

The books Australian teens enjoyed reading most in 2022 and 2023: Findings from the Discovering a Good Read (DAGR) survey

By Katya Johanson, Leonie Rutherford, Bronwyn Reddan, Donald Matheson, & Andrew Singleton

Snapshot

This article reports on the survey findings of the Discovering a Good Read (DAGR) study of Australian secondary school students' leisure reading behaviour. It outlines key trends in student responses to a question that asked them about the books they enjoyed reading most in the previous year. The survey results highlight an impressive diversity in the books they identified, reflecting wide-ranging individual tastes and interests and a broad spectrum of literary engagement. This wide spectrum included a range of genres (fantasy, mystery and crime, romance) and book types (young adult and middle grade literature, contemporary fiction, non-fiction and classics). Student responses reveal a significant appetite for book series and identify several perennially popular titles. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary reading trends among Australian students and underscore the importance of providing young people with access to a variety of reading material in educational settings. The implications for educators and librarians are discussed to enhance reading engagement in secondary school curricula.

Introduction

The *Discovering a Good Read* (DAGR) project, led by researchers at Deakin University, is designed to provide information about Australian teenagers' leisure reading behaviour to the professions that have a vested interest in young people reading, especially educators and staff working in school libraries, including teacher librarians, library technicians, library aides and volunteers. In 2022–2023, this research involved a national survey of Australian secondary school students, who were asked a range of questions about their reading patterns and preferences. This article focuses on the books that students reported enjoying reading most over the previous twelve months to better understand their leisure reading choices and preferences. Analysing their responses allows us to identify the popularity of different genres and book types. This article offers seven observations about the books Australian teens enjoy reading in their free time.

In 2022 and 2023, the DAGR survey collected responses from Australian students in years 7 to 12 located in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia. We used a purposive quota sample to reflect the demographic spread of Australian secondary school students. This sample included students from capital city and regional populations and from all school types (government, independent and Catholic). We worked with schools, teachers,

and teacher-librarians to secure their students' participation in the survey. After obtaining the necessary consent from schools, parents, and students, we provided a survey link for completion on students' personal devices (i.e., notebooks and smartphones), with the survey usually completed in the classroom. We collected data via the Qualtrics online platform between March 2022 and June 2023, with some delays due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In total, 13,217 students participated in the survey, with 12,093 completing it entirely (Rutherford et al 2024, p. 7).

...this top ten list suggests that a small number of 'blockbuster' texts dominate teen leisure reading preferences...

Methodology

We used Australian Bureau of Statistics data on Australian secondary school student enrolments to design our sample frame (ABS, 2022). This data included the number and proportion of secondary students in government, Catholic, and independent schools in the four states. Once the sample frame was designed, nationwide cooperation from schools, teachers, and teacher-librarians enabled us to fill the quotas. Using various networks, such as school librarian associations, we sought participation from all school types with secondary students in the relevant states. Where there were gaps in our quotas, we contacted schools fitting our sample criteria, requesting student participation. After obtaining the necessary consent from schools, parents, and students, we provided a survey link for completion on students' personal devices (i.e., notebooks and smartphones). We also used ICSEA data to guide our school selection, including schools from areas across the socioeconomic spectrum¹. While this quota sampling method is not random, it is effective for social research when full-scale randomness is neither feasible nor cost-effective (de Vaus, 2013). In addition, the substantial number of respondents strengthens the reliability of the findings.

Finally, to adjust for biases during data collection, we applied a two-step RIM weighting to the data: first, to accurately represent the age distribution of adolescents aged 11-18 from WA, NSW, VIC, and QLD, and second, to ensure the correct proportion of students attending each of the secondary school types in those states, using the 2022 Australian Bureau of Statistics school student data as the reference for this weighting (Rutherford et al. 2024).

The books Australian teens enjoy reading most

The article analyses responses to a single survey question which allowed for a short-answer response: 'What book did you enjoy most in the past year?' The inclusion of this question allowed us to investigate what books Australian teens are currently enjoying, and to identify patterns in the information they provided. Almost seven thousand students (6971) responded to the question by identifying one or more books they enjoyed reading in the past year. We did not weight responses to the question by age to be consistent with a representative sample

¹The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) is a scale developed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) using ABS data. It measures the socio-educational backgrounds of students.

of teenagers and more schools agreed to survey younger class groups. As a result, the results discussed in this article are skewed towards younger age groups (11–13 and 14–15 year olds).

