2009

Midnight Jack and Houston: a novel, [and] Lesbian families in children's literature

Vivien Tait

University of Wollongong

Recommended Citation

NOTE

This online version of the thesis may have different page formatting and pagination from the paper copy held in the University of Wollongong Library.

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

COPYRIGHT WARNING

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site. You are reminded of the following:

Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.
Midnight Jack and Houston

A Novel

A novel submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Master of Creative Arts – Research

from

University of Wollongong

by

Vivien Tait, BA (Communications)

Faculty of Creative Arts
University of Wollongong

2009
Table of Contents

Chapter One – Zaranden........................................................................................................ 3
Chapter Two – Ovidon ........................................................................................................ 11
Chapter Three – India goes home .................................................................................... 18
Chapter Four – Bottick ..................................................................................................... 20
Chapter Five – Out of sorts ............................................................................................... 30
Chapter Six – The Battle in Ovidon .................................................................................. 35
Chapter Seven – Bonjuka’s black hole .............................................................................. 43
Chapter Eight – India goes home again ............................................................................. 44
Chapter Nine – Jack goes home ...................................................................................... 46
Chapter Ten – India is determined .................................................................................. 48
Chapter Eleven – Zaranden buzzes .................................................................................. 51
Chapter Twelve – Showdown ............................................................................................ 53
Chapter Thirteen – India goes to Bottick ......................................................................... 54
Chapter Fourteen – Jack goes to Bottick ....................................................................... 56
Chapter Fifteen – Hugh goes to Bottick .......................................................................... 59
Chapter Sixteen – Noha stays at Zaranden ..................................................................... 61
Chapter Seventeen – The children are missed .................................................................. 62
Chapter Eighteen – India and Mrs Kuja have a chat ....................................................... 64
Chapter Nineteen – Mrs Kuja tells her tale ...................................................................... 67
Chapter Twenty – Noha sends the alert .......................................................................... 72
Chapter Twenty One – Houston and Midnight Jack ......................................................... 74
Chapter Twenty Two – It’s all happening at once! ............................................................ 78
Chapter Twenty Three – The final battle in Ovidon .......................................................... 82
Chapter Twenty Four – The children are called home – again! ....................................... 84
Chapter Twenty Five – The children leave Ovidon ........................................................... 86
Chapter Twenty Six – Jack and India make a discovery .................................................... 88
Chapter One – Zaranden

“India, you definitely need a wig,” said her Class 6 teacher, Melissa, handing her one made from straight, black nylon.

They were in the Zaranden School hall, rehearsing for the end of year Excellence Extravaganza that they were staging in a week’s time.

“Cleopatra doesn’t work with white hair.”

“It’s not white, my hair, it’s very, very fair,” said India, sitting regally on the throne. “It’s a snappy-straight, shoulder-bobbed, have-fun, sparkly colour.” Her hands were waving across the crowd of her classmates kneeling in front of her, dressed in their servant costumes. “And if they don’t like it, orf with their heads!”

Sitting in the throne next to India, Jack’s Caesar-crown was catapulted across the room as he doubled over laughing. “That’s from Alice in Wonderland, India!”

“And orf with your head, too,” said India, spluttering her own laugh over the servants.

Jack and India had a good old belly rumble, but Melissa’s thick lips were pushed forward in the air. They were held in place by the tight corners of her mouth, which were nearly touching each other.

The rest of the class went very still.

Melissa looked like she was going to plant a big sloppy-one on someone’s cheek. Except that she was frowning.

“India, Jack, this is not helpful behaviour,” said Melissa.

“Oooh, la di da di da,” said India, putting her pinkie in the air and touching her pointer finger and thumb together.

Melissa turned away from the thrones. The veins in her nose were pulsating. She took such a deep breath that all the children could hear it snuffling right into the back of her nostrils. “Well, I’d say that this act is finished, who’s next?”

Children tip-toed around the room to take their positions for the next item. One of them, Samantha, leaned in close to the thrones when she passed and said, “What about Melissa’s Kisser?!” before she tripped on her Dad’s old J.C. sandals from nineteen seventy something.

Samantha’s words echoed back from the end of the empty hall and the whispery ‘Kisser, Kisser, Kisser’ tickled the children’s laughing bones. A loud hiccup,
a squeak, a snort and then all kinds of twitters burst from around the room. Twenty pairs of hands clamped over twenty children’s mouths, but they couldn’t hold on, and the glee spilled between their fingers.

Melissa raked her hands through her hair, then dropped them to her thighs – thwack. “India. Out.” She seemed to speak without moving her mouth.

“Oh, that’d be right,” said India. “Blame me for everything and chuck me out, when I’m the only one who’s learned my whole act.”

“Now.”
India threw the wig towards the teacher. “I hate you, Kisser-Melissa. You’re as stupid as this bunch of losers.”

Melissa bent low to pick up the wig.
India jumped off the throne and circled the children. “I could put on this whole show by myself! And, I’d be finished before any of you could even remember what to do!”

Melissa’s hair was so snarled that it looked like a fireball around her head. She walked over to Jack and leaned across him to place the wig down carefully on India’s abandoned throne. A string of slobber oozed out of her lips onto Jack’s head.

“Yuk, Melissa!” said Jack, scrubbing at his hair with the back of his sleeve.
Melissa turned to India, “Out!” she sprayed.

“Oh, I’m going, Kisser!” said India, running to the door. She slammed it so hard that the props on the stage fell over.

“I’m going to wash my hair,” said Jack, and he was across the hall, with the door open, when Melissa answered. “No, Jack. I need you to stay here for the rest of the rehearsal.”

He closed the door very quietly and went back to the rest of the children.

*****

Melissa motioned for the children to come and sit on the beanbags at the back of the hall.

“We’ve run out of time to rehearse everyone’s acts,” she said. “Let’s have a talk-through to make sure we’re clear.” She sank onto a beanbag, as well.
“Ok, we’ve seen the first item – well enough of it, anyway,” continued Melissa.
“Who was next?”
“Wait, what about me, Melissa?” cried Tristan, “I haven’t rehearsed my Caesar understudy with Sunshine.”
Melissa ran a hand over her eyes, “I think it’ll be ok, don’t you? I’ve seen how well you’ve been shadowing Jack and India,” she said warmly. “Now, everyone, what comes next?”
“That’s us,” said Ann. “We’ve got individual and team juggling. We’ll collect things from the audience – hats and umbrellas, bags and shoes, babies and, nah, just kidding - ”
“And we’ll toss them around,” said Barry. “Then we’ll do some balancing with me on Ann’s shoulders, more juggling, and we’ll end with a collapse into tumbles.”
“Good,” said Melissa. “Then we have Colin with poetry, Deidre with a mental arithmetic demonstration and Ella with a piano performance – which will lead the audience to interval and the Part 2 Outdoors performance.”
“Yeah, and I open that part with my fire-breathing,” said Fran.
“Then we come in with flame torches to light the path to the skate ramp,” said Gerry, pointing out a group of five children.
“Oh,” said Melissa. “That’s where we have roller blades, skate boards and mountain bikes, is that right?”
“Yeah, but you left out the part where we walk with everyone from place to place, as well, playing our drums,” said Harriet, pointing to three other children.
“Great,” said Melissa, standing up. “You all seem to know exactly what you’re doing! I have a special thank you to Jen, Kevin and Larry, who didn’t want to perform, but have put in a lot of work to organise the event.”

The Class whoopeed and whistled, clapping loud and long. The three children blushed and smiled, ducking their heads under their arms.
“Ok, quiet now,” said Melissa. “The final word on the show goes to Jack. Have you decided what you will do?”
“I’m going to stand on the big rock dolmen in the front playground,” he said. “The flame torches will be at my feet, and the drummers will accompany me.”

“And what will you sing?” asked Melissa.

“‘Time Of Your Life’, by Greenday,” said Jack, almost to himself.

****

When the bell rang for the end of school, Jack bolted to the toilet block to clean his hair. The slime was hard and dry and stuck in globs. He could hear India crying in the girl's loo, next door. “You ok?” he called through the wall.

“No!”

With a sigh, he gave up on his hair and walked over to the girl's side. “How long have you been in there? Come on out.”

“No way.”

Jack paused at the door and peeked around the corner. “Well, is anyone else in there?”

“No.”

India was folded in a little heap behind the wash basins, with a roll of toilet paper in her lap, and scrunched up balls of it in a pile beside her.

“It's ok, India,” said Jack, from just inside the doorway. “You know that Kisser’s got no sense of humour.”

“Yeah! Did you see her face?” said India, the corners of her mouth twitching. “And what about her hair! Quick, call the fire brigade - Kisser’s smoking out of her ears!”

“Well what about you? I thought we’d have a down-pour in the hall with the way you were rain-dancing around everyone,” said Jack.

India grinned, then sniffed loudly. “I'm sick of Melissa pick, pick, picking. What took you so long, anyway?”

“Melissa wouldn’t let me go,” he said.

“Gee, Jack, sometimes you just have to go when you want to!”
“I guess,” he said, kicking the toe of his shoe on the floor. “Come on, let’s go to my house and you can pick, pick, pick up loads of popcorn to put in your mouth. My Mum makes the best.”

India straightened off the floor. “Which Mum?”

“Tara,” said Jack, blinking in the sun as they came out of the gloomy block. “Hugh calls her our cooking queen.”

“My step-dad does all the cooking in our house,” said India as they wandered over to Class 2 to pick up her little sister and Jack’s little brother. “My Mum works really long hours. She says she’s too tired to start up in the kitchen when she gets home.”

“Well, my Mums have heaps of work to do, too, but they’re great jugglers,” said Jack.

“That’s wicked,” said India.

Jack laughed. “No, they don’t really juggle, not with balls or anything. I mean they juggle their work around. They take turns to get us after school.”

“Who juggles?” said Hugh, almost knocking his big brother over with a flying bear hug.

“Mummy and Tara,” said Jack, keeping his arm around Hugh and starting to walk to the school gate.

“They aren’t jugglers,” said Hugh. “They’re bosses.”

“Shoosh, you don’t even know what we were talking about,” said Jack. “Just hurry up, Tara’s waiting, and India’s coming with us today.”

“Noha, too?” said Hugh.

“No,” said India, “she’s got her gym exam.”

“Oh, not fair,” said Hugh. “Jack, you get someone to play with and I don’t.”

“You’ll survive,” said Jack.

* * * *

Jack, Hugh and India plonked their bags, beanies and coats in the hall, kicked off their shoes, and made a bee-line for the kitchen. They crashed open the fridge and cupboards, ransacking for after-school munchies.
“I promised India your famous popcorn,” Jack called to Tara who’d come in behind them loaded up with her work bag, the mail and fresh bread.

“Nothing ‘til everything’s off the floor,” she instructed.

Jack’s forehead creased down over his brown eyes, “Yeah, yeah, c’mon India,” he said stomping everything away to his bedroom.

“You too, Hugh.”

Hugh skipped over to his bag, singing “Frere Jacques, Frere Jacques, dormez vous, dormez vous,” then walked backwards down the hall to the study.

The pump of music suddenly thumped through the house from the boom-box in Jack’s room, and then was joined by the ‘bring’ of the computer starting up in the study.

Tara climbed into slop-around trackies, piled washing into the machine, and plumped wet clothes into the drier. Turning them both on, the ‘chunk, chunk, chunk’ of the washing machine and the ‘whoomp, whoomp, whoomp’ of the drier added to the Monday afternoon din.

