

Genre, History, and the Stolen Generations: Three Australian Stories

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In 1997, the *Bringing Them Home* report concluded that between one in three and one in ten Australian Aboriginal children had been forcibly removed from their homes and families between 1910 and the late 1970s, as a result of a number of national and state laws. These children became known as the Stolen Generations (Read, 'Stolen Generations'). The government's goal was to destroy Aboriginal cultures and traditions, and to assimilate Aboriginal children into white Australian society by placing them in institutional and foster 'care'. In fact variants of the practice were already occurring throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as the report itself states: 'Indigenous children have been forcibly separated from their families and communities since the very first days of the European occupation of Australia' (BTH report). The report prompted furious public debate. As Fiona Murphy puts it, "'Stolen Generations" were called upon across the continent to tell their stories, to allow Australians from all backgrounds to bear witness to the crimes and tortures of a past both known and unknown' (482). This state of public reflection and engagement helped fuel the publication of a proliferation of autobiographies by members of the Stolen Generation, and, gradually, a number of books for children. Picture books, autobiographies, and historical novels sought to make the histories and legacies of the Stolen Generations available to children of the present.

This essay examines three twenty-first-century Australian middle-grade novels that provide fictional accounts of experiences of the Stolen Generations: *Who Am I?: The Diary of Mary Talence, Sydney 1937*, by Anita Heiss (2001); *The Poppy Stories: Four Books in One*, set in 1864, by Gabrielle Wang (2016); and *Sister Heart*, by Sally Morgan (2016), with an unspecified setting in the late-nineteenth or early-twentieth century.¹ As these are fictional stories, imagining the perspectives of children, they employ a number of artistic and generic

conventions that create empathy but also cloud or colour access to historical ‘truth’. Reading each novel alongside a consideration of its historical and cultural contexts, I discuss the ways in which its genre influences the story it can tell.² *Who am I?* is a fictional diary, and *The Poppy Stories* is an adventure story written in the third person. Both form part of multi-author historical fiction series, *My Australian Story* and *Our Australian Girl* respectively. *Sister Heart* is a stand-alone verse novel. The generic conventions of each book shape and situate the telling of these tales in ways that relate to their historical and cultural ‘authenticity’. The journal format of *Who Am I?* makes use of quite different narrative strategies to the adventure/quest genre employed in *The Poppy Stories*. The verse format of *Sister Heart* affords the novel a particular immediacy and affective power. This essay explores the roles that genre plays in these texts’ negotiations of history and identity, as they attempt to depict, for children, the suffering and resilience of the Stolen Generations.

Genre and Children’s Literature

The implications of the concept of ‘genre’ have been discussed extensively, both within children’s literature scholarship and in the emerging field of genre studies. The term comes from the Latin *genus*, meaning ‘category’ or ‘type’. But, as Perry Nodelman and Mavis Reimer point out, quoting Jane Feuer, ‘genres exist primarily in the eyes of their beholders: “A genre is ultimately an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world”’ (Nodelman and Reimer 186). Genres are not stable or fixed. Nevertheless, if a text is marked as belonging to a particular genre, it invites certain expectations from readers. As Daniel Chandler notes, ‘[g]enres can be seen as constituting a kind of tacit contract between authors and readers’ (6). The genre of a text can signal what kinds of plot devices, character developments, and resolutions the reader can expect.

There is critical disagreement over the question of whether children's literature should itself be considered a genre. While Maria Nikolajeva argues that texts for children are too diverse to be considered a distinct genre (*Aesthetic* 50); I build here on Nodelman and Reimer's suggestion that it is helpful to consider children's literature a genre. They propose the basic plot pattern of home/away/home as applicable to nearly all children's literature, from picture books to novels for young adults (188-9). Stories for children about experiences of the Stolen Generations are thus challenged from the outset to fit a story about the loss of home into a genre that privileges its return. Marc Caddon considers the novel for children as 'a nexus – a core of connections and links. It is a nexus of other genres, including not only those more structurally defined like science-fiction or mystery but also the age-based genre categories of children's and young adult literatures' (303). Bearing in mind Nodelman and Reimer's notion of a home/away/home master plot, I will use Caddon's term to consider each of the three novels as a nexus of different categories and genres. *Who am I?* can be considered a middle-grade/historical/fictional diary; *The Poppy Stories* are middle-grade/historical/adventure/girl's fiction; while *Sister Heart* is a middle-grade/historical/verse novel.

