Wilkins et al. 5).

Many of these themes also appear in published interviews with this article's Australian writers. While Flanagan says he is 'not sure that there are new things we can offer that are intrinsically because we're Australian' (Wood), he identifies humour as key to his style (see Wallace). Nix associates a 'larrikin sense of humour' with Australia and considers characters who make the best out of bad situations 'a very Australian thing' (Subramanian). Both writers also mention features that strike an egalitarian or anti-authoritarian chord. Flanagan's protagonists convey a message that 'heroes don't have to be big, muscle-bound types' (Wood). He also likes his central characters to have a 'social problem' so readers will identify with them ('Q&A with Ranger's Apprentice Author'). Nix expresses an interest in 'the use, misuse, and cost of power' (Stafford). Additionally, discussions of the female characters in Forsyth's adult fiction, who refuse to 'bow to societal norms' (Hopkins) and fight to 'overcome the gag' of patriarchy (Aldred), are a recurring feature in her interviews.

Humour, egalitarianism and anti-authoritarianism are not only evident in interviews with the Australian writers, however. Riordan discusses his 'quirky, snarky sense of humour' (MPR News, 00:33). Cowell also uses a 'light, humorous' style to focus on themes like 'standing up to bullies' (Drabble), and says leaders 'need to know what it's like to be at the bottom of the pile as well as the top' (Kesh). Additionally, Black and Clare see Callum Hunt, the protagonist of *Magisterium*, as an 'underdog' (Stubby the Rocket), and Rowling admits that 'Harry breaks rules quite routinely' (de Bertodano). The elements Australian genre fiction writers identify as distinctly Australian are therefore significant to children's fantasy writers both in Australia and beyond. But do these themes manifest the same way in fiction by Australian and other Anglophone writers? For the remainder of this article, I explore the idea that genre fiction by Australians contains a distinctive Australian voice through close textual analysis of *Deltora Quest*, *The Impossible Quest*, *The Keys to the Kingdom* and *Brotherband*. This analysis focuses on the protagonists of these children's fantasy series and is guided by the features Wilkins et al. discuss. In using these features, I do not interrogate their merit, but rather take seriously and foreground the perspectives of Australian authors. To assess whether these features work in a distinct way in the series by Australian writers, I compare these series with the previously introduced series by other Anglophone writers. I also consider the link between these features and conventional narrative elements of fantasy to add an extra layer to our understanding of how Australian fantasy writers engage with conventions.

The texts selected for this analysis are contemporary (post-Harry Potter) children's fantasy. Explicit young adult (YA) series are beyond the limits of this article, even though the later books of the Harry Potter series are often labelled YA. I take Rowling's series as the starting point for 'contemporary' in this context due to its impact on children's fantasy, including its role in instigating the current

'fantasy revival' (Levy and Mendlesohn 167). Within these limitations and the focus on established writers outlined above, the series I discuss are visible, internationally published bestselling series. Bestselling is a difficult category to pin down without relying on publisher and writer claims about the commercial success of a book. The three criteria this article uses to assess bestselling are visibility, a life beyond the books, and in the case of the Australian series particularly, international publication. In selecting series for this article, I considered which books are on bookstore shelves even though the series might be complete and which series have a substantial online presence. Literary fiction typically values books that endure on the understanding that longevity equates to literary merit. However, for genre fiction, the fact that bookstores give a book shelf space and readers talk about it suggests the ongoing commercial value, and hence popularity, of that book. A similar logic underpins my focus on series with lives beyond the books. Series that inspire publisher- and/or fan-directed adjacent material such as merchandise (Rowling, Riordan, Cowell), games (Flanagan, Rodda), activities/quizzes (Forsyth), dedicated websites or fan fiction/artwork (Black and Clare, Nix) are demonstrably bestselling because publishers are willing to spend money developing complementary material for these series, or fans are invested enough in the series to create and share material about them in fan communities.

I discuss character in this analysis because character is both highly significant in the marketing of children's fantasy (as established above) and an essential narrative element of children's fantasy. In a narrative sense, characters and their growth are fundamental to children's fiction (see Trites 10). Additionally, the quest, which is central to most fantasy, is 'usually interpreted as a metaphor for a coming of age' (Mendlesohn 7). The writers on whom this article focuses also identify character as significant. Flanagan describes his Ranger's Apprentice series as 'character-driven' (Wood) and considers the point when he can 'see no further progression of the characters' as the end of a series (M. Ball). Nix comments that 'characters have to grow through the course of a book' (Shaheen) and says, 'I start with a character in a very basic setting and explore with the character' (Firester). Also, Black and Clare see 'a love of these characters' as what inspired their *Magisterium* series (Clare and Black).

