

Verse novels 101 for school libraries

by *Kelsy Peterson*

Snapshot

Kelsy Peterson explores the rewarding and challenging area of verse novels considering-

- What is a verse novel?
- Why are verse novels important for school libraries?
- Which readers will benefit most from verse novels?
- Which verse novels are best for school libraries?

Verse novels offer a wealth of opportunities to provide enriching literacy experiences for students of all ages and reading levels. The unique characteristics of verse novels—such as fewer words per page and lots of white space—make them a particularly effective tool for engaging striving and reluctant readers. At the same time, these texts offer the chance for more advanced readers to employ key reading skills as they construct meaning from the language and story. And verse novels are an accessible way to introduce students at all reading levels to the formal study of poetry.

This article will explore the following topics as we consider how verse novels can be effectively utilised in school libraries.

- What is a verse novel?
- Why are verse novels important for school libraries?
- Which readers will benefit most from verse novels?
- Which verse novels are best for school libraries?

What is a verse novel?

Let's take a look at the primary characteristics of verse novels. Verse novels are novel-length texts that tell a continuous story through a series of poems. In this way, they are distinct from poetry collections or anthologies, which may contain poems with a common theme but lack the cohesive story arc of a novel in verse.

Although there is some disagreement among critics and practitioners, verse novels are generally considered to be an example of literary format, not a genre (e.g. Friesner, 2017, p. xv). In fact, verse novels come in many popular and diverse genres including historical fiction, contemporary realistic fiction, dystopian fiction and romance.

While many verse novels contain approximately the same number of pages as traditional novels, their physical layout is strikingly different. Students will immediately notice that verse novels

have more white space, shorter lines of text, and fewer words overall on each page compared to a prose novel. This clean, streamlined layout derives from several typical conventions of verse novels.

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First, the poems in a verse novel are usually less than a page in length, and rarely longer than 2-3 pages (Alexander, 2005). The result is that verse novels are broken up into manageable sections or 'chunks' that are much shorter than the chapters in a prose novel.

A second significant convention of verse novels is that many of these texts are written in free verse, an accessible poetic form without a prescribed rhyme or meter. Often, free verse can recall the rhythms of spoken dialogue. Author and librarian Brenna Friesner explains that free verse is 'written to reflect the cadence of speech, and line breaks occur where a thought is paused or a breath is taken' (2017, p. xviii). And the abbreviated lines of free verse mean that the pages in a verse novel 'look similar to other mediums [young readers] enjoy: text messages, social media messages, song lyrics, etc.' (Banker, 2022).

Additionally, many verse novels employ a first-person, present-tense narrative (Colquhoun, 2021). This style of narrative lends a sense of immediacy to the story that many young readers find engaging and resonant. Rather than passively reading the story, readers of verse novels are invited 'into the life of the protagonist. The short lines of verse can be rhythmic, almost asking the reader to 'hear' the speaker. This lends itself to addressing topics that can be deep or emotionally intense' (Krok, 2020b).

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Thus, a typical verse novel offers a distinctive structural blend of short poems, the abbreviated lines of free verse, and the emotional immediacy of a first-person present-tense narrative. These features are often cited by practitioners as key factors in a verse novel's appeal, particularly for reluctant or striving readers.

Why are verse novels important for school libraries?

Now that we understand the primary features of verse novels, let's explore some of the reasons these texts are an important element of school library collections.

Verse novels can serve as an accessible introduction or 'gateway' to formal poetry. Many practitioners know that students often feel apprehensive about studying traditional poetic texts, perhaps because it's an unfamiliar experience, the language is intimidating, or they're discouraged by the focus in English class on interpreting or 'understanding' the poem (Abate, 2018).

A verse novel presents an alternative way to read and experience poetry. The format of a novel is familiar to most students, and the primary focus in reading a verse novel is on following the story arc rather than analysing each specific poem. Once students become comfortable engaging with poetry in the context of a verse novel, teachers and librarians can segue to a discussion of the language, symbolism and poetic devices used in the text.