Sonja Kurtzer suggests that, in telling difficult Indigenous stories, the genres of fiction and poetry may be inherently less threatening to non-Indigenous audiences than the genre of autobiography, as they don't claim the same level of 'truth' (7).³ Books aimed at children also seek to be non-threatening. Middle-grade fiction, as a publishing category, is directed to children from the ages of eight to twelve. Middle-grade novels are generally shorter than novels for older readers, eschew graphic descriptions of sex and violence, and tend to have a happy ending (Rubin). These constraints necessarily influence the novels' deployment of the genre of historical fiction. As Catherine Butler notes, the concept of 'historical fiction' contains a paradox: 'the very term "historical fiction" combines an implicit claim to say

something factual about the historical past with a declaration that it is fiction, something defined precisely by its departure from fact' (181). This tension between fact and fiction plays out differently in each of the novels I discuss. Historical fiction is seen as an appropriate genre for middle-grade audiences partly because of its didactic potential. It teaches children 'about the events of the past, inevitably in ways that tend to promote and naturalise the ideological assumptions of the writer's present' (Butler 182). Narratives about the Stolen Generations are not merely history lessons, however, but have work to do in the present – a present deeply shaped by the experiences of the Stolen Generations.

As middle-grade historical fiction, *Who am I?*, *The Poppy Stories*, and *Sister Heart* each present facts from the past in fictional ways deemed appropriate for eight to twelve-year-old children, inflected by ideologies and concerns of the present. But each of the other genres utilised by the novels – fictional diary, adventure story, and verse novel – encourages different reading styles. Sarah Livingstone notes: 'if different genres result in different modes of reader-text interaction, these latter may result in different types of involvement: critical or accepting, resisting or validating, casual or concentrated, apathetic or motivated' (253, quoted in Chandler 8). John Stephens distinguishes between 'two different interpretative positions which readers may take up as reading subjects – the subjected and the interrogative' (50). In a 'subjected' reading, a text is merely accepted and consumed, while in an 'interrogative' reading, the ideologies of texts are called into question. Most genres for children encourage a 'subjected reading', in which the reader identifies with the principal character and accepts their assessment of their world. The novels I consider here ask for such identification, too, but each novel positions the reader slightly differently, partly through their use and transformation of genre.

The three different genres I discuss both invite and model different reading practices. In *Who Am I?*, the historical journal packed with dates, events, and place names claims a high

degree of historical ‘authenticity’ and invites reflection on how the present is shaped by the cumulative actions of the past. This labelling constructs history as something scientific and absolute, while the pauses between journal entries, and the slightly disjointed unravelling of plot entailed by the journal format, insert gaps in the narrative that may provide space for readers to reflect on their own lives. Further, the protagonist’s pointed questions and interrogation of cultural texts encourage readers to do the same. The adventure genre of the *Poppy Stories* provides a more immersive reading experience: readers are invited to enter Poppy’s world and mind, and to be swept along by her adventures. The novel attempts to shift the gendered and racial parameters of the national myths underpinning an understanding of the country’s colonial past. However, as Poppy’s ‘Indigenous’ voice does not speak from a lived Indigenous perspective, the text’s power of broadening cultural understanding in this respect is limited. Finally, in *Sister Heart*, the quietness of the verse novel imitates the constricted perspective of a child ripped from her family and her world. As Annie gradually reconstructs a sense of self in the most trying of circumstances, the child’s consciousness is privileged over quantifiable historical markers. Morgan points out that the complex and layered past of the Stolen Generations demands a multipronged approach (interview). The use and transformation of different genres can be a part of such complexity.