Characters who are disruptive and have a disregard for rules and authority are common in children's fantasy. Lief from *Deltora Quest* rebels against the tyrannical Shadow Lord who rules his home city, and uses deception and trickery to win back the gems of the magical belt of Deltora. In *City of the Rats*, for example, he distracts the giant snake Reeah with praise, while his friend Jasmine attacks it. Tom, the protagonist of *The Impossible Quest*, shows a disregard for rules, and also disrupts social order. He interacts with Lady Elanor, daughter of the lord, in a way that makes young squire Sebastian's 'ears turn hot and red' and causes him to

think Tom needs ‘a lesson in how to behave respectfully towards his betters’ (Forsyth 49). Both Lief and Tom are also ostensibly poor and underprivileged. Lief believes he is a blacksmith’s son (he is really the deposed king’s heir), and Tom is a pot-boy who helps his mother in Lord Wolfgang’s castle. Of the two, only Tom shows a genuine capacity to change his circumstances. While Lief is an ‘underdog’ who rises from his position as a blacksmith’s son to defeat the Shadow Lord, this is presented as a natural progression because he is heir to the throne. Even when Lief becomes king in the second series, however, he maintains an egalitarian streak, ceding his kingdom to a female relative so he can leave to liberate his enslaved country men from the Shadow Lord. Tom represents egalitarian principles more clearly than Lief because he is nothing more than a pot-boy, who, through intelligence and wit rises to the status of a hero.

Harry Potter and Percy Jackson, two of the most successful children’s fantasy characters globally, display similar features. Both protagonists break practical rules (like school rules) and moral codes of acceptable behaviour. Even though the good/evil binary at the centre of the Harry Potter series aligns Harry with traditional heroes ‘who possess superhuman strength, courage, or nobility of soul’ (Canepa 117), Harry has no qualms with breaking the rules. This is particularly apparent in *the Half-Blood Prince*, in which Harry uses trickery rather than skill to win at Quidditch (Rowling 278-9), takes credit for what he finds in the Half-Blood Prince’s potions book like ‘a liar and a cheat’ (Rowling 494), and manipulates Professor Slughorn into revealing what he knows about Horcruxes. In the early books, Harry has a penchant for helping the disadvantaged: he releases a Boa Constrictor from the zoo and tricks Lucius Malfoy into freeing Dobby by giving him a ‘filthy sock’ (Rowling, *Chamber* 248). Harry feels empathy towards these powerless individuals due to his own suffering at the hands of the Dursleys. However, like Lief, Harry is never actually as disadvantaged as he believes: as the boy who lived, he naturally holds a position of influence in wizarding world. Before he travels to Camp Half-Blood (a summer camp for demigods), Percy is expelled from school after school. Additionally, even though he often appears to be a delinquent, Percy has a hidden manipulative side that he relies on to evade enemies who are stronger than he is. When he and Annabeth are trapped in Hades in *The Heroes of Olympus*, Percy lets Bob, the Titan whose memories he previously washed away, believe they are friends so Bob will help him. Even though he feels bad about it, Percy manipulates Bob in a way that makes Annabeth ‘a little uneasy’ and ‘stunned that Percy could be so calculating’ (Riordan, *House of Hades* 178). While circumstances often force Percy to these measures, he does also take pleasure in rebelling against authority figures who treat him badly, such as his stepfather Gabe, Ares and Dionysus.

These examples show that anti-authoritarianism, a disdain for rules and egalitarianism are features of children’s fantasy protagonists by both Australians

and other Anglophone writers. A reader-focused explanation for the popularity of these features lies in Becker's assertion that audiences demand 'what they have learned to enjoy and want' (107), or books that employ familiar narrative tropes or conventions. Even though these series typically conclude by reinforcing the power of traditional authority figures such as kings and gods, the protagonists routinely undermine tyrants, lords, politicians, teachers, gods and others who hold (and abuse) positions of authority. To undermine such figures, they break rules, lie, cheat, trick, steal, deceive and disrupt. Paradoxically, the moral ambiguity these traits imply goes some way to paralleling the protagonists with their adversaries. However, this paradox and the traits these protagonists draw on also tie them to the trickster, a highly significant character archetype in the conventional European mythic antecedents of fantasy. Many of the features Australian writers identify as contributing to the Australian voice are central to mythical tricksters like Prometheus, Hephaestus, Hermes, Odysseus and Loki, and intermediary fantasy tricksters like Bilbo Baggins, who is 'not engaged to kill dragons, that is warrior's work, but to steal treasure' (Tolkien 239). Nancy Canepa describes tricksters as 'cunning underdogs' (117) or 'quick-witted hero[es]' who sate readers' desire for 'marginalized characters who against all odds triumph' (118). Lewis Hyde considers them 'masters of deceit' who function as 'the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox' (7). The parallel between the trickster archetype and contemporary protagonists of children's fantasy, and the fact that protagonists of series by Australian and non-Australian writers alike display rule-breaking and anti-authoritarian tendencies, suggests that these tendencies result from generic convention inherited from myth rather than an Australian voice.