...the most popular genres are fantasy, mystery and crime, dystopian, humour and romance.

While the survey question invited students to identify a single book title, many respondents identified a series (e.g. *Harry Potter* series), the name of an author, genre or type of book, or multiple titles or series in their answer. We therefore compiled the responses into a spreadsheet and engaged in a data cleaning process to allow us to identify multiple nominations of any one title or series, correct any

obvious spelling mistakes, make title and series names consistent, and remove incomplete or irrelevant responses. Responses that identified a book series or individual title/s from a book series were edited to include the description 'series, duology, trilogy, saga' to measure the overall popularity of book series. If a response referred to an individual title from a book series, we recorded these details in a separate column to track the relative popularity of individual titles within series. If a response identified more than one title or series, we created separate entries for each title or series. We then sorted the data into a hierarchical sequence based on the most to least frequently nominated titles, using the first title or series listed in student responses. This spreadsheet provides the basis for analysis in this article and can be downloaded from the [Teen Reading in the Digital Era website](#).

Our initial goal in creating a hierarchy of titles was to compile a list of the top 10 most popular books with teen readers for a report on key findings from the DAGR survey (Rutherford et al.2024). While this top ten list suggests that a small number of 'blockbuster' texts dominate teen leisure reading preferences, the number and range of books nominated in the full list of responses is vast. The 'long tail' of individually identified titles illustrates variety in teen reading preferences, in contrast to our expectations that there would be a prevalence of popular media franchise and series titles. The DAGR study identified seven teen reader 'types': Book Abstainers, Casual Dabblers, Sparse Readers, Holiday Browsers, Rushed Fans, Regular Bookworms and Fiction Fanatics, with vastly different appetites and opportunities for reading (Rutherford et al.2024). This may contribute to an explanation for the long tail of titles offered by single respondents.

This broad spread of titles became evident when we grouped responses according to title/series and created a rank based on the number of responses that each received. Across the sample, 2332 unique titles/series were identified in the first titles respondents provided, with 1668 of these (or 72 per cent) identified only once. Collectively, the selection of titles and series in the 'top 30' places was identified by 2135 respondents. Given that this 'top 30' includes series, it in fact represents a large number of books. Only the series at the top of this list (J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series) was nominated by over 200 respondents (245). By the time we descend the hierarchical table to sixth place, which is occupied by Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series, the number of students who nominated it is fewer than 100. In contrast, 1668 titles/series were nominated by only one respondent. Due to time

and resource constraints, and the fact that titles below the top 30 were identified by fewer than 30 respondents, we did not research details of all books on the extensive list. Instead we focus the majority of the discussion in this article to the top 30 most popular books based on the first title or series identified in survey responses, with some observations about and references to the complete list.

Figure 1
Top 30 titles

	Title	Responses
1	Harry Potter series	245
2	The Hunger Games series	196
3	One of Us is Lying series	184
4	It Ends with Us	139
5	Diary of a Wimpy Kid series	133
6	Percy Jackson & the Olympians series	96
7	The Maze Runner series	92
8	Wings of Fire series	87
9	Heartstopper series	80
10	A Good Girl's Guide to Murder series	79
11	Once series	52
12	Divergent series	52
13	CHERUB series	51
14	The Summer I Turned Pretty trilogy	48
15	The Lord of the Rings	48
16	Tomorrow series	45
17	The Hate U Give	45
18	Skulduggery Pleasant series	45
19	Throne of Glass series	40
20	Keeper of the Lost Cities series	39
21	The Song of Achilles	38
22	Six of Crows duology	37
23	One Piece series	36
24	Ugly Love	35
25	To All the Boys I've Loved Before series	33
26	To Kill a Mockingbird	33
27	Ranger's Apprentice series	33
28	The Treehouse series	32
29	Demon Slayer series	32
30	Alex Rider series	30