Anita Heiss: Who am I: The Diary of Mary Talence, Sydney 1937

Heiss, a prolific and high-profile writer in Australia, an academic, and an ambassador from the Wiradjuri nation of New South Wales, was approached by Scholastic to write a story from an Aboriginal perspective for their middle-grade history series *My Australian Story*.⁴ At that point she had not written much fiction and was ‘grateful for the [journal] format’ which gave her ‘limits which were useful for [her] first novel for young people’ (Heiss, ‘Anita’s Story’). She embraced the publisher’s directive to ‘transport the reader through the voice of a

young person at a particular point in Australia's history' ('Anita's Story'). The format of the fictional diary influences the telling of the story in two significant ways. First, it facilitates the inclusion of a vast number of dates and facts. Second, it establishes the direct voice of the protagonist, who tells the story in her own words. The tone of the journal is cheerful and inquisitive, and Mary's sentences have a casual, spoken feel. Heiss considered it important to tell the story of the Stolen Generations for a number of reasons, including a desire to create materials suitable for classroom use. Her own grandmother was taken to Cootamundra Girls Home at the age of six and, as Heiss puts it, 'I don't know one Indigenous Australian who hasn't been affected by the policies of protection' ('Anita's Story').

The fictional diary is a popular genre in children's literature, simulating direct access to the past (Nikolajeva, *Children's Literature* 103). As Kim Wilson points out, '[c]hild and teenage readers, being concrete rather than analytical thinkers, are more likely to believe the story as "true" because it is based on "fact"' (104). Mary's journal is peppered with local historical facts and dates in a way that sometimes feels slightly forced. We learn the names of politicians, the dates of the construction of buildings and bridges, and details about national sporting games and Australia's first taste of Coca-Cola (137). Wilson argues that, despite being grounded in historical facts, the My Australian Story series is 'often ahistorical in its ideological treatment of content' (104), as it presents the Australian national character as grounded in antiauthoritarianism and the act of 'striving toward a fairer, more equal society' (111). It is true that *Who am I?* reflects Heiss's own 'historical contexts' and preoccupations, and that Mary strives towards a fairer society. Heiss also, however, depicts the systematic racism her protagonist experiences at home, school, church, and in the wider community. She makes use of the journal form to question the fundamental unfairness of Australian society and to encourage her readers to do the same, inviting a critical, motivated, and interrogative reading position.

The journal begins on the eve of Mary's tenth birthday and ends on her eleventh birthday, strategically placed on the 27th of January, the day after 'Australia Day'. Mary was removed from her family at the age of five and placed in Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home. The decision to base Mary in a named institution that actually existed lends weight and authenticity to the story. The buildings of Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home, which operated between 1908 and 1988, are still standing, and are preserved as a memorial to those forced to grow up there ('Bomaderry'; Drewitt-Smith). The novel follows her life as she is fostered by a white, Catholic family and attends a mainstream school. She begins to question the white world around her, and to build knowledge about and pride in her Aboriginal heritage and identity. The story thus follows the home/away/home formula but with a difference: neither the 'home' at the beginning of the narrative nor the home at the end of it – the foster family in which Mary carves a place for herself – are Mary's true home. At the end of the narrative, Mary is not reunited with her birth mother, but rather with a politically engaged Aboriginal community.

Throughout the journal, Heiss models the practice of 'interrogative reading' through the way Mary questions the texts and genres around her. She loves to sing but notices that most of the songs, many of which are still staple fare in primary schools across Australia today, are exclusively about men, comprehensively ignore Indigenous Australians, and do not reflect her own experiences at all:

Today in singing group we did the song 'Advance Australia Fair' by P D McCormicle.