“Popcorn ready, yet?” yelled Jack over the noise.

“Come on out and you can help,” Tara yelled back.

Jack emerged, whistling the song he’d just turned off. India came bopping along behind him and Hugh skidded up to them all in the kitchen.

“Let’s have a bedroom picnic,” said Hugh.

“With fizzy drinks and a performance. Live theatre,” said India. “Hugh can be the audience.”

“I want to be in the performance, too,” said Hugh. “I got excellent dress ups for my birthday.”

“Fine, Hugh. We’ll take turns, ok!” said Jack, “and we’ll use my stage make-up to create strange and fearsome characters. Okay, Tara?”

“Sure, darling, but you’ve only got about an hour, then India has to go home,” said Tara, handing Jack three bags of steaming, salty popcorn.

“You bring the drinks, India,” said Jack, “and you get the costumes, Hugh.”

As India walked down the hall, Hugh tugged at Jack’s sleeve and motioned for him to bend down. Standing on his tip-toes, Hugh whispered in Jack’s ear, “Hey,
maybe we don’t have to get the costumes out. What about we play our new game, Jack?”

“Hugh! We can’t do that, you know that it’s top secret! Just get the clothes, ok?!” Jack hissed.

* * * * *

Hugh struggled through the door of Jack’s bedroom laden with a mountain of costumes. “Here we go, something for all of us,” he chirped, as he dumped the outfits on Jack’s bed.

“No way,” said India. “I’m not wearing those girly clothes.”

“But you are a girl,” said Hugh.

“I’m a superior-new-age-girl. I don’t do high heels and false nails. You wear them, if you like them so much.”

Hugh’s mouth dropped open.

Jack laughed. “No one has to wear them,” he said. “I’ve got a better idea.”

“But we’ve just got all our costumes ready for our characters,” said Hugh.

“You’ll like this, though. Remember our new discovery?”

Hugh moved close to his brother and whispered in frustration, “You just said it was our secret discovery!”

“I’ve decided it’s ok. It’ll be fun to take her with us.”

India was drumming her fingers on her cheek. “What are you two mumbling about?”

“You’ll see,” said Jack. “Come over here, you two.”

Jack closed the bedroom door, spread his fingers apart and put his left hand on the panel just above the handle. Then Hugh put his left hand on top, with his fingers in the gaps between Jack’s, and the door started to vibrate.

“India, you’re next,” said Jack. “Put your left hand on top of ours.”

“And why would I want to do that?” said India.

“C’mon, it’s fun,” said Hugh.

“When exactly did you last wash those hands?” she said, not quite touching his stumpy, dirt-crusted fingers.
“I don’t know,” he said. “We were digging for dinosaur bones at lunch time.”

“Will you two just get on with it,” said Jack. “India, don’t worry about his hands. He’ll start one of his expedition stories and we’ll never get there.”

“Where could we possibly go, with our hands piled on top of each other like soppy toddlers?”

“Your hand, India. Hurry up,” said Jack.

She leaned over the others to reach for the door panel. “This is worse than a game of Twister.”

“You’ll definitely be twisted, if you don’t connect properly,” said Jack.

“I don’t know what on earth you think we’re doing here,” said India, putting her hand on top of Hugh’s, “but -”

A fierce wind drowned out the rest of her words. The bedroom door swung open and the children were whipped through like a lopsided spinning-top.
Chapter Two - Ovidon

The children plumped onto a pile of snow, their arms and limbs tangly and poking into ears, backs and looping necks. The boys unravelled easily, rising to stand lightly on the soggy surface. The girl, though, was moving deeper into the snow.

“Oh, I’m giddy-spinning-sinking-fast. Houston, you’d better give me those little stumpy fingers to help me out of here. Houston?! Why did I just call you Houston?”

A big smile splashed across his face, and his chest puffed out as he reached forward to pull the girl to the surface. “’Cause that’s my name in Ovidon. What’s yours? Just speak and it’ll come out of your mouth.”


The bigger of the boys swept his black cape across his waist with his right hand, bowing low. “And Midnight Jack, at your service, madam,” he grinned. Straightening, he put an arm around Cindia’s back to help Houston balance her on the snow.

“This is wild!” said Cindia. “First we topple through some, some, I don’t know, some space. And then we’re on top of the most gorgeous snowy mountain – and you two look sensational in your capes and pants and boots and hoods!”

“Well, thank you Cindia,” said Midnight Jack. “We think they’re stylish yet functional.”

“So, how do I get my costume? My name came out just fine.”

“Don’t know. We’re always just wearing ours when we arrive. We’ve never brought a friend before. I’m not sure why you’re still in your jeans and jumper.”

“Then tell me how you got here. There might be a secret in the story that I can try.”

“There’s no secret. It’s just a long, plain old story about some gloop we bought. It came in an old tin at a market one Sunday. Our Mum, Maggie, loves markets and trots the whole family along with her. Sometimes we get some cool stuff.”

“Well, my boring-old-jeans-and-regular-patchy-jumper are soaked. How am I supposed to get warm on top of a snowy mountain?”
“No problem,” said Midnight Jack, wrapping the end of his cloak over her shoulders. “Houston, could you do the honours?”

“I’m on my way!” He stood on one leg and put his hands behind him to hold the sides of his blue cape. As he flew away, his orange shirt flashed against the blue sky, until he faded, high in the atmosphere.

When Houston took off, Cindia’s whole body flopped in surprise, and Midnight had to tighten his grip so that she wouldn’t fall through the snow. “Steady. Look, he’s coming back.”

Houston was hurtling towards them, carrying an orb of fire. The heat and light intensified the closer he got. Houston put the seething heat down as carefully as a raw egg, then danced a jig around it whooping, “That was fun!”

“Fun? Ow!” said Cindia. “We’re going to fry now. Or drown!” she added, as the snow turned to liquid under their feet. It cascaded over the edge of the mountain in a thundering waterfall.

“We’ll be ok,” said Midnight Jack. “Though, I’d have to agree that shrinking the sun to warm our bones was a bit over the top. But that’s just Houston doing his best.”

Midnight Jack motioned for Houston to take his spot holding Cindia. When Houston was in place, Midnight Jack let go of Cindia, reached both of his hands behind his head, and then threw them forward. A mass of fog blanketed the sun and softened the heat to the comforting strength of a campfire. Then he stamped his right foot three times, and rocks pushed up from underneath each of the children. They were lifted up and out of the water, in a semi-circle around the sun. Houston could let go of Cindia.

“Now all we need are some marshmallows,” said Midnight Jack.

“Yeah, yum, toasty and melty,” said Cindia. “Can’t you magic some up Midnight?”

“No, ‘cause this isn’t exactly magic. We can only play with what’s around us.”

Houston rustled a paper bag out of his pocket. “I’ve still got some popcorn, if you want some.”

The children sat for a while, drying out, digging in the bag for popcorn and crunching loud munches.

“I’m getting toasty-melty myself, now,” said Cindia. “I need a cool-me-down.”
“Aha, water. My specialty,” said Midnight Jack. He pointed three fingers to the waterfall and turned his hand in circles, then raised his arm up level with his mouth. Three fonts of water arced like straws straight to the children’s lips. As they took a long drink, the sun shining up through the arches created three perfect rainbows.

* * * * *

Midnight Jack jumped up and flew around to collect the ends of the fountains. “Houston, grab some sunshine and come with me. Cindia, stay on the rock and we’ll come back for you.”

Houston plucked three rays from the sun, stringing them out like wool from a ball, and soared after his brother. They went down the side of the mountain, then up, and down again. On the next rise, they went completely around in a circle, then took the ends of the water and rays into a steep slope, ending at the ocean.

“Race you back,” said Midnight Jack, zooming off.

“Not fair, I wasn’t ready!” yelled Houston, following.

Midnight Jack slowed down and waited for his brother to catch up. “Ok, then. Ready, set, go!”

The boys crackled through the air and screeched to a halt above Cindia’s head at exactly the same time.

“Tie!” they said together, coasting down to the rocks.

“Splendiferous!” Cindia applauded. “Those are magnificent-ribbons-of-rainbow.”

“Well, thank you,” said Midnight Jack. “It does look impressive, even if I do say so, myself.”

“I say so, too!” said Houston, laughing.

“But the fun is just about to begin,” said Midnight Jack. “Cindia, come and sit on the middle rainbow. Make sure you hold on tight to our hands – we’re on each side of you.”

“It’s my turn to count,” said Houston. “One, two, three, go!”
The children zipped down the rainbows like the front carriage of a turbo-charged Big Dipper. The wind roared past their ears, wobbled their cheeks and was blasted back out of their open mouths by their fun-park screams.

When the children whistled up and over the rainbow loop, their shrieks reached an incredible pitch, carrying all the way out to space. The sound was blended in a three-tone harmony, a strange song of squeals, as they tilted sharply on the final slope and cabashed, phoom, deep into the sea.

* * * * *

“That was excellent!” said Houston. “Let’s go back and do it again.”

“No. I think we should go right to the bottom of the ocean and see what it’s like,” said Midnight Jack. “What do you think, Cindia?”

“Mm, mm, mm, mm,” she said, wriggling towards the surface, but held back by the tight grip of the boys. Her face had gone bright red and her cheeks were bulging like a puffer fish.

Midnight Jack and Houston burst out laughing and poked one of her cheeks each, popping her breath out.

“You can breath, Cindia,” said Midnight Jack. “We’ve still got your hands!”

“Oh my – Oh my - ” she tried. “Oh my - whatever! I thought I was going to explode. I took the biggest breath in the world when we rocketed off the end of that tummy-turning-ride.”

“Yeah, my tummy’s still flip-flopping,” said Houston. “Midnight’s right. Let’s go.”

They walked down through the sea, with the push and pull of the current tickling around them. Here and there vague shapes shadowed past them, rippling the water. The light was a long way above them and the water was getting inkier with each step.

“I’m scared,” whispered Houston.

“It is pretty spooky in a cool-kind-of-a-way,” said Cindia.

“We’re all ok,” said Midnight. “Let’s try smelling our way down – that’s what deep-sea fish do.”

“I don’t know how that is going to help,” said Cindia. “All I can smell is salt.”
“Let’s see how Houston goes,” said Midnight Jack. “He’s got all that practice from fart competitions.”

“Hey! What about you?!” said Houston. “You fluff around everywhere, too.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Midnight Jack. “Just put that nose to work and not your other end!”

Houston stuck his nose up high and started making an odd noise in the back of his throat. It was a cross between a pig grunt and a giggle. “I can smell something! It’s fruit, yum, I think it’s mango.”

“Don’t be – no, wait. I can smell it too,” said Midnight Jack. “But it’s not mango, it’s -”

“Pineapple,” said Cindia.

“That’s right! Let’s follow our noses,” said Midnight Jack.

Their snouts led them further down the ocean, until their feet were scrunching on sand.

“We’re on the sea’s bottom!” said Midnight Jack.

“Oh my – Oh my – WHAT IS THAT?”

In front of the children, pairs of luminescent lights were blinking in the murk, moving towards them.

“Phew, that smell’s strong, now,” said Houston.

“Ah, of course, I get it,” said Midnight Jack. “They’re Pineapplefish. They mix up a potion from bacteria to make lights on their jaws. They’re looking for their dinner.”