Research on children and young adults' reading patterns often focuses on avid readers. In contrast, our survey provides a snapshot of the breadth of reading preferences across all students, including those who read occasionally or infrequently. Invitation to participate in the survey was extended on a class- or year-level basis, and often administered by school staff in a classroom context, in which case it encouraged students to participate regardless of their

appetite for reading. As discussed above in our section on the sample design, our study aimed to be representative of Australian teenagers in terms of school types, regional/metropolitan location and socio-economic status. All respondents were asked to answer questions about their reading habits, with those who reported spending any amount of time reading for pleasure invited to provide more detail about the types of reading material they choose to read. As a result, our discussion includes not only teenagers who identify as avid readers and who may be part of reading networks that recommend books and are guided by a love of books, but also students who read for pleasure less regularly whose most enjoyed book may be one they were expected to read for the school curriculum, or that they read because it aligned with other recreational pursuits (such as sport).

... book content on popular social media platforms including TikTok, YouTube and Instagram have an influence beyond the reading habits of teens who interact directly with it.

The titles/series that students nominated tell us about seven aspects of the kinds of books teenagers are enjoying:

1. They are mostly fiction

Most of the titles/series across the entire set of responses to the question are fiction, with all those identified in the top 30 places fiction titles. A large proportion of fiction titles are middle years and young adult titles, with adult titles more likely to appear lower in the hierarchy, with fewer nominations, possibly reflecting the bias in survey results towards younger teenagers and the fact that adult books are more likely to be read by older students. Most of the top 30 places are occupied by young adult titles, while the most popular middle-years titles were the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* and *Treehouse* series, nominated by 133 and 32 respondents respectively. Across the entire list, adult fiction titles included contemporary books (Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*, Heather Morris's *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*) as well as classics (F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*).

In contrast to the predominance of fiction, non-fiction titles appear infrequently throughout the sample and were almost all adult books, in particular titles popular on book social media, in particular BookTok, at the time the survey was completed. Most of these are self-help titles such as James Clear's *Atomic Habits*; Robert Kiyosaki's *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* and Jordan Peterson's *12 Rules for Life*. The non-fiction titles also include sporting books (such as James Milner's *Ask a Footballer*) and biographies and memoirs, including Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Shane Warne's *No Spin: My Autobiography* and Li Cunxin's *Mao's Last Dancer*. The sparsity of non-fiction titles in the list may be read in the context of the survey's findings that fiction readers find it easier to discover books they enjoy than do non-fiction readers (Rutherford et al., 2024; Meyerkort, 2024). There are parallels between international book buying patterns and teenage reading preferences, with fiction dominating bestseller lists and *Atomic Habits* standing out as a popular non-fiction title, buoyed by TikTok attention (Nawotka 2023).

2. A range of genres

The titles/series students identified as enjoying confirm the findings from other questions in the survey that the most popular genres are fantasy, mystery and crime, dystopian, humour and romance. Within these genres, a range of reading levels and interests are evident. Titles and series in the top 30 places include: J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*, Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us*, Karen M. McManus's *One of Us is Lying*, Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, Rick Riordan and Jonathan E. Steinberg's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*, James Dashner's *The Maze Runner*, Alice Osman's *Heartstopper*, Holly Jackson's *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder*, Tui T Sutherland's *Wings of Fire*, Veronica Roth's *Divergent*, Jenny Han's *The Summer I Turned Pretty*, Robert Muchamore's *CHERUB*, Derek Landy's *Skulduggery Pleasant*, Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, Sarah J Maas's *Throne of Glass*, Leigh Bardugo's *Six of Crows* and John Marsden's *Tomorrow*. These genres also include both classics and contemporary publications, with J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and Roth's *Divergent* as examples of fantasy novels in the top 30 places.

This reflects a contemporary phenomenon of persistent 'blockbuster' titles, sustained by social media reader channels and film and TV tie-ins.