It's a strange song that's meant to make everyone feel proud to be Australian. But the first line is 'Australian sons let us rejoice'. What about the daughters? (115)

'Advance Australia Fair' replaced 'God Save the Queen' as Australia's national anthem in 1984. Although its first line was changed to 'Australians all let us rejoice', the song is still criticised today for its colonial undertones and its erasure of Indigenous Australians. Mary's

cutting analysis and pertinent questions, of course, actually betray a twenty-first century feminist viewpoint, as these interpretations would have been significantly less obvious in the 1930s than they are today. Mary also expresses Heiss's deeply held view that Indigenous stories should be told by Indigenous writers: 'How could anyone else know what I think or feel if they wasn't me?' (128).

Heiss deliberately sets the book primarily in 1937 in order to include the protests of the 'National Day of Mourning' on 26 January 1938 – the 150-year anniversary of the landing of the First Fleet. Discussing the comparable *Our Canadian Girl* series, Marnina Gonick critiques the way in which historical fiction for children tends to solve political problems with personal solutions (179). In contrast to this, *Who Am I?* manages to foreground the political processes necessary for change. After attending the protest, Mary records the words of the resolution moved by Aboriginal protestors on that day:

We, representing the Aborigines of Australia ... hereby make protest against the callous treatment of our people by the whiteman during the past 150 years ... we ask for a new policy which will raise our people to full citizen status and equality within the community (183, AIATSIS).

By finishing the novel shortly after Mary's attendance at this meeting, Heiss not only manages to provide a satisfying culmination of Mary's search for identity, but successfully uses the journal format to gesture towards the methods by which true change will eventually be achieved: political activism and Aboriginal Australians speaking for themselves.

The Poppy Stories

The Poppy Stories can be categorised as at once 'girl's fiction', 'historical fiction', and 'adventure story'. Novels in the *Our Australian Girl* series are published in sets of four and focalised through the character of a fictional young girl.⁵ As the catch-phrase of the series, 'A

girl like me in a time gone by', indicates, the books encourage an immersive, 'historical' reading experience and direct, gendered identification with the main character (Duckworth). In press releases and teacher notes, *The Poppy Stories* are described as 'adventure stories' ('Meet Poppy'; Kerr), a genre drawing on colonial tropes of exploration, which encourages escapism rather than detailed analyses of dates and facts. Nikolajeva notes that '[a]dventure stories usually present characters and situations that are not impossible, but highly improbable' (*Aesthetic* 62). Thus the adventure genre, which implies improbable situations, sits somewhat awkwardly beside the novel's claim to historical authenticity.

The Poppy Stories begin in the fictitious Bird Creek Mission in the colony of Victoria in 1864 and follow Poppy's marvelous journey towards the goldfields as she escapes the mission and goes in search of her brother. The story of an incredible journey by an Aboriginal child escaping from a mission is not unprecedented, as can be seen in the novel and subsequent film version of Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* [see Clare Bradford's discussion of this book in this number of *IRCL*]. *The Poppy Stories* differ from this story in the fact that they are wholly invented, vastly more positive, and infused with popular archetypes from Australia's colonial past. The adventure genre of the novels embroiders Poppy's journey with familiar motifs such as the Robin Hood figure of a bushranger, a friendly animal (the dog Fisher) who becomes her travelling companion and catches an enormous nugget of gold hidden in a fish, and a wise Aboriginal man who saves her life and begins to guide her in Bangerang ways.

Wang is a Chinese-Australian children's author and illustrator, best known for her narratives that combine Chinese-Australian characters and folklore with aspects of magic realism. In *The Poppy Stories*, her customary magic-realist elements create a bridge to depicting Aboriginal culture. In creating an Aboriginal-Chinese protagonist, Wang brings together two cultures not often considered together (Daozhi, 'Liminality'). While significant

numbers of Chinese prospectors lived in Australia at the time of the gold rush in the 1850s, there are conflicting accounts of Aboriginal-Chinese relations at the time (Cahir and Clark). Both groups were looked down on by the white population. As a historical adventure novel set in colonial times with a female Chinese-Aboriginal protagonist, the novel enacts a reversal and reclamation of the genre for a gender and cultures which would traditionally have been moved to the edges of such narratives (Bradford, 'Saved' 90; Smith, Moruzi and Bradford 117-46). The historical-adventure format enables the novel to function as a feminist, multicultural revision of Australian foundation myths.