“Cool,” said Houston, “grow your own lights.”

“Well, are they – are they - safe?” said Cindia.

“Sure, you just – Houston did you hear that?” said Midnight Jack.

“Yep, she’s pretty soft though.”

“What?!” bristled Cindia, moving closer to Midnight Jack. “Are you calling me soft?!”

“Sh, Cindia.” Midnight Jack snapped, “we need to hear properly. I’d say it’s time to go home,” he finished.

“Home? We just got to the bottom!”

“I know, but Tara’s calling us. It’s time for you to go back to your house.”
“Tara? She’s not even here!”

“Yeah, but we can hear her when she wants us. We have to go, its part of the deal. If we don’t come home when we’re called, we don’t get to play in Ovidon.”

“You mean your Mums know about this?”

“Of course they do. C’mon Cindia, you’re asking too many questions. We have to get back.”

Houston leaned across Cindia to pull on his brother’s blue shirt. “Midnight, we can’t go home. We don’t have a door.”

“No way,” said Cindia. “You mean we’re going to be stuck here?”

“No. We’re ok. I just have to think,” said Midnight Jack. “Think! What has doors in the ocean?”

“Trap doors,” said Houston. “Oh, no, that’s spiders.”

“What about boats?” said Cindia.

“Yes! That’s it. You’re a genius,” said Midnight Jack. “But we’ll need some help.”

Midnight Jack reached towards the Pineapples. His arm stretched like a rubber doll’s, and snapped back with a fish in his hand. He gave it to Houston to use as a torch, and picked up another for himself.

“We have to move as quickly as we can. Cindia, it’ll be a bit like swimming, but hold on tight to our hands. Houston, go!”

The children slithered through the water, winding from side to side, and up and down, searching for a boat. The Pineapples had become brighter with the heat from the boys’ skin, and lit the ocean clearly with red beams.

“There!” shouted Cindia. “Stop moving! Look where my eyes are pointing. See? Over there.”

The boys followed her eyes, which were fixed on the bottom of the ocean. There it was, a wrecked ship, half buried in sand and seaweed, full of fish.

They were all standing on the rotting deck, in front of the hatch before Cindia had time to blink.

“C’mon, let’s hurry,” said Houston. “Tara sounded cranky when she called us a few minutes ago.”
“Yeah, she did,” said Midnight Jack. “Ok, we all know what to do. Left hands piled up.”

The children formed their clumsy triangle and were pulled into a whirlpool, whizzing through like suds down the drain after a bubble bath.

They landed, plop, on their own bottoms, in Jack’s bedroom.
Chapter Three – India goes home

India twirled through her rickety front door holding a daisy high in the air. She brought her hand down and plucked the petals, flicking a trail along the hall, into the lounge room.

The room was completely silent. The usual TV blare and squiggle of children was gone. But India’s mother, Serenity, was sitting on the lounge nursing a beer. Her step-father, Abe, was balancing his glass of wine on the arm-rest.

“Mum, you’re home early, that’s great!” she said. “I’ve just had the best time at Jack’s house. We - ”

“Sit down, India,” Serenity commanded. “We have to talk.”

“Ok, but listen. When I was at Jack’s place, we - ”

“India! I had to cancel three meetings this afternoon to deal with you. Sit down and stop talking!” Serenity barked.

India humphed over to a cushion on the floor, crossed her arms and put her chin down so that her hair hung over her face.

“I had a phone call from Melissa,” Serenity said. “Your father and I had to go to Zaranden to see her.”

“Is Dad here?” said India, looking up.

“No, India,” said Abe. “I went with your mother.”

“Oh. You,” said India.

“This is exactly the kind of behaviour that Melissa was talking about,” said Serenity. “She’s had enough of your rudeness, and quite frankly, so have we. We had a long conference about what to do with you.”

“Oh, la-di-dal,” taunted India. “It would’ve been nice if you’d invited me to your stupid conference. You never ask me what I want, and you should! ”

“India, you don’t seem to understand that this situation is serious. It’s not like we’re writing a play and you can have the last say about the plot,” said Serenity.

“I knew it!” trumpeted India, tossing her head up so that her hair flew away from her face. “This is all about Kisser in rehearsal today, isn’t it? She’s just jealous ‘cause she doesn’t know how to have fun, and I do!” finished India, her black eyes fixed on Serenity.
Abe walked over to sit beside India on the floor, facing Serenity. But when he spoke, it was to India. “Sweetheart, I can see how hard this is for you. Sometimes you get so busy reacting to everyone, that you don’t get enough clear space to work things out.”

India dropped her head again and leaned towards Abe. “So,” she whispered, “what’s going on?”

Abe put his arm around India’s shoulders and she rested her head on his shoulder. “You and Noha and the family are going to try something new,” he explained. “We’re going see if you’ll like it better at a school that’s really different to Zaranden.”

India jumped to her feet, which nearly sent Abe into a backwards somersault. “No way! You’re not sending me to Bottick. We have the Excellence Extravanganza in a week and I’m, I’m, I’m, well, I’m important. I’m Cleopatra!”

Serenity put her now empty beer bottle on the side table, and stood up to face India. “That will do, India,” she stated. “This’d be the umpteenth time we’ve spoken to you about your behaviour. You and Noha’ll go to Bottick for a week, and then we’ll all see what happens next.”

“Oh come on, why does Noha have to go? What’s my energetic-little-sister done wrong?” said India.

“Noha’s been very well behaved, India, you know that.” Serenity’s voice became cold. “Bottick won’t take you without your sister – they have some whole-of-family rule about only taking all siblings, or none. So, your behaviour is also punishing your sister.”

India took a step towards Serenity, and stood on her toes so that her face was closer to her mother’s. “Oh, terrific, blame me,” she said very quietly. “Take me away from my friends. I hate Kisser. And I hate you and my Dad-who-never-comes-when-I-need-him. Fine. I’ll go to Bottick, but you’ll be sorry.”

India turned to bolt and ran straight into Abe, who had come up to stand behind her. He wrapped India in his arms, and she crumpled into sobs. “It’ll be ok, princess,” he soothed. “It’s just a little time-out trial. Let’s see. You might even like it better.”

“Yeah, and princesses might fly,” mumbled India.
Chapter Four - Bottick

Not a single car could be seen on the long driveway that led to Bottick. Parents were not welcome on the school grounds.

When children started at Bottick, the Headmistress, Mrs Bonnie Kuja, put them into a girl-10 or a boy-10 group. She arranged for the children to be picked up from outside each of their houses in a mini-bus by a special driver and a Group-Teacher. They made sure that the Bottick children came to school every day, no excuses.

India and Noha stepped out of the bus onto the path that was right outside the door. Their Group-Teacher lined the children up from the smallest to the tallest and led them to the Bottick hall. The bus driver brought up the rear.

No one said a word.

The children tagged onto the end of a queue of other girl-10 groups, punctuated by adults. In the crawling line India leaned forward to blow words into Noha’s ear. “What’s happening, and where are the boys?”

Noha shrugged.

* * * * *

The girl-10 groups filed through a small door on the left hand side of the Bottick hall, and walked up three stairs onto the stage.

Mrs Kuja was standing on the hall floor, her chin tilted high in line with the front and centre of the podium.

When each girl became level with Mrs Kuja, she kneeled down, still facing the direction she was walking. She kept her unflickering eyes straight ahead and a ramrod back.

Mrs Kuja was holding a ruler. If the girl’s mustard uniform touched the floor, Mrs Kuja hit the stage with the ruler. The girl stood up and walked down the other stairs, to go and take a seat on the left hand side of the hall.

If the girl’s pleats did not touch the floor, Mrs Kuja hit her on the back of the legs. The girl stood up and walked to the back of the stage.

Noha was fidgeting in the line, chewing at a loose thread on the sleeve of her pink jumper, her other hand in the pocket of her yellow tracksuit pants. When it was
her turn to walk across the stage, her sister pushed her aside and took her place. India reached the spot on the stage that was level with Mrs Kuja, and she stopped, but didn’t kneel down.

India was wearing blue jeans covered in colourful patches and a slightly holey red jumper. She turned to face the Headmistress.

“Oh, here we have the Zaranden-transfer,” said Mrs Kuja. “Perhaps your sister could join us? Come here, child.”

Noha dragged her sneakers slowly across the stage, to stand next to India, and tucked her head under her sister’s armpit.

“Boys and girls, I present to you: India and Noha Karyon,” said Mrs Kuja.

Without a sound, all the children in the hall stood up. The boys on the right of the hall bowed, and the girls curtsied. They all sat down again.

“Thank you, children, that was a lovely display of manners. India and Noha, you may curtsey in reply.”

The girls bobbed their knees, but Noha was off-balance and toppled onto the stage, flipping into a nimble forward-roll to break her fall. India dropped down next to her and whispered, “Are you alright?”

Noha nodded, her eyes full of tears.

“Well, I can see that it is difficult to curtsey without a school uniform,” said Mrs Kuja. “You may accompany me to the storeroom and we’ll have you looking just like all these other little ladies in no time.”

India took Noha’s hand, helped her up, and led her off the stage to stand next to Mrs Kuja.

The Headmistress handed her ruler to another teacher. “Mrs Thistlethwaite will continue here, children. I am confident that you will extend to her the same courtesy that you have shown me.”

She walked down the centre aisle, followed by India and Noha. As they passed, the children in the hall stood, and then sat, in Mexican-wave formation from the front to the back of the hall.

* * * * *
The door to the storeroom was on the outside of the hall. Mrs Kuja unlocked it to reveal a steep spiral staircase, with a lace iron rail, going down.

“You may enter first, girls,” she said, flicking a switch that glowed a light way below.

India leaned back to Noha, who was trembling. “Stay close to me and hold onto my shoulders,” she murmured.

As they started their descent, a loud bang shook the stairs. Mrs Kuja had bolted the door.

“Move more quickly, please,” she said, clinking her heels sharply on the stairs behind Noha.

The girls hurried down and around, down and around.

“I feel sick,” said Noha in a tiny voice.

India put one of her hands over Noha’s on her shoulder, and squeezed. “We’re almost there,” she panted.

“Silence please, girls,” said Mrs Kuja. “You were not given permission to speak.”

The stairs ended in a huge room with corridors leading off each of the sandstone walls. Rows and rows of shelves held boxes and books, all neatly stacked.

The girls were out of breath, but Mrs Kuja was still crisply manicured and composed.

“Follow me please, girls,” she said, clacking over the slate floor towards one of the corridors.

India put her arm around Noha’s shoulder, and her little sister hunched in tight. They were almost running to keep up with the Headmistress, when she stopped at another door.

Mrs Kuja jangled a key from her belt and they entered another large room lined with shiny new clothes on racks, shoe boxes, belts, hats and school bags.

“We won’t need any of these,” said Mrs Kuja, gesturing towards the uniforms on display. “I keep a special supply for Zaranden-transfers.”

She bent down to a massive gold trunk and opened an enormous padlock.

“You may assist me in lifting the lid.”

India and Noha moved to each end, and Mrs Kuja took the middle.
“We shall lift – now,” she said.

They heaved open the lid, releasing a clothes-rack that sprang upright, dangling freshly pressed uniforms on wooden hangers. They were all covered in clear plastic sheets, with tidy labels on the front that were printed with a name and a year.