Preferences for fantasy and mystery are broadly in line with Manuel and Carter's survey of teen readers (2015)², though interestingly, relatively few readers in their survey a decade ago listed romance as a favourite genre. This development may reflect the growth of publishers' lists to meet demand for LGBTIQ+ romance (e.g. *Heartstopper*), as well as the TikTok-fuelled appetite for the work of authors such as Colleen Hoover. Throughout the entire DAGR list of favourite titles, historical and contemporary realism, classics and science fiction are also evident, but with fewer nominations.

3. Series are popular

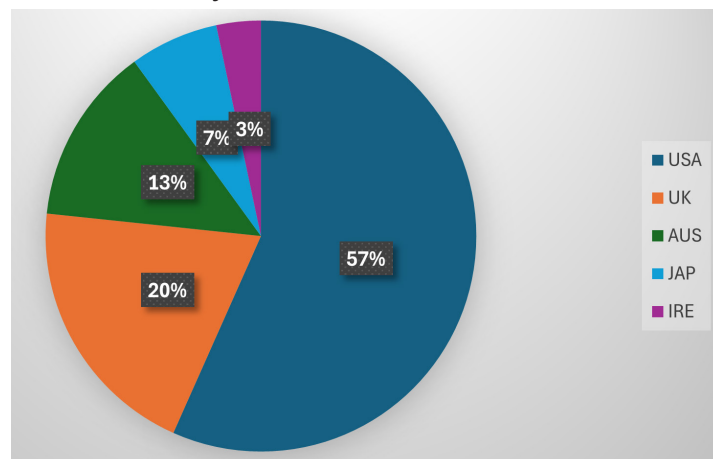
Of the 'titles' students offered as the book they had enjoyed most, 566 were either a book series or part of a series. As the DAGR survey found, 'reading other books by an author I like' (61%) is the most popular method for discovering a book to read (Rutherford et al., 2024, p. 21). Series fiction is an obvious example of a means to capitalise on this strategy for book selection. Furthermore, many series sit at the top of the most enjoyed books table. Nine out of the top 10 and 24 of the 30 responses in the top 30 places are series (including a trilogy and duology). The proportion of responses that identified series rather than singular titles remains high as we descend the hierarchical list, although it steadily declines. All series in the top 30 were middle-years or young adult series, reflecting and supporting the strategy of the publishing industry to publish series for young readers.

²It is not possible to seamlessly compare Manuel and Carter's findings with those of the DAGR survey, as their genre categories are organised somewhat differently – detective fiction being listed separately from mystery for example – and their questions about genre preferences are somewhat differently presented.

4. Little cultural diversity

Although responses to the question show that collectively, students are reading and enjoying a vast number of titles/series and a range of genres, the survey responses demonstrate little cultural diversity. Of the titles/series in the top 30 places, 23 (77 per cent) are authored by either British or North American writers. Two of the American authors are identified on their publisher websites as dual nationality: Leigh Bardugo, the author of the *Six of Crows* series is Israeli-American, and Tahereh Mafi, author of the *Shatter Me* series, is Iranian-American. Four of the titles/series in the top 30 are authored by Australian writers. Only three of the titles in the top 30 are authored by writers from non-English speaking countries: two by Japanese – both of them manga books – and one series by an Irish author. The complete list includes titles/series by non-English speaking authors, including some that were offered in other languages. However, these are clustered in the lowest two-thirds of the list, enjoyed by a small handful of students at most. It is likely that these titles were selected by first- or second-generation Australian students or international students enjoying books by authors from their own cultural backgrounds, or by students pursuing second-language study. This suggests that books reflecting non-dominant cultures are not the first choice for leisure reading for the majority of teens.

Figure 2
Author nationality



5. The Influence of social media

Books popular on the TikTok hashtag BookTok, as well as other social media platforms, are also common in the top 30 titles. These include Karen McManus' *One of Us is Lying* series (3rd), Colleen Hoover's *It Ends with Us* (4th) and *Ugly Love* (24th), Alice Oseman's *Heartstopper* series (9th), Holly Jackson's *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* series (10th) and Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (21st). Several of the adult fiction and non-fiction titles that appear lower in the hierarchy of titles are also books popular on BookTok, including Ali Hazelwood's *The Love Hypothesis*, Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*, and Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. The DAGR survey found that 28 per cent of teens who read browse social media to discover books, while 27 per cent use recommendations from social media influencers (Rutherford et al., 2024, p. 21). However, book content on popular social media platforms including TikTok, YouTube and Instagram have an influence beyond the reading habits of teens who interact directly with it. This was apparent in focus groups we held with students as part