As an Indigenous character written by a non-Indigenous author, however, Poppy's 'authenticity' is questionable. While Heiss's grandmother and Morgan's great-grandmother were members of the Stolen Generations, Wang is a fourth-generation Chinese-Australian with no Indigenous heritage. Non-Indigenous Australian writers risk producing stereotypes when depicting Indigenous characters, even when they have good intentions (Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala* 10; Bradford, *Reading Race*; Stanton). As Joseph Bruchac puts it, 'Those authors might mean well, but like the inexperienced driver who just accidentally hit you with his car, good intentions don't make up for being run over' (342). Although Wang has consulted Indigenous liaison officers, and was very conscious of writing outside her own culture (personal email), the voice of Poppy is not easily distinguished from the other (mostly white) girls in the series in terms of her values and assumptions.

Poppy is highly, and anachronistically, literate, and the books she reads, including *Great Expectations*, an encyclopedia called *The Book of Knowledge*, *Moby Dick*, and *Alice in Wonderland*, disproportionately shape the way she views the world. She practices what Stephens terms a 'subjected' style of reading. Poppy's own reading is transgressive in some ways, in the sense that she reads the matron's private library when she is supposed to be cleaning her rooms and that she reads to absorb information about her Chinese heritage,

otherwise denied to her (24). She never, however, questions the truthfulness or relevance of what she reads; rather, she absorbs it into her world-view. When she escapes the mission, ‘the moon shone like a beacon above, and it was as if she fled over white silk between the tall trunks of the gums. On both sides they stood, like ghostly columns leading to a Phaoroh’s tomb’ (49). The descriptions of ‘silk’ and ‘Phaoroh’s tomb’ seem out of place in the imagination of a young nineteenth-century Chinese-Aboriginal girl, even when she has been described reading a chapter about the Pyramids a few pages earlier. Books are so precious to her and so ingrained in her way of thinking that, when she starts to acquire more knowledge of Aboriginal culture, she describes it as a ‘book inside her’ (303). The reader of *The Poppy Stories* is likewise encouraged to seamlessly, imaginatively enter Poppy’s world.

Wang’s decision to begin the story in a fictitious mission marks a very different approach from Heiss’s depiction of actual institutions. The conditions of the children in Bird Creek mission are analogous to those described in several missions of the time, which sought to control the children’s time and movements stringently, cut off access to their families and culture, and sent children into domestic servitude once they were teenagers (McLisky). Bird Creek is also, however, somewhat of a simplification. Most missions accepted both adults and children, although children were often housed separately from the adults and frequently sent to other missions, such as Coranderrk. The *Bringing Them Home Report* states that, by 1867, ‘The manager of Coranderrk travelled around the Indigenous communities removing “neglected” children for the school although he had no lawful power to do so until 1869’ (Chapter 4). The *Poppy Stories* do not draw attention to this practice. While the children feel trapped there, the mission is described as an ‘orphanage’ and the children are referred to without exception as ‘orphans’, familiar characters in the genre of children’s literature. While Gus remembers ‘crying’ when he and Poppy were ‘taken away’, their mother is dead and their father is absent.