“These are uniforms that were worn by distinguished students from our hall of fame,” said Mrs Kuja, softly stroking some of the clothes. “By wearing one of them, you will have a chance to become like their former owner.”

India pinched her nose and rolled her eyes.

Noha nodded, her eyes wide and her lips flickering with the start of a smile.

“Ah, I’m pleased to see that you agree with me, child,” said Mrs Kuja. “You are athletic, I believe. Mrs Thistlethwaite has a particular aerobic ability; you may accept her 2nd Class uniform.”

Noha took the hanger and held it with an outstretched arm.

“You, on the other hand,” she said, turning to face India, “only seem to have the ability to try and be different to everyone else.”

India’s eyebrows scrunched together and her hands clenched.

“You will require a stronger influence,” said Mrs Kuja. “You may accept my 6th Class uniform.”

“No way,” said India, throwing it across the room. “We’re not wearing anyone’s stinking hand-me-downs. And we’re not playing follow-the-Kuja any more. We’re going home.”

She strode over to Noha, threw the other uniform on the floor, and led her sister to the door.

It was locked.

“I see that you are finding it difficult to understand what is expected of you at Bottick,” said Mrs Kuja, picking up a cane. “Allow me to explain. You may wear the uniforms I have selected and join your Classes, or you may be punished and spend your day in a separate holding room each.”

“You can’t hit us and lock us up!” said India. “Our parents will - ”

“You parents have given me permission to deal with you in any way that I see fit,” she said, pushing on the lid of the trunk so that it closed – thud!
“Now, you may retrieve your uniforms and change in the booth across the room. I will bring you the other items you require.”

India walked stiffly to pick up the uniforms, then to the booth. She was half-carrying Noha who was clinging to her around the waist, her face buried in her sister’s jumper.

* * * * *

The children, and the Class Teacher, stood when Mrs Kuja entered the room with Noha. India waited at the door.

“My apologies for interrupting, Mrs Thistlethwaite. I have brought Noha to join your Class,” said Mrs Kuja.

“Thank you, Headmistress,” said Mrs Thistlethwaite, moving forward to take the little girl’s hand.

When Mrs Kuja left the room, Mrs Thistlethwaite put Noha in the front row next to a girl called Mary, who seemed to look exactly the same as all the other girls in the room.

Their uniforms were identical, but there was more. They all had brown hair, tied in a single long pony-tail with a black ribbon. They all sat on stools, but their spines were so straight that they looked like the backs of chairs. Their hands were clasped loosely on the desk in front of them, their knees were together and their feet were flat on the floor.

The boys were very similar. They had black hair, cut very short, and black trousers. Their shirts were the same baby-poo colour as the girls’ uniforms and their posture was perfect.

“Children, we will continue with our seven times table. Together, please,” said Mrs Thistlethwaite.

The Class chanted, “seven times one is seven, seven times two is fourteen - ” as their teacher walked slowly along the rows of desks, tapping the rhythm with her ruler.

* * * * *
“I believe it would be beneficial for you to spend the day with me, India,” said Mrs Kuja as they climbed the hill that was on the School grounds. “Your untimely exit from Zaranden, and your demonstration in the store-room, suggests that you require some time to focus on what is important.”

The Headmistress walked into the foyer of a single building at the top of the hill. The School Secretary’s office was on the left and Mrs Kuja’s office was on the right. There was a third, locked door, facing the rear of the building, which led to Mrs Kuja’s private quarters – her home.

The Headmistress left India standing just inside the front door, and went into the Secretary’s office. “Ah, Miss Jones. I will be unavailable this morning. I trust that you will attend to matters on my behalf.”

“Yes, Headmistress.”

Mrs Kuja crossed the foyer to enter her office. “You may join me, India. Please close the door behind you.”

The office was sparsely furnished with a polished mahogany desk taking up the length of one wall, an oversized portrait of the Headmistress hanging above it.

Each side wall was hung with a tapestry that covered the entire space. One was a map, with minute details of the important buildings in the local area, including the schools. The other tapestry was a faithful reproduction of all the known constellations and planets in the Universe, with the Milky Way taking pride of place in the centre.

The final wall was taken up by a huge picture-window, offering a panoramic view of the whole Bottick.

Mrs Kuja sat in the luxurious chair behind the desk. “You may sit, child,” she said, indicating a hard-backed wooden chair opposite, for India to sit on. “Please explain to me why you have transferred from Zaranden.”

“Oh, as if you don’t know!” said India crossing her arms. “They chucked me out.”

“I see, and what was their reason for requesting that you leave?” said Mrs Kuja, leaning forward to rest her elbows on her desk.
“I don’t know and I don’t care,” said India, standing up and stomping over to look out the window. “They can have their stupid everyone’s-got-a-unique-gift school. I’m never going back there. Never!”

“That can certainly be arranged,” said Mrs Kuja, settling back in her chair. “However, we expect absolute loyalty, here at Bottick. You must be prepared to fit in.”

“Well,” said India. “I put on the uniform, didn’t I?”

“Yes, my dear, you did. How does it feel?”

“Pretty good, actually. It’s clean and smells good, and it’s got no holes. Um, thank you, for, for your old uniform, Mrs Kuja.”

The Headmistress smiled and got up from the desk, to stand next to India at the window. “There, you are starting to sound like a good Bottick girl, already. This could be your new home away from home, if you would like it to be,” she said, surveying the School in front of them. “However, you will need more than a uniform to become part of the School family.”

“What do you mean?” said India, peering at the Headmistress out of the corner of her eyes.

“You must be prepared to take a stand and put Bottick before anyone else, or any other place.”

“Well, that’s easy. I always stand up for what I think,” said India.

“Yes, my dear. You do appear to have a particular talent in that area,” said Mrs Kuja, moving to look at the Universe tapestry. “Now, you may accompany me on a journey to test your abilities. Come here, please.”

India joined the Headmistress in front of the planets. “You don’t have to explain the Universe to me, Mrs Kuja. We learned about it last year.”

“Thank you for informing me of that fact,” she said taking India’s right hand with her left hand. “However, I intend to show you the Universe.” The Headmistress raised their arms in a kind of triumphant salute, and placed her right hand on a patch of sky in the centre of the Milky Way. “Sooabinackas!” she cried.

“Wow! Are we going to - ” started India.

The wall fell away and they were swished into a tunnel, tumbling at a whip-cracking pace, and flung out into deep, dark space.
They hung, suspended, for a few moments before the Headmistress floated them down to stand on a star.

“Ah, I see that you have not yet embraced Bottick,” she said, resplendent in a shimmering gold dress and magenta full-length cloak, a string of pearls around her neck.

“I have so! See, I’ve still got my uniform on.”

“Yes, child, and that is how I know that you are undecided. You are not fully altered, as I am.”

“So! I’ve got a special name, it’s Cindia.”

“Ah, Cindia. It’s a rather soft name, isn’t it? Well, I am pleased to inform you that: I AM BONJUKA,” she laughed to the Universe, her left arm raised high above her head.

Cindia was knocked backwards from the force of the Headmistress’ voice.

“Help!” she screamed, balancing on the edge of the star, in danger of falling into the endless space around her.

“Really, my dear, you must be more careful,” said Bonjuka, rolling Cindia back to the top by spinning the star around with her feet. “I can see that you are sadly lacking in any ability at all, here in Ovidon.”

“Well, can’t you just give me your old 6th Class outfit? Then I could do what you used to do.”

“I’m afraid that it doesn’t work like that, Cindia. You must make your own choice, and then you may transform.”

“This sucks,” said Cindia, scooping up a handful of stardust and scattering it. She sneezed. “I don’t care any more, just take me home.”

“Now-now, child. There’s no reason to give up before you’ve even begun,” said Bonjuka, taking off her pearls. “I am able to give you some trainee-ability, and if you succeed, you may well be able to move on from there.”

Bonjuka removed one of the pearls from her necklace and threaded it onto a strand of her silver hair, which she plucked from her head. She twirled the hair into a small circle and it snapped, solid, into a ring.
“Wow, that’s beautiful,” said Cindia.
“This will assist you,” said Bonjuka taking Cindia’s right hand and slipping the ring onto her pinkie finger.
“Thank-you,” whispered Cindia, looking at the ring.
“Yes, well – I usually find these arrangements are quite unsatisfactory,” said Bonjuka. “You will find the procedure is rather cumbersome, however, we must make do.”
Cindia wiggled her finger around, pointed it at planets and stars, and closed and opened her fist. “Nothing’s happening!”
Bonjuka growled a deep laugh in the back of her throat.
“No, my dear. Your finger must be used to imitate what you are trying to achieve. You could put your earlier belief to work and learn a sucking-action, if you like.”
“I’m not a baby!,” said Cindia.
“Oh, no. This has nothing to do with babies,” said Bonjuka. “Now, you may put your pinkie finger to the corner of your mouth, and see what eventuates.”
As soon as Cindia’s finger touched her mouth, the Universe was filled with her voice, booming, “ha ha ha ha haah.”
Stars started flashing across space and vanishing, whump, into an immense black hole.
“You may remove your finger, child, or we will lose the whole Milky Way,” smiled Bonjuka.
“Oh ye-yah, oh ye-yah, I’ve got pow-wers, I’ve got pow-wers,” sang Cindia, in a victory dance. “That was so cool! The stars looked like those science experiments when you put a boiled egg on top of a milk bottle – they get all stretched out before they plop to the bottom.”
“Well, yes – I am pleased to see that you managed that exercise very well, Cindia.”
“It was great! I’m going to do it again, get ready for my power-cry - ” said Cindia, moving her right pinkie finger towards her mouth.
“No. It is time for us to return to Bottick. You will have future opportunities to practice. Your hand, please.”
Bonjuka entwined their fingers and raised their arms high above their heads. “Soobinackas, to Bottick!” she trumpeted, and they travelled swiftly back through the tapestry, to land in the Headmistress’ office.
Chapter Five – Out of sorts

Music was rocking the car as Maggie pulled into the Zaranden car-park.
“Wait, wait,” said Jack. “I want to hear the end of this song.”

Maggie turned off the engine. “Sorry, darling. I’m going to be late for my meeting, as it is.”

Hugh was already half out the door. “Bye, Mummy!”
“Just a minute, love, and I’ll walk you up to your classroom.”
“Oh, can’t I go up with those guys?” he asked, pointing to Mark and Brian from his class.

“Ok, then, but straight onto the footpath. Here, kiss first,” she smooched.

Hugh climbed across for a quick cuddle, and then he was off, chasing his friends through the gate. “Hey, wait for me!”

Jack was fiddling around with his bag. “Can’t I come to work with you, today?”
“What’s the matter, Jack?” asked Maggie, placing her hand on his forehead.

“Aren’t you feeling well?”
“We’ve got maths this morning, and I hate it. It’s so boring and I don’t get it.”

“Don’t worry too much, you just do the best you can,” said Maggie, giving him a hug. “You’re good at all kinds of other things.”

“Yeah, like keeping my bedroom tidy,” he said, with a sudden smile.
“Don’t know about that!” Maggie said, ruffling his head.

“Whoa! It took me ages to get my hair right this morning.” Jack flipped down the sun-visor to check in the mirror. “I’d better go, the bell’s ringing.”

Maggie pulled him into a tight squeeze. “I love you, darling.”