of the DAGR project and is reinforced by other research. In Asplund et al's (2024) research, for example, an interviewee explained how 'if I hear my friends talking about a BookTok book and they have read it and say what they think about it, then I'll feel like reading it too' (641). This rippling-out effect of recommendations from BookTok helps explain the popularity of titles with relatively mature themes, such as *It Ends with Us* which explores family violence. When a book has a cumulative presence across multiple channels such as bookstores, friends' discourse, and social media channels its visibility and social desirability increases. As one focus group participant explained:

Well, I feel like the TikTok algorithm really like knows what to recommend to me [...] and then I follow like book accounts that also recommend books, and I do the same on YouTube. Then I hear about what other people are reading on TikTok. Then books, like they kind of blow up on TikTok and then everyone's reading them. Then I'm like well if everyone's reading it, I've got to try it. It must be good. (Rutherford & Reddan, 2024, p. 137)

...indicates the important relational role of libraries staff in working with each individual student to identify their reading interests as there is no 'one size fits all'...

6. Persistently popular books

Many of the books in the top 30 places, as well as over the complete list, have been popular over a substantial period of time. This includes classics such as *Lord of the Rings*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the novels of Jane Austen. Some such titles are likely to feature on the school curriculum or be recommended by older family members and friends. However, it also includes young adult and middle-years titles/series that are more recent but that were first published more than a decade ago, including *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games*, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, *Skulduggery Pleasant*, and *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*. This reflects a contemporary phenomenon of persistent 'blockbuster' titles, sustained by social media reader channels and film and TV tie-ins.

7. A small number of Australian authors

Australian titles are represented in modest numbers across the sample. These include young adult series by John Marsden (*Tomorrow* series), Morris Gleitzman (*Once* series) and Anh Do (*WeirDo* series); middle-years titles by Andy Griffiths (the *Treehouse* series); contemporary adult titles (Graeme Simsion's *The Rosie Project*, Trent Dalton's *Boy Swallows Universe*) and some classics (A.B. Facey's *A Fortunate Life*, Henry Lawson's *The Drover's Wife*). Again, series predominate: the most frequently nominated Australian title/series was Gleitzman's *Once* (52 responses), followed by Marsden's *Tomorrow* (45 responses), John Flanagan's *Ranger's Apprentice* (33) and the *Treehouse* series (32). As with most other adult titles, Australian adult books such as *Boy Swallows Universe* and Pip Williams' *The Dictionary of Lost Words* received a handful of nominations.

While across all books in the top 30 places, the representation of female to male authors is reasonably balanced, there were remarkably few Australian female authors in the top 30 and in the entire list, with two series by Lynette Noni the only ones in the top 30 places, with

the *The Medoran Chronicles* and *The Prison Healer* series in 24th and 25th place respectively. Other Australian female authors' books also appeared in the complete list, including those by Amie Kaufmann, Pip Williams, and Rebecca Lim, but with a small number of nominations. The lack of mention of female Australian authors at the top of the list contributes to the picture that while students are collectively enjoying a large number of books, their appetite for or exposure to diverse titles may be limited.

Implications for school libraries

The vast number of books that survey respondents selected as the titles/series they enjoyed most signals the difficulty schools face in acquiring and stocking libraries. It also indicates the important relational role of libraries staff in working with each individual student to identify their reading interests as there is no 'one size fits all' for teen readers. In addition, the ongoing appetite for particular titles, including not only classics but also books popular over the past few decades, demonstrates the importance of tracking borrowing habits when making decisions about what titles continue to occupy limited shelf space.