By presenting Poppy's mother as dead, Wang avoids more complicated representations of children literally stolen from their mothers. Poppy's father, it turns out, has been wrongly imprisoned, and he is delighted to be reunited with her as soon as he is able to be. In a similar vein, Poppy's friend Blossom's fortuitous and mutually satisfying adoption by a white couple who own a bookshop is not representative of the fate of stolen Aboriginal children at that time. For example, in Tasmania, just twenty-five years earlier, five-year-old Mathinna was temporarily adopted by Lady Franklin, the childless wife of the Governor, who appeared to treat her as an 'exotic pet' but abandoned her to an orphanage when the couple returned to England (Haebich 116). Unlike this account of Mathinna's life story, *The Poppy Stories* fit neatly into the conventional home/away/home plot. Beginning in the unsatisfactory 'home' of the mission, once Poppy has successfully escaped and journeyed across the countryside, she is reunited with her brother, her father, and even her dead mother in the form of her totem animal, a crow. She embraces her Father's Chinese culture, but maintains ties with her Aboriginal heritage. The closure, celebration, and cultural fusion provided by this narrative arc contributes to a more comforting and less unsettling reading experience than that invited by the questioning, political *Who Am I?*

Sister Heart and the Verse Novel

Morgan is a prolific and respected Indigenous Australian writer, best known for her autobiography *My Place* (1987). *Sister Heart* is her only verse novel. She says she did not set out to write a verse novel, or indeed a novel at all, but that the story came to her in a dream and insisted on this genre. The verse novel is a burgeoning Young Adult genre which has also, in recent years, expanded into the middle-grade market (Alexander). The vast majority, *Sister Heart* included, do not rhyme, but consist of spare, interlinked free-verse poems. Caddon observes that, 'Like matter itself, the verse novel is mostly air, and we see that even

in the textual nature of the layout' (309). Morgan makes use of the empty space and minimalism inherent in the genre to craft a different kind of historical fiction. No dates or place names are mentioned and there is no supporting appendix of historical facts or documents. Here, the verse novel invites readers into a state of interior reflection and empathy rather than historical interrogation or vicarious adventure. The quietness of the verse-novel form enables *Sister Heart* to venture closer than *Who am I?* and *The Poppy Stories* to a depiction of trauma, while still remaining appropriate for a middle-grade audience.

Sister Heart differs from the other two novels in that it begins in the traumatic moment when the protagonist Annie has just been snatched from her mother and abandoned in 'a cold stone room / with no one to hug / but me' (11). In this way, it modulates the use of the home/away/home structure. *Who am I?* depicts the journey from an institutional home to a foster home, and *The Poppy Stories* depicts the journey from an institutional home to a home with Poppy's own father and brother. In *Sister Heart*, home exists only as a memory and a dream. 'Home' is the final word of the novel's first poem, and is mentioned three times in the final stanzas of its last. When the book opens, Annie is in a holding cell, trapped by straight lines 'making me cry / cry / cry / for home' (13). At the end of the book, she is confined in an institution, dreaming of her mother and knowing her mother is dreaming of her:

She will hear my song in a dream

Listen to my voice

Know it's me

I will sing

I am not lost, Mum

Watch for me

Someday

I am coming home (250-251)

While the novel narrates the painful and unresolved experience of the loss of home, it is framed by the recollection of and longing for home. And although Annie does not recover her home in the narrative, she gains the interior strength to sing and dream of it.

The pared-back lyrics capture the child's fragmented perspective and condense into the simplest, most heart-rending questions: 'Where is he taking me? / Where is my mum?' (16). The verse novel is a good conduit for sensory memories and experiences. Annie remembers her baby sister's sloppy kisses and wants to pick her up. These details are nearly unbearable to read, but the spare matter-of-factness of the simple poems, combined with the lightness and gentleness of the form, the forgiving white space, and moments of humour and companionship, mean that they do not overwhelm the reader. If they do, there is space and air to breathe between poems. A small line-drawing of a plant introduces each of the book's four sections, and is printed above each poem. The simple drawings of silent but comforting local plants contribute to the calm, reflective reading experience that the novel invites. Plants, particularly wildflowers, are also significant presences in the narrative, and offer the children a degree of companionship and imaginative freedom.