In this way, verse novels present a rich opportunity to deepen students' understanding of both the novel form and poetry at the same time. Writer and poet Regis Coustillac explains that the verse novel's narrative 'tethers each poem to a larger story, making them easier to follow and grasp, while the poetic form allows the author to explore characters and scenes in an abstract way that is rarely seen in traditional novels' (2019).

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Another excellent reason to include verse novels in your school library is to promote diversity and representation in your collection. The subject matter of verse novels for children and young adults presents a wealth of diverse voices, cultures and experiences. And due to the conventions of first-person narrative and free-verse poetry, the verse novel format is particularly suited to conveying powerful messages about different cultures, religions and identities. Librarian Mel Colquhoun writes that verse novels are ideal for exploring diversity 'due to their first-person narrative and lyrical style, drawing the reader into the life of the protagonist, transporting them into other cultures, family situations and backgrounds' (2021, p. 54).

Offering verse novels in school libraries also gives our students an opportunity to foster their empathy skills through deep emotional engagement with the characters and stories. If you've been in the field of education or librarianship very long, you're likely to be familiar with the research showing that reading fiction can increase levels of empathy in readers (e.g. Kidd & Castano, 2013). Indeed, University of Michigan psychologist William Chopik describes fictional texts as 'a playground for exercising empathic skills' (Schmidt, 2020).

I believe that a verse novel's unique textual characteristics can make them even more effective than prose fiction at this empathy-building process. This is primarily due to the psychological

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immediacy readers experience with the characters in verse novels. The first-person narrative of many verse novels helps to create an emotionally intimate experience for young readers, bringing them into the characters' mind and experiences. And a verse novel's economy of words naturally emphasises the characters' emotional experiences and development instead of exposition and plot (Friesner, 2017, p. 33).

As school librarian Ed Sullivan explains, verse novels 'offer readers a voyeuristic perspective not possible with prose. Poetry lends itself well to introspection and intense emotion' (2003). Likewise, the prolific and brilliant verse novelist Ellen Hopkins describes the experience of reading a novel in verse as 'living the story rather than being told the story' (Friesner, 2017, p. 35). Thus,

the heightened and intimate emotional experience of reading a verse novel and identifying with its characters presents a valuable tool for developing empathic skills in young people.

Which readers will benefit most from verse novels?

Verse novels can offer a rich literacy experience for all students, but there are two specific groups of readers that I want to highlight.

First, many practitioners have found that verse novels can be highly accessible for reluctant readers, striving readers, and even dyslexic readers (e.g. Krok, 2020a; Bokelman, 2018). Much of a verse novel's accessibility derives from the clean physical layout, with significantly fewer words on each page, short phrases or lines, frequent section breaks, and lots of white space. These characteristics are of great significance for young readers who may be intimidated by the long and dense blocks of text often present in prose novels.

In addition, verse novels typically employ 'dramatic storylines that elicit strong emotions, and an intimate narrative voice' which helps readers engage meaningfully with the text (Bokelman, 2018, p. 198). And according to English teacher Jeffrey Harr, a verse novel's economy of words enables these texts to 'cut to the chase in a way that prose sometimes cannot... [Verse novels are] focused on one thing at a time—a single image, a single event, a single emotion,' which increases their appeal and accessibility (Friesner, 2017, p. 145).

These unique textual features of verse novels may enable a reluctant or striving reader to finish an entire novel in one night, which in turn will promote their sense of fluency and competence.

The second group of readers that I think will particularly enjoy verse novels are our engaged or advanced readers. We've just looked at how the physical white space on the pages of a verse novel can support reluctant readers by breaking up the text into manageable sections. In turn, verse novels can challenge advanced readers to appreciate and interact with the metaphorical 'white space' in the text.