“Mu-um, my hair!” he said, untangling himself, and getting out of the car.
Jack paused at the open door. “Love you, too,” and then dashed to the gate.
“Now I’m really late,” grumbled Maggie, punching numbers into the mobile phone and driving off.

* * * * *

The Class 2 children were rampaging through the playground they shared with Class 1, filling in time until school started. They were swinging on the tyre, scaling the
wooden climbing frame, and playing shop in the cubby house. They had leaves for money and flowers, twigs, and rocks for sale.

The chickens in the nearby coop were scratch, scratch, pecking at the vegie scraps that were being scattered by Penny from Class 2.

Hugh was collecting the eggs out of the straw and putting them in a cane basket. He took the eggs to his teacher. “Phillip, how come Noha isn’t helping me this morning?”

“She’s left Zaranden, Hugh. She’s gone to Bottick.”

“Oh, not fair,” he said, his bottom lip wobbling. “Why didn’t she tell me?”

“You’ll have to ask your Mums, Hugh” said Phillip, squatting down and putting his hands on Hugh’s shoulders.

“But Noha’s my first-best friend,” Hugh said, and burst into tears.

“It’s alright, mate,” said Phillip, staying quietly beside him.

When Hugh’s sobs had eased to sniffles, Phillip stood up. “What about we get you some tissues, and then you can ring the bell for me today.”

* * * * *

Jack sprinted all the way to his classroom. He hung his bag and hat on his hook, changed his shoes for slippers and rushed into the classroom. It was empty. “Oh, no! Where is everyone?”

He swapped slippers for shoes, shoved his hat on and ran to the hall. Empty.

He found them in the playground, doing laps with skipping ropes.

He almost collided with his teacher. “There you are, Jack,” she said, as if she’d been looking for him, not the other way around. “Come and join in.”

Jack groaned. “I’ve got a bit of a sore ankle, Melissa – remember how I dislocated it?”

“Come on, now. I’m sure you’re ok – that was at least a year ago,” she said, handing him a rope.

“Fine,” he harrumphed, lumbering off with a sloppy swing, barely jumping when it slapped the ground.
He’d only managed five skips, when Melissa called out. “That’s enough for today, Class 6. Bring your ropes back to our room, and we’ll have our maths lesson.”

* * * * *

Tara was at the gate at the end of the school day, chatting to other parents. Gradually they all collected their children and went home, until she was the last parent left. Jack and Hugh finally appeared, dawdling along the path.

“Hi, you two! I was starting to get worried,” she said wrapping an arm around each of them. “How was school, today?”

“Awful,” said Jack.

“Horrible,” said Hugh.

“That good, huh?” Tara said, taking them to the car and getting in. “Seat belts.”

As she drove off, the boys said:

“India - ”

“Noha - ”

“has gone to Bottick,” they finished together.

“And she didn’t even say goodbye,” said Jack.

“Neither did Noha,” said Hugh.

Tara put on her hazard lights and stopped the car by the side of the road.

“That’s really strange,” she said. “I’ll ring Abe when we get home and see what’s going on.”

Tara flicked on the right indicator, and steered the car out into the traffic. “We’ll sort this out,” she said.

“Nothing to sort,” said Jack, staring out the window. “They’re gone.”

* * * * *

The phone shrilled through the sleeping house, shocking Jack awake. He ran up the hall to the kitchen. “Hello.”

“Hi, it’s me,” said India, talking very softly.

“What are you doing, ringing so late?”
“It’s the first chance I’ve had to get to a phone. I’m supposed to be in bed, resting. But, Jack, I’ve just had the most amazing day - I had to ring and tell you. Bottick is nothing like we thought it would be. Oh, sure, the children do look exactly the same, and that’s kind of weird. And the Headmistress was pretty scary to start with, but she’s actually excellent!” she said without stopping to take a breath.

“India, why didn’t you tell me you were leaving?” he asked in a shaky voice.

“I’m really sorry, Jack. I couldn’t. When I got home, yesterday, Mum told me that Kisser’d sent me packing from Zaranden. Mum was fuming all over me and grounded me forever – well not forever, you know how she goes - ‘until further notice’” India mimicked. “She even took my mobile. Then, this morning I had to come straight here - ”

“What do you mean, ‘here’?” said Jack. “It’s really late, aren’t you at home?

“No, I’m at Bottick. The Headmistress let me and Noha stay on a sleepover at her house – she lives on the school grounds behind her office. Mum thinks it will be ‘instructional’, can you believe it?! Well, it is really. Anyway, we’re going to Ovidon, again. I mean, I’m going again, and Noha’s going for the first time.”

“What! You told her about Ovidon?!”

“No, Jack. The Headmistress showed me. She’s got an entrance through these tapestries in her office. If I show her Zaranden, Mrs Kuja’ll let me practice the powers she gave me, and - ”

“Oh, no. Did you say Mrs Kuja? India, that’s Bonjuka. You - ”

“I know she’s Bonjuka. She looks so cool in her outfit, nearly as good as you and Hugh. Anyway, I thought you could meet us there tonight and I’ll show you my new powers and - ”

“India, no!” Jack hastily interrupted. “You have to be careful. Bonjuka’s - ”

“Gee, Jack. I thought you’d be happy for me, but I guess you’re jealous now, ‘cause I have some powers, too. You’re just like Kisser.”

“No, I’m not! India, listen - ”

“Forget it. I’m glad I’ve decided never to go back to Zaranden,” she said, slamming the phone down.

Jack stared blankly at the phone, which was beep, beep, beeping in the silence of the house.
“What's happening?” said Hugh, rubbing his eyes as he stumbled into the kitchen.

“No time to explain. We have to get to Ovidon. C’mon.”

“It's the middle of the night,” said Hugh, yawning.

“I know, but India and Noha are in danger. We have to go now!”

“But we'll get in trouble with Mummy and Tara.”

“It'll be ok, Hugh. They’re fast asleep – they didn’t even wake up to the phone,” he said, walking out of the kitchen, then pausing. “You're right, though. I'll leave them a note, just in case.”
Chapter Six – The Battle in Ovidon

Midnight Jack was dressed in black. Hovering above Zaranden, he was camouflaged against the dark sky. “Houston, we have to find Cindia and Hona,” he whispered.

“How?” said Houston who was snuggled under Midnight’s silky cloak for protection, when the air was filled with a bellowing noise - ha ha ha ha haaa.

“Oh, no!” said Midnight Jack. “Cindia’s sucking up.”

“Who to?” said Houston, thinking of her long, strong body and fierce fury, wondering why she would suck up to anybody.

“Houston!” retorted Midnight Jack, reaching for a moonbeam to shine at a spot on the land way below them. “Just look.”

The Zaranden school was being sucked up into the sky. It was like a huge vacuum cleaner was sweeping the grass, and bits of the school were splintering off and disappearing. As they watched, the basketball poles and hoops flew off the court. The comfy sheepskin covers were whizzing off their chairs, and out of the classrooms, like hundreds of moths in the night. But they weren’t chasing the light; they were being swallowed into darkness.

“She’s opened a black-hole,” said Midnight Jack. “We have to save our school.”

With a flick of his cloak, Midnight Jack and Houston started to dive silently toward Cindia, when they crossed into the moonbeam. Midnight Jack had forgotten to extinguish it!

Cindia was standing on the grounds of Zaranden, in her Bottick uniform. When the boy’s shadow passed over her, she looked up, and her jet black eyes sparkled with delight. She put the pinkie finger of her right hand to the corner of her mouth, booming her power-cry.

The sound winched the black hole away from the school, one ha at a time, to face Midnight Jack and Houston.

“Houston, fly!” said Midnight Jack. “This’ll be interesting,” he mused, as Houston darted earthward.

Midnight Jack grabbed the moonbeam and drew a ring around Cindia. Huge boulders grew out of the ground where the moonlight touched.
Houston used his muscley little body to pick the boulders up and throw them at the black-hole. As each boulder reached the edge of the black hole, it slowed down and was stretched like a glob of chewing gum before it vanished with a ‘phlunk’.

Houston was moving so quickly he looked like a DVD on fast-forward. Cindia spun around and around, trying to aim the black hole at Houston. For a split second Cindia managed to line him up with the black hole and Houston’s blonde curly hair was pulled out straight. His bright blue eyes went a peculiar square shape as the skin on his forehead was stretched upwards.

Houston knocked the black hole off-course with a boulder and it kept turning to suck up everything in its path. The school bell went clanging through the air, trees were ripped out like overgrown stalks of parsley, and the Class 2 vegie garden was tossed in the sky, flipping into the black hole like an enormous salad.

Cindia’s pinkie finger was now sloppy with the spit that dribbled all over it. Her power-cry was starting to sound bubbly, like she was talking under water. The phlunk, phlunk, phlunk into the black hole was getting louder and faster, as the boulders kept growing and Houston kept throwing.

Midnight Jack had pulled some left-over popcorn out of his cloak, and was lying back on a cloud, munching away while he watched Houston and Cindia twirling below him. “They’re pretty evenly matched,” he observed with a chuckle, as he licked the salt off his fingers and put the popcorn away. He stood up, stretched, and walked down the air, where he delicately placed two soggy clouds above Cindia’s head. “Houston, blow!” he called, running down the air to join his brother.

Houston let the last boulder leap from his hands and turned his face to the clouds. His mouth made a perfect circle, and with a deep breath he whooshed wind to the clouds, crashing them together.

Cutting stripes of lightening started to hammer the ground around Cindia’s feet, and thunder growled through the clouds. Cindia was hopping backwards and forwards to escape, like she was tap-dancing to the beat of the storm. She was using her arms and hands to balance, including her pinkie finger which was out of her mouth. The black hole closed.

Midnight Jack and Houston held their hands high, like police officers in the traffic, and froze the storm. Cindia was caught in a cage of lightening bolts, with
thousands of rain drops suspended like icicles all around her. Her arms were suddenly pinned to her side and she shook with frustration.

She screamed in a perfectly ordinary girl’s voice, “Let me go! I haven’t finished yet. I’m going to get rid of this do-goody, warm-fuzzy, oh-so-special school. I’m going to make sure that all the children, with their shiny talents, their sweetie-smelling just-rightness and their hippy-trippy, oh-so-caring families get moved to the same-old school down the road. LET ME GO!”

Cindia’s voice thickened on the sudden swamp of tears that flooded her face. “Please, just let me go.”

With a nod from Midnight Jack, Houston put his thumbs into his ears and waggled his fingers towards the cage. Fire burst out in the shape of a Catherine wheel, spun the cage and instantly melted it. Midnight Jack and Houston stepped into the warm pool of water and took one of Cindia’s hands each.

“It’s ok Cindia,” said Midnight Jack, “we’re taking you home.”

* * * * *

As the boys launched into flight, with Cindia between them, the ground they’d been standing on split open in a deafening rumble.

A gaping crack had travelled across the earth from the Zaranden office, which was being lifted high by a gigantic mound that was rising underneath it. The building splintered, and was flung down the sides of the mountain, like a shower of matchsticks.

As the mountain reached an astounding height, the tip exploded a slice of earth, which was missiled into the sky. It only just missed the children.

A figure erupted from the hole in the top, carried by the vibrant molten rock that was beginning to froth over the edge. “I AM BONJUKA,” the figure blasted, raising its left arm high.