While the cover of *Who am I?* features historical photographs and the cover of *The Poppy Stories* features the photograph of a contemporary schoolgirl posing as Poppy, the cover of *Sister Heart* is adorned with a stylised pattern of red and yellow wildflowers on an appealing purple background, designed by Western Australian artist Tracey Gibbs. The title, by not including a name or date, also distinguishes itself from the other two texts. The cover features heart-leaf flame pea flowers (*chorizema cordatum*), native to the southwest corner of Western Australia, which echo the 'heart' of the title, and billy buttons (*craspedia*), which are mentioned in the text:

Janey squats down

touches a billy button gently

billy buttons

are like baby suns

I like billy buttons too

Billy buttons are a smile

on the ground (184)

The heart-shaped, sun-shaped plants on the cover invite reflections on love, hope, resilience, and beauty, which can flourish even in the most difficult of circumstances. They also mark a very different relation to history than that of the other two novels. History here is inhabited but not explained. We are given a limited, child's-eye view, with a focus on immediate experience rather than historical context.

The complete lack of any historical framing material is initially disorienting, mirroring, in a minor way, Annie's own confusion. There is no clear indication of when or where the novel is set. The only hints are that Annie is forced to undertake a journey by ship, and is referred to by the other children as a 'Nor-wester', which she has in common with some children there, while others are 'Sou-westerners'. With a bit of research, one can discover that it was common in Western Australia in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries for Aboriginal children to be brutally taken from the north of the state and sent to the south, thousands of kilometers from their families (Haebich 243-46), but this is not made explicit in the text. Patricia Linton points out that we should pay attention to gaps in the text and be mindful of the ways they may rightfully shut us out (Linton 43, quoted in Bradford, 'Reading Indigeneity' 335). In an interview with Morgan, Georgia Moodie suggests that the lack of detail in the text about places, dates, and names may be a way of universalising the story and

making it represent the experiences of any number of stolen children. I had assumed much the same thing. Morgan, however, has another way of looking at it:

What I was really focusing on was how does a little girl like Annie, like how does she cope, when she's in deep shock, she's lost her voice, she's lost her home, she's lost her family and her country... what's important to her that she keeps safe, what secrets does she want to hide from authorities – that's why those things weren't shared...

(Morgan 'interview')

The lack of detail is meant to be protective rather than universalising, as 'Annie has a fear that if she shares things that are really important to her . . . that they will be taken from her, in the same way that she's been taken from her family and her country' (Morgan, interview). In refusing to contextualise Annie's experience with dates and place-names, Morgan steps away from a scholarly or pedagogical approach to history that might actually distance a reader from events, as they happened long ago and can be mapped onto a timeline. At the same time, she imagines her character as a real child in need of protection – some but not all of her story can be shared. In deciding not to claim historical authenticity through facts and photographs, a different kind of cultural authenticity becomes available – the notion that some stories are private – and that Indigenous experiences are not available for consumption and control.

Observing the characters as readers enables yet another level of reflection on the ways in which genres shape and challenge experience. While Poppy is depicted as unproblematically absorbing all the knowledge and stories she encounters, Morgan draws attention to the cultural difficulties Annie experiences when she encounters English words and genres. When the girls decorate themselves with flowers and pretend to be queens, Annie whispers, 'I don't know what a queen is // Janey elbows me / *Queens a boss / Rich one* / says Emmy' (141-2). Annie's confusion as to what a queen is shows how distant her background is from European general knowledge and stories. Reading and speaking in English are also

difficult for Annie. Her teacher forces her to repeat ‘Mary had a little lamb’, and her friend Janey points out: ‘*That rhyme is for babies / Teacher wants you to feel dumb / and look dumb / but you ain’t dumb, Annie*’ (178). This novel, like *Who am I?* does in a different way, draws attention to the violence and control enacted in colonial education. Mary is baffled by the absence of Indigenous perspectives in her history classes and the songs she is taught, and is disappointed when she is not allowed to play Mary in a nativity play, despite having the right name. Annie and Janie reject the genre of the English nursery rhyme in favor of their own strategic silences and songs.