However, egalitarianism is one feature that is treated differently in the Australian examples. Harry and Percy are divested of the idea of their own marginalisation early on in their respective series. Harry finds out he is a wizard and has money, and Percy finds out that his ADHD and dyslexia mean he is a powerful demigod. Tom and Lief, however, at least notionally change their circumstances by fighting. Even though Tom's father is a powerful man and Lief's father was king, neither boy is guaranteed a position of power. Tom earns prestige by fighting alongside three children who are privileged. He is not special, but earns his opportunities. Similarly, Lief believes he is a blacksmith's son and becomes a hero to bring back peace and overcome oppression. It is only at the end of series one that he discovers he is the heir to the throne.

The heightened sense of egalitarianism in series by Australians is also evident in other series. Hal Mikkelson from *Brotherband* (Australian) and Hiccup from *How to Train Your Dragon* (British) provide an example. Hal lives in Skandia, a country based on Scandinavian and Viking culture, and Hiccup is a Viking. Both boys are marginalised because they are unlike their peers. The other boys in Hallasholm

tease Hal because of his 'mixed parentage' (Flanagan, *Outcasts* 35), and he is 'lightly built' (Flanagan, *Outcasts* 402), unlike the other Skandians including his 'big and well muscled' friend Stig (Flanagan, *Outcasts* 35). Hiccup is also singled out because he is 'small, skinny, and unimportant' (Cowell 9). His father often suggests that he should be more like Snotlout, who is 'a tall thug of a boy' (Cowell 8). Hal and Hiccup both rely on brainpower rather than brawn. Hal's atypical abilities as 'a thinker and a planner' are stressed in the series (Flanagan, *Outcasts* 153, see 149, 225; Flanagan, *Invaders* 45, 233-4). Like Hephaestus and Odysseus, he relies on 'imagination and inventiveness' (Flanagan, *Outcasts* 33) to build innovative objects such as his ship and giant crossbow. Similarly, Hiccup's main strengths are devising 'cunning plans' and having 'clever ideas' involving disguise, deception and playing dead.

Despite their many similarities, Hal and Hiccup live in very different circumstances. Hal is a half-Skandian who sits on the periphery of society. As in Tom's case, his father was a powerful and respected member of the community: he served on the current Oberjarl (leader) Erak's ship and was the only man who could match Thorn, Hallasholm's greatest warrior. However, this does not guarantee Hal any power. Hal must earn the respect of the village, which he does by using his wit and inventions (and a little cheating) to win Brotherband training. His actions and decisions can therefore change his circumstances and social position. Hiccup, on the other hand, is the king's son. He knows he is destined for power no matter how pathetic his peers think he is. While he does change his circumstances in that he increases the respect the other Vikings have for him through his escapades, he does not change the level of power he holds.

As important as the strand of Australian distinctiveness discussed above is, it is also vital that we explore how children's fantasy by Australians directly employs the same conventional narrative elements as series by other Anglophone writers. This provides the opportunity to consider how convention and distinctiveness interact, and further reveals how Australian writers engage with convention. For my final example, I therefore examine direct links to the trickster archetype in Nix's *The Keys to the Kingdom* and Black and Clare's *Magisterium* series. Nix's Arthur Penhaligon is an ordinary boy chosen as heir to the Architect of the Universe out of convenience and because he 'can create' (Nix, *Sunday* 307). Despite the strong Christian influences in the series, evident in the title and the *Morrow Days*, who represent the seven deadly sins, Arthur's creativity links him to Greek tricksters like Prometheus and Hephaestus. The series also aligns Arthur with 'the Old One', who is a Prometheus figure. Arthur meets the Old One chained to a clock as punishment. Every 12 hours puppets come and put out his eyes, 'though for many centuries they took his liver' (Nix, *Monday* 205) just as in the myth of Prometheus, 'every day an eagle swooped on him and devoured the lobes of his liver, which grew by night' (Apollod. *Lib.*1.7.1). In the final book, Arthur finds

himself chained to the same clock before he completes his transformation from human to the New Architect. As the Architect, Arthur orchestrates the destruction of the universe, which enables its renewal at his hand. This links him to Loki, who, according to many, manages to 'renew the cosmos' by bringing about Ragnarok but ensuring that Odin's son Baldr survives (Wanner 234, 242).