Her magenta cloak opened to reveal a child holding onto her like a monkey. “Bonjuka,” called out Cindia. “I thought you’d left - ”

Midnight Jack covered her mouth with his hand. “Be quiet, Cindia,” he hissed.
“Ah, child, I had no intention of abandoning you,” declared Bonjuka, settling Hona securely on her hip and taking flight. “I have been watching the demonstration of your power-cry with interest. You were doing very well for some time, my dear, and I am disappointed to see that you have accepted the assistance of others. However, you may all join us.”

“Houston, go!” yelled Midnight Jack, and they rocketed away with Bonjuka close behind them.

“Midnight, she’s catching up,” panicked Houston.

“Just stop,” pleaded Cindia. “Bonjuka’s great, she can - ”

“Cindia, will you just be quiet!” snapped Midnight Jack as they whipped around the sky to keep ahead of Bonjuka. “We have to do something. Look what’s happening to Zaranden!”

The lava was pouring down the mountain, dissolving the landscape. It reached the Zaranden hall, which ignited in a flash of flame – and was gone.

“No!” screamed Cindia. “I was going to perform in that hall this week.”

“You have no need for the Zaranden hall, child,” answered Bonjuka. “No one does – everyone will come to Bottick.”

“Bottick, Bottick, all I hear from you is Bottick!” yelled Cindia. “How could you do this to Zaranden? You said you just wanted to have a tour of the school and teach me some more powers.”

“ENOUGH,” Bonjuka roared, as she accelerated into the path of the children and reached for them. “You will come with me!”

The children just managed to duck her arm. Midnight Jack wrenched Hona with them on their way past, and the sudden force of the movement sent Bonjuka into a spin. “Quick, to the Kindergarten across the bridge – the lava hasn't reached it yet.”

When they landed outside the front door, Midnight Jack spoke to his brother. “You take the girls through, and get reinforcements. Mum and Tara will help. I'll hold off Bonjuka.”

“No way!” said Cindia. “We can help. Look at us.”

Cindia and Hona had lost their Bottick uniform. They were in matching outfits with purple tops, white pants and green capes and boots.
“I want to stay, too, Midnight,” said Hona, doing a series of back-flips in the sky. “This is fun!”

Houston caught Hona at the end of a flip, and gave her a rushed hug. “I’m glad you’re back.”

“Me too,” she laughed.

Midnight Jack turned to Cindia. “Same here,” he said, giving her a gentle punch on the arm.

“Well, yeah,” said Cindia, stubbing her boot at the orange ground. “Oh no, the lava’s here now.”

“And, look!” said Houston. “Bonjuka’s back on the mountain. She’s speeding everything up.”

“Ok. Houston, you and Hona have to unravel Bonjuka’s tapestries so she can’t get back,” said Midnight Jack. “Go through the door to Bottick.”

“Hey,” said Cindia. “I’ve still got the pearl ring! You take it, Hona,” she said putting it on her sister’s finger, as she was about to leave with Houston. “It’ll guide you both to the Headmistress’s office.”

***

Midnight Jack went under the bridge and came back carrying the river. He poured the water onto the lava, cooling it to solid rock. It sent up clouds of sizzling steam, which hid the children from Bonjuka.

“Do you think you can still work the black hole, Cindia?” he said, holding the river like a hose and moving up the mountain.

“Oh yeah,” she said, following. “In fact, I reckon I could open the biggest black hole in the Universe, now.”

Midnight Jack chuckled. “Well, then, madam. You may begin at your leisure.”

“Certainly, sir,” she replied. “And you can be sure that I won’t miss.”

Cindia started to raise her pinkie finger to her mouth, but instead, pointed it at Bonjuka through the steam, booming her power-cry, “ha ha ha ha haaa.”
A super-massive black hole opened above the mountain and gulped it down, like it was a child’s cup-cake, in one yawning moment. Bonjuka’s stretching magenta cloak looked like the cherry on top, as she disappeared into the vacuum.

Cindia brought her arm down to shake Midnight Jack’s hand, and the hole closed.

“Oh, just come here,” he said, embracing Cindia and twirling her into a dance around the sky.

* * * * *

“Hey, Midnight, look what we’ve got,” Houston called out. He and Hona were both carrying a ball of multi-coloured thread.

“Um, what are they?” asked his brother.

“We were getting the tapestries off the wall and Bonjuka’s head popped through the map in front of me!” said Hona.

“So we had to grab the end-bits to come back through the door as fast as we could,” said Houston. “We rolled them up on the way, like we do when we have yarn-spinning in class.”

“But Bonjuka’s head disappeared anyway,” said Hona.

“That’s because Cindia sucked her up!” said Midnight Jack.

“Well, Bonjuka’s gone,” said Cindia. “But look at the mess she made.”

Some parts of the school grounds were covered in slushy ashes, with twigs of splintered buildings poking through. Other parts, where the lava had been, looked like a hard-baked desert.

“Zaranden’s gone, too,” she said, her voice flat.

“Hey!” said Houston excitedly. “Hona and I can use the yarn to knit it back together, can’t we!?”

“Yeah,” replied Hona. “We’ve been practicing our knitting to make our recorder bags at school.”

“Midnight, could you get us some needles, please?” said his little brother.
“I guess - if you think it'll work,” he said, flying over to some distant trees and bringing back four trunks. He moved his palms along them and smoothed them into two giant pairs of knitting needles.

“Excellent,” said Houston. He blew them into the air, and they stayed, but didn’t move.

“Hmmm,” he said. “I’m not so good at solid objects.”

“That’s ok,” said Hona. “I can work them.”

She took a ball of tapestry yarn and flew to the end of one needle, spinning the thread around it with a somersault. Then she leapt onto the other needle and ran up and down the wood, like she was on a balancing beam. The needle dipped onto its twin, and they started a knitting rhythm. She did the same with the other pair and ball of yarn, and the needles started re-creating Zaranden.

“Wow, Hona, that was amazing!” said her sister. “I bet you passed that gym exam for the advanced level.”

Hona beamed.

“C’mon, Houston,” said his brother. “Let’s fix the grounds.”

The boys stood together in the centre of the school. Houston drew a breath and gusted a mini-tornado, which picked up the debris. When it was cleared, he stopped blowing and the tornado vanished, leaving a smooth surface of rich, brown earth.

Midnight Jack knelt down and placed his palms flat on the ground. Lush grass, trees, flowers, birds and rivers spread from his fingers and covered the area with a rich abundance.

As each building, desk, chair, lambs-wool cover, colourful rug, book, pencil, blackboard and other item was knitted in the sky, Cindia and Hona carried it to the correct place in Zaranden.

When everything was finished, Midnight Jack took the needles out of the sky and planted one on each corner of the Zaranden hall. “To remind us,” he said. The poles instantly grew wide branches and masses of leaves.

The children flew to sit in the bough of one tree each, and rested as the sky crimsoned with the first rays of dawn.
“Midnight, did you hear her?” said Houston.

His brother jumped up. “Oh, no! I didn’t realise it was so late.”

“What are you guys talking about?” asked Hona.

“I know,” said Cindia. “Tara must be calling them.”

“No,” said the boys, at the same time.

“It’s Mummy,” said Houston.

“That’s Maggie, right?” clarified India.

“Yes, India!” replied an exasperated Houston. “You know that Maggie is Mummy, and Tara’s Tara, and they’re both our mums!”

“And this mum doesn’t sound very happy,” said Midnight Jack.

“C’mon, everyone,” said Houston. “The hall door’s closest.”

“I don’t think we’ll be allowed to play with any friends after school this week,” said Midnight Jack.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Cindia. “We’ll see you at the outrageously-important-star-studded-(that would be us, Midnight!) -Excellence-Extravaganza, in the fantastically and lovingly restored Zaranden School Hall.”

The children slapped their hands on top of each other’s, then on the door, and pelted into Jack’s bedroom like meteors.
Chapter Seven – Bonjuka’s black hole

The force of the black hole stretched Bonjuka like blue-tac and straightened her hair to resemble a perfect row of her students’ pens. The vacuum drew her arms and cape above her head, tightening the ties around her neck so that she was gasping for breath. She looked like some kind of superhero, but with the cape leading the way.

Clenching her teeth, Bonjuka brought her arms down to her head and plucked a strand of silver hair with each hand. She dragged her knees to her chest and rolled herself upwards into the suction, so that she was wrapped in her cape.

The pressure was loosened from her neck, and her hands connected each strand of hair to a corner of her cape. “Soobinackas,” cried Bonjuka, relaxing her left arm so that it stretched out straight above her.

The strands of her hair snapped solid to become parachute threads, and her cape ballooned high and wide. Bonjuka untied the cape from her neck, held the corner strings, and brought the ends of the cape together to form a bag. She had scooped up a portion of the black hole, and the bag now expanded to the width of the vacuum, plugging the suction.

Bonjuka held the bag tightly with her right hand, raised her left arm and flew out of the edge of the black hole, through space, to settle gently on the grounds of Bottick.

Bonjuka walked quietly to the entrance of the storeroom on the outside of the hall. She cracked the door just enough to let her open the bag and release the captured black hole into the darkness.

Snapping the door shut, she shook out her cape, re-tied it around her neck, grinned, and raised her left arm in the evening’s final salute. “Soobinackas, home!”

Bonjuka crossed out of Ovidon and arrived near the front step of her private quarters, once again the neatly dressed and composed Headmistress of Bottick.
Chapter Eight – India goes home again

“You go first, Noha, they like you best,” whispered India as the sisters approached their house.

“It’s ok, India, we haven’t done anything wrong,” Noha replied. “Just come on!”
“Yeah, well, I don’t know,” said India. “Anyway, hurry up, I’m starving!”

Noha creaked the front door open, and they tiptoed down the hall, past the lounge room and into the kitchen. The rest of their family was sitting at the table, eating breakfast. Serenity was sitting opposite the door, closest to the sink, making her way through a plate of scrambled eggs. Abe was sitting with his back to the door, the twin toddlers, Ozzie and Felipe were sitting in their high chairs at each end of the table, and 4 year old Frank was perched next to his Dad, making puddles of milk around his cereal bowl.

When India and Noha appeared at the door, Serenity put her fork down, stood up and walked to look out the window above the sink. The rest of the family turned their heads to the door.

“Good morning girls,” said Abe. “Have you had breakfast?”

India's face broke into a huge grin. “Thought you’d never ask,” she said, pulling up the spare chair next to Abe, Noha choosing the other side of the table, next to Serenity’s empty seat. “I’m so hungry I could polish off the whole pantry, and fry up the whole fridge, and - ”

“India,” said her mother in a very firm voice, turning to face her daughter, “I - ”

“No, wait Mum! Please? We have a really special-out-of-this-world reason for being home this morning, don’t we Noha?” interrupted India.

Noha smiled and turned her face around to her mother, but just as quickly turned back to the table, and dropped her head between her shoulders.

“What about we hear them out, Serenity?” placated Abe.

Serenity folded her arms across her chest. “This better be good, India” she muttered.

Noha jumped up from the table and ran over to her mother, throwing her arms around her waist. “Oh, Mummy, I missed you. It was so scary and so many things happened but we were so brave and clever, just wait until we tell you all about it, and - ”
“Sh, it’s ok Noha,” soothed Serenity stroking her hair. “Slow down so we can hear what’s going on.” Serenity took her youngest daughter’s hand and led her back to the table, where they both sat down.