Conclusion: Genres, Hope and Storytelling

Happy or hopeful endings are expected in children’s books. Home is meant to be restored (Nodelman and Reimer 188-9). These conventions are problematic in the context of stories about the Stolen Generations. Not all survivors of this cultural genocide were able to reconstruct their lives into what could be considered a ‘happy ending’, and not all survived. Many suffered or died from abuse, maltreatment, and neglect, or lost touch with their families and their heritage forever. Other children, however, whether through benevolent foster care or courageous post-institutional personal journeys, went on to achieve higher education, cultural integration, and artistic success (Read, ‘Return’ 9). Read writes that ‘a particular responsibility [of] all historians of the stolen generations’ is ‘[h]ow not to diminish the effect of separation but simultaneously to recognise the ability of the removed children to overcome those effects’ (‘Return’ 9). Children’s books about the Stolen Generations have a similar responsibility to tell the painful, nuanced histories of the mistreatment and resilience of First Nations children.

Each of the three books has either a happy or a hopeful ending, through variations of the home/away/home formula, thus conforming to expectations of a children’s book format,

and presenting First Nations children as resilient and hopeful. The extent of the hopefulness, and the ways it is presented across the three different genres, however, are very different. *The Poppy Stories*, which conform to the 'adventure' genre, provides the most closure, in the form of a loving multicultural family unit. At the end of *Who am I?*, Mary has not been reunited with her birth mother, but feels more at home with her foster family and has discovered a network of Aboriginals who will help her in the future. Most importantly, she has an answer to the question posed in the title: 'I am an Aboriginal, and I am proud' (189). This partial closure, coupled as it is with Mary's awakening to the possibilities of organised political resistance, is more realistic than Poppy's utopian homecoming. Morgan's *Sister Heart* also manages to end on a note of hope, but it is a quieter, more muted hope than that expressed in the other two novels. Annie stands together with her friend Tim: '*Home's waitin' for us, Annie / And we are waiting for home*' (251). This home is articulated, sung, and dreamed, poignantly balancing the generic need for closure and comfort with a fidelity to the painful realities experienced by these children. The hopeful endings of each of the novels illuminate the possibilities of the nexus of genres that they each inhabit. The genres of fictional diary, adventure story, and verse novel invite different reading practices and approaches to the history of the Stolen generations: interrogative, immersive, and quietly empathetic.

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¹ *The Poppy Stories* were originally published as four separate books: *Meet Poppy* (2011); *Poppy at Summer Hill* (2011); *Poppy and the Thief* (2011); and *Poppy Comes Home* (2011). For the purpose of this essay I will refer to the compilation volume published as *The Poppy Stories* in 2016.

² As a white Australian with an English heritage, I recognize that I read these narratives from an outsider perspective. I thus, as Clare Bradford recommends, hope to incorporate a 'self-reflexive style of reading', in which I am 'alert to the signs of difference in these texts, and to the ways in which [my] own habits and assumptions are challenged' (Bradford, 'Reading Indigeneity' 334).

³ Much discussion of Indigenous writing in the context of 'genre' has focused on the genre of autobiography (Haag; Kurtzer). Xu Daozhi provides a comprehensive analysis of the cultural and political roles of Australian Indigenous autobiographies and their relationship to the Bringing Them Home report (*Indigenous Cultural Capital* 63-96).

⁴ This is a companion series to the other Scholastic national series Dear America, Dear Canada, My New Zealand Story. Wilson compares the characteristics of these various national series in *Re-visioning History for Young Readers*.

⁵ The series shares this format with the American Girl series, with which it is not formally associated, and the Our Canadian Girl series, also published by Penguin. These series have been extensively discussed. See: Acosta-Alzuru, Carolina, and Peggy J. Kreshel; Duckworth; Gonick; Hade; Marshall.