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What do I mean by the metaphorical white space? Because verse novels lack the detailed exposition and background information provided in a prose text, students must use key reading skills to assign meaning to the text. Some of these key reading skills include inferencing, visualization, and imaginative speculation to fill in the gaps in the text (Rook 2020; Cadden, 2011). As librarian Lisa Krok describes it, 'The white space on the pages of a novel in verse can be thought of as a silence to be filled by the reader's imagination' (2020b).

Additionally, higher-level readers are perfectly poised to identify and analyse the symbolism, language and poetic devices used in verse novels, thereby deepening their appreciation and comprehension of both poetry and the novel form. Verse novelist Sarah Crossan explains: 'Verse doesn't require the same-sized canvas as prose; sparsity is what lends these novels their magic,

the white spaces on the page revealing almost half of what the chosen words express and sometimes that space says even more' (2020). Higher-level readers will revel in the process of seeking out, exploring and creating textual meaning within the metaphorical white space of verse novels.

Which verse novels are best for school libraries?

I've collated three lists of verse novels that I have read and recommend for different age groups.

These lists were developed using the following criteria:

- 10-12 titles per age category
- One title per author per age category
- A diverse range of topics, narrators, themes and cultures
- Title is available to order from Australian online bookshops (as of May 2022).

Verse novels for Primary School students:

Apel, K. (2014). *Bully on the bus*. UQP.

Clark, S. (2021). *Mina and the whole wide world*. UQP.

Creech, S. (2021). *Moo*. Michael O'Mara.

Harry, P. (2019). *The little wave*. UQP.

Herrick, S. (2020). *Zoe, Max and the bicycle bus*. UQP.

Hopkins, E. (2021). *Closer to nowhere*. Penguin.

Lai, T. (2013). *Inside out & back again*. HarperCollins.

Lucido, A. (2020). *In the key of code*. Walker.

Murphy, S. (2020). *Worse things*. Walker.

Pinkney, A. (2015). *The red pencil*. Hachette.

Saunders, K. (2020). *Bindi*. Magabala.

Warga, J. (2021). *Other words for home*. HarperCollins.

Verse novels for Upper Primary/Lower Secondary students:

Alexander, K. (2015). *The crossover*. Walker.

Bowling, D. (2021). *The canyon's edge*. Hachette.

Creech, S. (2002). *Love that dog*. Bloomsbury.

Fraillon, Z. (2022). *The way of dog*. UQP.

Freeman, M. (2022). *Alone*. Aladdin.

Grimes, N. (2021). *Garvey's choice*. Random House.

Harry, P. (2021). *Are you there, Buddha?* Lothian.

Hesse, K. (2000). *Out of the dust*. Scholastic.

Moskowitz-Sweet, G. (2021). *It rained warm bread*. St Martins.

Murphy, S. (2015). *Sister heart*. Fremantle.

Patterson, J. & Alexander, K. (2020). *Becoming Muhammad Ali*. Jacaranda.

Woodson, J. (2016). *Brown girl dreaming*. Penguin Putnam.

Verse novels for Secondary School students:

Acevedo, E. (2018). *The Poet X*. HarperCollins.

Atta, D. (2020). *The Black Flamingo*. Hachette.

Coehlo, J. (2020). *The girl who became a tree*. Walker.

Crossan, S. (2020). *Toffee*. Bloomsbury.

Eckermann, A.C. (2012). *Ruby moonlight*. Magabala.

Elliott, D. (2021). *The seventh raven*. Houghton Mifflin.

Herrick, S. (2000). *The simple gift*. UQP.

Haydu, C.A. (2022). *Lawless spaces*. Simon & Schuster.

Kernot, S. (2018). *The art of taxidermy*. Text.

Mann, M. (2021). *The crossing*. Penguin.

Reynolds, J. (2018). *Long way down*. Faber.

Zoboi, I. & Salaam, Y. (2020). *Punching the air*. HarperCollins.

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