“I thought you were with Mrs Kuja for a special introduction to Bottick, as we arranged,” said Serenity, looking at India. “Why has she let you come home without talking to us first?”

“Oh Mum, it was unbelievable!” India replied with a mouthful of toast that she’d grabbed from the centre of the table. “You are looking at the Zaranden Warriors. We saved our school!” she trumpeted.

Serenity’s face became very red. “That’s it, India. I’ll tell you what’s unbelievable,” said her mother, raising her voice. “You are! For the last time, India, what is going on?!“

“I should have known,” India retorted, standing up and moving to the kitchen door. “You never listen to me, never! Well, I don’t care. I’m going to be in the Zaranden School Spectacular and I will be a Star!” pouted India, running out of the kitchen.

“Come back here, India, we are not finished!” demanded Serenity.

Noha put her hands over her ears, and rested her head on the table.

Abe stood up and started gathering the other children. “Come on everyone, let’s go and play outside before school,” he invited, opening the back door. “Serenity, what about you just leave her alone for a while?” he suggested. “Why don’t you come out with us for a breather?”

Serenity started clearing the table, clanking plates into piles on the sink. “For goodness sake, Abe,” she fumed. “You really have no idea! I’m going to work,” she finished, and strode quickly up the hall.

The front door slammed, and rattled the stack of dishes.
Chapter Nine – Jack goes home

“But Tara, I need to know if India is in the performance,” said Jack in a very shaky voice. “I told you how hard she worked to fight Bonjuka and rebuild Zaranden!”

“I know what you told me, Jack, but India has been on a time-out and I don’t know if Melissa will let her come back.”

“That’s NOT fair!” he yelled. “I’m not going if India’s not allowed. She was right, the school’s full of a bunch of do-gooders who really don’t do any good at all!”

Jack slammed the lounge room door and raced down the hall to his room. He threw himself on his back on his bed, plugged his iPod into his ears, and tried to see out the skylight through the mist in his eyes.

Green Day played through his head, and that was too much. “Well, sure”, Jack whispered, “you might hope I’ve had the time of my life, but I don’t think so! It’s not going to happen anyway, not with India possibly banned, and that girly ‘ooh, I broke my nail’ Sunshine taking her part. As if Sunshine (with a name like that anyway) could ever, EVER, manage to come even close, to India’s performance. Who do they think they’re kidding? I swear I wish I could leave Zaranden! They say how great they are, and then they give you the flick if you’re not as pretty and soft and oh-so-polite as they think you should be. Blah blah blah. I’m even sick of hearing myself think about them!”

* * * * *

Hugh and Tara were sitting at the kitchen table, finishing breakfast. "I don’t get it,” puzzled Hugh. “How come you don’t think Noha will be able to watch the performance? She’s never done anything wrong, and she was really great last night, too!”

Tara sighed as quietly as she could, and ended up turning it into a yawn. “Darling, it’s been a really long morning, what about we finish up here and get ready to go to school?”

“Can’t I just ring Noha and see if she is ok? I think she might be in trouble.”

“I’m sure Noha’s fine, Hugh. It’s late, and they’ll be on their way to school. Let’s get moving.”
Hugh got up from the table, and was on his way to get ready when the kitchen door opened. “Mummy!” he cried, running to give Maggie a big hug.

Maggie held him tight and laughed. “Are you all ready?” she asked, leaning over to Tara to give her a kiss goodmorning.

“No,” said Hugh, looking up at Maggie. “Jack’s cranky in his room, but I’m nearly ready!”

“Well, off you go and finish,” said Maggie, tickling Hugh under his arms. “What’s going on with Jack,” she asked Tara, grabbing a piece of buttered toast from the plate in the centre of the table, as Hugh hopped to his room.

“Might be good if you tried talking to him,” replied Tara. “He’s pretty upset.”

“Yeah, ok. It’d be good to get breakfast one morning, though,” she grumbled, chewing her toast as she left the kitchen.

“You might be lucky if you’re a bit earlier, miss sleepy head,” Tara called after her.

“Yeah, yeah,” smiled Maggie, walking down the hall.

Maggie knocked on Jack’s door and opened it when she didn’t get a response. “Hey,” she said, popping her head in. “Your star-of-the-moment private driver has arrived, sir! Today’s the big day.”

Jack grunted and turned onto his side, with his back to the door. Maggie turned on the light and opened the door wide. “Come on Jack, that’s enough! Time to have a quick shower and get dressed. We need to get moving,” she finished, walking over to sit on the bed and rub Jack’s back. “You’ll have lots of last minute rehearsing to do,” she said more softly. “You know where your costume is, don’t you?”

“Hm mmm,” mumbled Jack, still not moving.

Maggie sighed and walked to the door. “I’ll leave you to it then, Jack. Just remember that you’re the lead male role tonight, and the production is counting on you.”
Chapter Ten – India is determined

“Ok everyone,” rallied Abe, “time for teeth and shoes. We’re off to school in fifteen.”

He put lunches in all the school and kindy bags and went to knock on India’s bedroom door.

“What do you want?” came a muffled reply.

“Come on, India,” Abe called. “We’re off to school. Are you ready?”

India flung the door open. “I’m not going to school, Abe,” she said. “We were fighting-building-creating-colouring the Zaranden world all night, and even I need some beauty sleep, you know!”

Abe put his hand on India’s shoulder. “Princess, you are worrying me. Your imagination is taking you away from us,” he said very kindly.

“Abe!” cried India. “Not you too! Ask Noha, she’ll tell you,” she said, turning back into her room to sit on the bed.

Abe followed India, and sat next to her. “I’ve talked to Noha, India. She seems very excited about a game you were playing last night, and - ”

“It wasn’t a game, Abe,” said India, looking him straight in the eyes. “It was real!” Abe put his hand on India’s forehead. “Are you feeling sick, India?” he sympathised.

“Yes Abe,” India mumbled, shrugging and pushing his hand away. “I guess I don’t feel very good. I’d better stay home and prepare for my very important Excellence Extravaganza performance tonight. I must be ship-shape-diamond-sharp!” she said, almost brightly.

“India, I’m not sure - ”

“It’s ok Abe, you’ll see,” interrupted India, twisting the corners of her mouth into some kind of smile.

“Well – ok - I’ll tell the school you’re not feeling well when they pick up Noha,” Abe said as he leaned over to kiss her forehead. “You get some rest, princess. I’ll see you later.”

Abe left the room, calling to the other children. “Come on now, everyone, into the car!”
India lay down on her bed with a moan, closed her eyes, and was instantly asleep.

****

Abe waited for the Bottick bus to collect Noha, dropped the other children at kindy and phoned Tara.

“Hi Abe, how’s it going with the new school?” Tara answered.

“Where do I start?! I’m not sure what to do, Tara,” replied Abe. “India and Noha are talking about some elaborate game they played last night, and now India’s got it in her head that she’s going to be in the Excellence Extravaganza at Zaranden. I can’t imagine Melissa will let her in. Serenity stormed out of the house this morning in a huge temper. I mean, really, they are so alike, her and India with the way they – ”

“Whoa, Abe,” interrupted Tara. “We’ve been talking about it too, with Jack and Hugh. They all had a pretty big night.”

“Your boys have been playing the same game? How did they get into Bottick?” puzzled Abe.

“It’s a long story,” sighed Tara, rubbing her eyes. “What about we meet for coffee?”

“That’d be great - any advice welcome at this end, Tara,” smiled Abe. “See you at CrEATe at ten.”

****

India woke with a start, in a dark room. “What’s the time?” she wondered out loud, groping for her alarm clock. “Oh no!” she exclaimed, “it’s five o’clock and I’m on stage in an hour!”

India grabbed her clothes out of her wardrobe, threw them on her bed, and went to have a shower. “Hello!” she called to the dark house, turning on lights as she went. “Where is everyone?”
India was in the shower, out, back in her room and dressed within ten minutes. “How could they go without me?!?” she muttered irritably, while she collected her costume and folded it into her backpack.

“Poise,” she said to herself, catching sight of the clock showing quarter past five. “It’s time to rise above these trifles to reach your very own ravishingly-royal-rendition of the magnificent Cleopatra. We will now go to Caesar,” she finished with a laugh, slinging her backpack over her shoulder and pulling closed the front door.

India jumped on her bike and rode faster than she ever had before, away from her house and its blazing lights.
Chapter Eleven – Zaranden buzzes

“Wow! Look how many cars there are,” exclaimed Hugh excitedly, as Maggie pulled into a parking spot about five thirty, at least 3 blocks away from Zaranden.

“Yeah, how lucky are we?” retorted Jack. “We get to walk to school.”

“Gee, Jack, it’s only down the road,” said Hugh, climbing out of the car. “Hey! There’s India on her bike. Where’s Noha?

Jack scrambled out of the car, “India!” he called at the top of his voice, running towards her.

“Jack, wait!” called Tara, closing her car door as Jack sprinted away.

“Let him go,” said Maggie, locking the car with a beep. “We’ve got Hugh to keep us company, haven’t we darling?” she smiled, taking Hugh’s hand.

Tara took Hugh’s other hand. They made their way to Zaranden with Hugh beaming as he skipped along between his two Mums.

“I had coffee with Abe, today,” Tara said quietly to Maggie, over Hugh’s head. “He was really worried about you know who after last night. They’ll be here tonight in case she’s allowed to perform.”

“Huh! I can’t see that happening, can you?” replied Maggie. “You didn’t try and explain what they all got up to, did you?”

“No!” Tara exclaimed. “We agreed not to, but it’s hard on the girls, maybe we should –”

Hugh suddenly let go of his Mums’ hands. “Hey, there’s my friends Mark and Brian, can I go walk with them please?”

“Only to the front gate, Hugh,” said Tara. “Wait for us there, please?”

“Ok,” he nearly sang.

* * * * *

By the time they’d reached the next block, the street looked as if there was a celebratory parade taking place. Families with eager children were crowding together, chattering elatedly. Torches shone their zagging beams across the ground and into the sky, as the mass of people made its way through the dark night towards Zaranden.
At the gate, everyone was asked to turn off their torch and to follow the candle-lit path as quietly as possible to the school hall. As families moved further along the path, the voices were gradually hushed and the sound of drums beat the air.

Hugh tugged on Tara’s hand. “Can you see Noha’s family?” he whispered.

“No, darling. Let’s just get inside, I’m sure you’ll find each other in the intermission,” she replied, stepping sideways to follow Maggie and Hugh through the crammed doorway, into the hall.
Chapter Twelve – Showdown

The Class 6 room was brimming with colour and movement as everyone got ready for the performance.

“Cleopatra is here!” announced India loudly, throwing open the doors.

“Accompanied by Caesar”, resounded Jack, offering his arm to India. India took Jack’s arm, they looked at each other, and sang together “Showtime!” as they skipped into the room.

Every head in the room turned to look at them, every voice stopped making sound, every person ceased moving.

“Oh, do look Caesar, how charming,” chimed India, “all our loyal subjects have paused to welcome us,” she laughed. “It is equally delightful to be re-acquainted with all of you,” continued India, removing her arm from Jack’s and gesturing in an arc around the room. “You may now carry on with your preparations,” she finished with a flick of her wrist followed by a sudden giggle.

The room erupted in whispers which caught hold of each other and flew to the ceiling, collided with the walls and brushed themselves into a wind of sound.