A need that arises from the responses to this singular question about what book students have recently enjoyed is the contrast between the large number of titles they collectively nominated, and the narrow range of voices represented in that number. Schools may choose to try to broaden the diversity of voices reflected in students' choice of reading. Based on the findings discussed in this article, strategies to achieve this include directing resources into expanding fiction collections that reflect diverse voices, given the predominance of fiction in students' reading. In particular, a selection policy that prioritised diverse voices in book series, and in the most popular genres of fantasy, mystery and crime, dystopian, humour and romance, would align these selections to students' preferences. These strategies may be complemented by efforts to seek and publicise social media recommendations of books with diverse themes and authors, given the influence of BookTok and other reader platforms.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2022). *Schools Australia* (Catalogue No. 4221.0). Table 43a: Total students FTE. Retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release>

de Vaus, D. A. (2013). *Surveys in social research* (6th ed.). Routledge.

Manuel, J. & Carter, D. (2015). Current and historical perspectives on Australian teachers' reading practices. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 38(2), 115-128.

Meyerkort, S. (2024). Why more non-fiction is needed for kids. *School News Australia*. Retrieved from <https://www.school-news.com.au/news/why-more-non-fiction-is-needed-for-kids/>

Nawotka, E. (2023). Print book sales were flat in 10 major markets in 2022. *Publishers Weekly*. 5 May. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/92226-2022-print-book-sales-in-10-major-markets-were-flat-compared-to-previous-year.html>

Rutherford, L., A. Singleton, A., Reddan, B., Johanson, K., & Dezuanni, M. (2024) *Discovering a Good Read: Exploring Book Discovery and Reading for Pleasure Among Australian Teens*. Geelong: Deakin University. ISBN: 978-0-6486374-0-0 (PDF) 978-0-6486374-1-7 (Print). Retrieved from https://teenreading.net/wp-content/uploads/sites/250/2024/03/Discovering-a-Good-Read-Survey-Report_FINAL.pdf

Rutherford, L. & Reddan, B. (2024, in press). 'Finding a good read? Strategies Australian teenagers use to negotiate book recommendations'. In Lo, Chin E. (Ed). *The reading lives of teens*. (Pp. 125-147) Routledge: London and New York.

Katya Johanson is Professor of Audience Research at Edith Cowan University. Her research focuses on how audiences (including readers) engage with creative production, and the policy, funding and support structures that enhance audience engagement. She has a particular interest in the publishing industry and reader engagement. She is a team member on the *Discovering a "Good Read": Pathways to Reading for Australian Teens*' ARC Linkage project.

Leonie Rutherford (PhD, Australian National University) is Associate Professor in Children's Literature at Deakin University. She is an expert in media with a special focus on children and youth. She currently convenes the Teenagers Reading and Digital Practices Research Group and leads the Australian Research Council linkage project '*Discovering a "Good Read": Pathways to Reading for Australian Teens*'. Her research interest includes media practices of children and youth, television studies, multiplatform production, audience research, and influences of media on children's digital literacy, health, and educational outcomes.

Bronwyn Reddan (PhD, University of Melbourne) is a research fellow on the Australian Research Council linkage project '*Discovering a "Good Read": Pathways to Reading for Australian Teens*'. She is an interdisciplinary researcher with a passion for investigating the social and emotional dimensions of different literary cultures including the history of shared reading practices, digital bookish communities and the recreational reading practices and habits of teenagers and young people.

Donald Matheson is Professor of Media and Communication at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. Donald studies journalism practice and public communication, including news discourse, social media and science communication. He has written on conflict reporting, communication ethics and discourse analysis. Donald is part of the research team on the Australian Research Council linkage project '*Discovering a "Good Read": Pathways to Reading for Australian Teens*'.

Andrew Singleton, PhD, is Professor of Sociology and Social Research at Deakin University, specialising in qualitative and quantitative approaches. His research spans youth religion, personal belief, and alternative religions. Singleton has published extensively, including *Freedoms, Faiths and Futures: Teenage Australians on Religion, Sexuality and Diversity* (co-authored with Anna Halafoff, Mary Lou Rasmussen, and Gary Bouma; Bloomsbury, 2021), *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia* (co-authored with Michael Mason and Ruth Webber; Garrett Publishing, 2007), *Religion, Culture and Society: A Global Approach* (Sage, 2014), and latest book, *Let the Dead Speak* (co-authored with Matt Tomlinson; Manchester UP, 2025).