Callum Hunt from *Magisterium* also has links to several mythical trickster figures. European alchemy is highly significant to the series: as Call's teacher Master North explains, 'intrigued by the teachings of the alchemists, particularly Paracelsus [a factual sixteenth-century alchemist], they [the first mages] sought to explore elemental magic' (Black and Clare, *Iron Trial* 60). This connection between the mages and alchemy relates Call to Hermes Trismegistus or 'the mythical father of alchemy' (P. Ball 151). Additionally, Call's soul belongs to a 'body-hopping' evil mage (Black and Clare, *Golden Tower* 128), which creates a moral ambiguity the series does not resolve. The books' titles show a progression that reflects alchemy's efforts to transmute lesser metals into gold. This suggests the characters gradually move towards a purity of soul over the series. However, at the end of the series, Call feels 'a flicker of doubt' even as he tells himself 'he was a good person now' (Black and Clare, *Golden Tower* 239). This moral ambiguity and fluidity links Call to Loki, whose actions in relation to the gods show him variously as friend and foe (Wanner 229).

The above examples demonstrate that the trickster archetype is particularly significant to these children's fantasy protagonists. We can appreciate why the trickster archetype appeals to both Australian and non-Australian writers by considering the narrative and industrial conventions of children's fiction and fantasy. The features of liminality, ambiguity and flexibility central to mythic tricksters are also relevant to constructions of childhood. Romantic notions of childhood typically position children as inherently fluid, 'ambiguous' and capable of breaking down binaries (Honeyman 167-9). Additionally, boyhood in particular represents an 'escape from sexuality, responsibility, and other limitations of adulthood' (Honeyman 174; see Rose 63-4). Considered from this angle, the trickster archetype provides children's fantasy writers a way to write characters who fulfil the desire to escape from the limitations of adulthood. For readers, tricksters are appropriate because they are humanly flawed and relatable (see Canepa 118-20). Arthur and Call are particularly relatable characters because they both deal with disability (as does Percy). Arthur struggles with asthma and Call has a crippled leg that makes him feel like an outsider. These handicaps emphasise the position of child protagonists as necessarily underdogs due to their physical inferiority to adults. Children can relate particularly well to such characters, whose strength is not physical and who journey from underdog to victor (Young and Ferguson 491; see also Abrams and Sutton-Smith; Valentova 749-50). This progression is possible due to the ability of these characters to call on the skills of

deceit, trickery and rule-breaking that they inherit from the trickster archetype. Kevin Wanner describes cunning as a 'universal technique for inverting the normal result of any contest' (220). Therefore, elements of the trickster archetype facilitate the conventional happy ending in children's fantasy as they allow children to overcome stronger opponents. In this sense, the trickster is a useful tool for all children's fantasy writers both in narrative terms and because readers identify with this type of character.

The trickster archetype hence functions to reinforce conventions at the narrative and industrial level, with implications for what Becker describes as shared knowledge used to make sense of art works and for the 'conventional way of doing things' in publishing (30). Trickster features are significant to the happy ending and conventional familiarity within fantasy, and to the commercial potential of fantasy beyond the books themselves. This is an example of how convention operates at the centre of all aspects of genre fiction, which is a point that brings us back to the question of distinctive Australianness. Where can Australianness fit in a genre in which conventions are so essential that they weave through the textual, industrial and social dimensions of books in a seemingly impenetrable web? Convention precludes the nationality of Australian writers from playing a role in the publication and marketing of children's fantasy by these writers. It also precludes the use of extrinsic Australian features in fantasy narratives. Despite this, some writers identify a distinct Australian voice in the narratives of genre fiction by Australians.

Perhaps it is idealistic of Australian writers to channel the premise that all books are a product of their time and place in an industry so concerned with commerciality and global appeal. However, in the case of this small sample of children's fantasy, there is some evidence to support the notion of a distinct Australian voice that influences the kinds of books Australian genre writers produce. My hypothesis is that this would ring true more broadly. While many features Australian writers identify as part of such a voice are conventional in the protagonists of children's fantasy through the trickster archetype, which is a feature of the fantasy genre's mythic antecedents, there are notable differences in the way egalitarianism is presented in protagonists by Australian writers. The plots of series by Australian and non-Australian writers generally reaffirm the establishment, but the protagonists in the series by Australian writers rise from a true state of having very little to a position of prestige through inventiveness and brainpower. Therefore, despite the significance of convention to fantasy and other genres, this case study demonstrates that the potential exists for distinctly Australian variation that fits unobtrusively within the narrative and industrial conventions of genre fiction.

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