“Excuse me,” uttered Sunshine in a small voice, barely audible over the wind of whispers, “but I think that I am Cleopatra tonight.”
Chapter Thirteen – India goes to Bottick

India grabbed her back pack and moved so quickly out of the back-stage door that she might have been flying. She slammed it behind her and stormed across the dark grounds of Zaranden towards Bottick. “That’s it!” she fumed out loud.

India jumped on her bike and pumped the pedals so fast that her breath seemed to bellow out of her mouth, as if she had become a steam train. She arrived at Bottick in record time, threw the bike on the ground, hitched her back pack in place and ran to Mrs Kuja’s private entrance, to rap loudly on the door-knocker.

When there was no immediate response to her knocks, India tried again with a series of 5 short, sharp bangs. “Oh, come on,” she murmured in frustration. “How long does it take to open the door?!”

India turned around to walk to the school office entrance to the building, “maybe she’s working late,” she pondered out loud, when she stopped in her tracks and hit herself on the forehead. “Oh no!” she wailed. “I sucked her up into the black hole, how could I have forgotten? How could I have even done that?!” she finished as she sank onto the step and started to cry.

“Now then, what’s all this noise child?” asked Mrs Kuja, appearing next to India. “You may come inside and tell me why you are here,” she finished, opening the door and gesturing for India to go in first.

India jumped upright, her eyes wide, “where did you come from?!” she blurted in surprise.

“We don’t have time to concern ourselves with insignificant matters, India,” replied Mrs Kuja. “I suggest that you enter the building and we will organise ourselves.”

“Sure,” said India a bit more cheerfully, moving through the door into Mrs Kuja’s lounge room, twisting her hands together. “Ummm, Mrs Kuja, I just want to say, ummm, I’m so sorry about what I did, I just didn’t know that they would be so horrible, I thought I was saving the school, and I wanted to be Cleopatra and – ”

Mrs Kuja held up her hand to India. “That will do, my dear. I appreciate that you were misguided,” she stated. “May I offer you a glass of warm milk, perhaps?” she asked, moving into the tiny kitchenette off the lounge room.
“Sure, that’d be great,” said India brightly, following her. “You have to tell me, though, please? Can you tell me how you got back here, I mean, wow! You escaped a black hole!”

“All in good time, child,” said Mrs Kuja calmly as she warmed the milk in a small saucepan, adding some honey and white powder, then pouring it into a mug. “Shall we retire to the lounge room where it is more comfortable, my dear?”

“Thanks Mrs Kuja,” said India accepting the drink and sitting on the lounge. “Hmmm, it’s delicious,” she said taking a sip, then drinking the rest all at once. “That was just the right temperature and just the right taste and just the right – ”

India’s hand went slack and Mrs Kuja caught the mug before it dropped on the carpet. India’s eyes closed and her head slumped forward.

“That’s right, child, you sleep,” breathed Mrs Kuja, lying India down on the lounge, and covering her with a blanket. “Tomorrow we will see what you have decided. Now - to business,” she said briskly, standing up and walking towards her office.
Chapter Fourteen – Jack goes to Bottick

Jack was so quiet that he seemed to float out of the Zaranden hall towards the back stage door, which he opened and closed behind him in equal silence. “India was right,” he muttered, “sometimes you just have to go when you want to, whatever Kisser or anyone else says!”

Jack lifted his head to the dark night sky, which was only showing the tiniest sliver of a new moon with its lopsided smile. “I don’t know what’s so funny,” he whispered, dropping his eyes to the ground. His shoulders were hunched, his hands shoved deep into his jeans pockets, and his feet crept him towards Bottick.

“Just how long do they have to make this driveway,” complained Jack, as he rounded a bend which led directly to the Bottick school hall. “At last,” he breathed, “now, where is Mrs Kuja’s office?” he wondered out loud. “India’s bound to be there.”

A light on the hill literally beamed a path through the pitch night, leading Jack to Mrs Kuja’s office. The picture window framed the Headmistress sitting on a hard backed wooden chair, with her spine perfectly straight, sewing the last stitches into her tapestries. She carefully put her needles and thread into a box on her desk, and effortlessly lifted the repaired tapestries to hang in their places on her walls.

When she stepped back to the centre of the room, Jack could see that they were identical to the tapestries that Hona and Houston had unravelled in the battle to save Zaranden. One tapestry was a map of the local area, with lots of detailed buildings, roads, countryside and the schools. The other tapestry showed everything in the Universe, with the Milky Way as the main focus.

From the centre of the room, Mrs Kuja faced first one, then the other, tapestry, raised her left arm above her head and forcefully stated, “Soobinackas!”

“What the - ” mumbled Jack.

The tapestries took on a shimmer which was so sudden and bright that Jack’s eyes closed. When he opened them again, the room was perfectly dark and Mrs Kuja was gone.

Jack jumped to his feet and pressed his face to the window, peering through the dark, trying to see into every corner. “She’s got to be kidding! Where is she? How did she get back here in the first place? Wait! Who am I even talking to?! Aaah,” finished Jack as he pulled his hair with both fists. “That’s it, I’m going in,” he decided.
Jack tried to open the window, but it wouldn’t budge. He followed the edges of
the building around until he found a door. Jack groped for the handle with both
hands, found it, and locked his fingers over the knob.

Before he could turn the handle, Jack was thrown through the closed door as if
he was made of air, and came to a stop floating above the desk in Mrs Kuja’s office.
He was dressed in black.

“Midnight, so glad you could join me. You have saved me the trouble of
fetching you,” rumbled a voice from somewhere in the dark. “I do hope you don’t
mind me calling you ‘Midnight’, child. Your name is so much more pleasant without
the common ‘Jack’ attached to it.”

Midnight Jack’s heart was beating very fast, his breathing was shallow, his
fists were clenched and he spoke in a hard voice. “You don’t get to call me anything
at all Bonjuka, because in a few moments you’re not going to exist!”

He flew to the tapestry of the local grounds and picked up the river, which he
directed to the centre of the room. The water rapidly started filling the office. “We
need a good clean-out around here,” he chuckled.

Bonjuka joined him with a growling laugh, saying “That’s very good Midnight, I
do enjoy it when a child shows initiative. However, it is time for me to teach you some
manners.”

Bonjuka stamped her foot and an enormous crack split the floor, draining the
water as quickly as it was pouring into the room.

Midnight Jack propped the river on the desk, aiming it into a corner to keep it
flowing into the room, and dived through the draining water to place his palms on the
floor. The crack closed like a zipper being done up.

“Oh, very clever, Midnight,” said Bonjuka, “but that is ENOUGH!” She closed
her fist over the river to freeze it and took her tapestry thread out of the box on her
desk.

Bonjuka sent the thread through the air to lasso Midnight Jack, and moved her
left hand as if she were mixing a cake. The thread spun Midnight Jack until he was
completely wrapped in a colourful cocoon. His voice could be heard calling
something, but it sounded like he was in a tunnel far, far away, and the words were
not clear.
“There’s no point shouting, Midnight, no one can hear you,” instructed Bonjuka. “You are better off taking the time to think about your behaviour. I will put you somewhere out of harm’s way, and we will see what you have learned in the morning. Goodnight, now, child.”
Chapter Fifteen – Hugh goes to Bottick

“Where’s Jack?” asked Hugh when Melissa had finally finished her opening speech and his brother didn’t make the entrance as Caesar. “And how come Sunshine’s being Cleopatra?” he finished in Tara’s ear.

“Remember, we thought this might happen with India?” replied Tara softly. “But I’m not sure why Jack’s understudy, Tristan, is on. Let’s just watch and see.”

“Um, I guess, but I need to go to the toilet, ok?” replied Hugh.

“Sure darling, but don’t be long.”

Hugh made his way out into the dark courtyard, and carefully picked his way across the pavers by the light from the windows. Instead of heading towards the toilets, he followed the building towards the back entrance of the hall. As he rounded the corner, he bumped into one of the new trees with a thud! “Ow!” he exclaimed, rubbing his head, “that hurt. Now, where’s Jack?”

The back of the building was very dark, and Hugh put both hands out in front of himself to find the door. The fingers of both his hands found a door knob and he was pulled through space before he could turn the handle.

He landed in a place that was as black as the deepest part of the ocean, except that it was dry. There was not even a hint of light, it was as if light had never existed and never would.

He rubbed his head where he’d banged it on the tree. “Ow,” he repeated. Then he stood very still, breathed very quietly, and listened. A soft noise was coming from somewhere, and he strained to make it out. “It sounds like an owl going ‘hoo hoo’,” he whispered nervously to himself, “and that means the owl can see me in the dark, and I can’t see the owl, and where am I anyway?!”

He put his hands out to find a light switch or something. As he turned, his cape brushed against his arm. “What the – ” he nearly yelled. “I’m wearing my outfit?! I’m in Ovidon? How could I get here without Midnight Jack?”

Houston kept turning and walking forward and backwards, and all he could find was molasses-thick air. There were no walls, no ceiling, no floor, nothing at all. There was only space and it was spinning. As Houston moved around, he was being carried through the air in a spiral motion, which was taking him downwards. “What is this place?” Houston wondered out loud.
As he was talking, the ‘hoo hoo’ sound became louder and more persistent. Houston stayed as still as possible until he could identify the direction of the sound, and then he turned and moved towards it. The sound was coming from somewhere below him, and when he was close to the sound, he reached out. His hands met a large object, a mountain of cotton. As soon as Houston touched the cloth, the mountain started to spin, making its mournful ‘hoo hoo’ sound and moving further downwards, further away from Houston.

“That’s so weird,” said Houston. “I think I have to try and get a hold of it to see what it is,” he puzzled out loud. Houston formed his mouth into a circle and sucked deeply, but no air moved.

“Ok – so I’ll try for some light to see what’s happening,” Houston continued, trying to solve the problem. He put his thumbs into his ears and waggled his fingers, but no fire took off into the darkness.

“I don’t get this,” Houston said through a sudden yawn. “Oh - I’m so tired, I just want to go to sleep,” he mumbled as he toppled sideways, his eyes closing, his body held up by the thick air that was as firm as his bed at home.
Chapter Sixteen – Noha stays at Zaranden

“Cha-cha-cha-cha-cha cha! Cha-cha-cha-cha-cha cha!” sang Noha softly, as she followed her parents up the path towards the Zaranden school hall, her little brothers forming a conga-line behind her. The line ahead came to a stand still, and Noha stopped suddenly, her brothers banging into her and each other with giggles and squeals.

“Shh!” snapped Serenity, turning with her finger on her lips and bending down towards the children. “Come here, you boys,” she said, taking their hands briskly into hers, and bringing them forward to stand next to her. “Noha, you should know better!”

Noha blushed and moved over to stand beside Abe. “Daddy,” she said, taking his hand and pulling him down to speak in his ear, “could I go and find Hugh to sit with him, please?”

“Not yet, Noha,” Abe replied. “I think Mummy will want you to stay with us. You two can catch up at intermission,” he said, as they moved into the hall to find their chairs towards the back of the room.

“What are you two talking about?” asked Serenity as she shuffled along the row to their seats, putting the boys in between her and Abe. “You come and sit over here with me, Noha,” she continued without waiting for a reply.

Noha squeezed past her father and brothers and took a seat wedged between her mother and the wall. She sat up as straight as she could and tried to spot Hugh’s curly hair in the sea of heads in front of her.

The lights in the hall dimmed, and Melissa took the stage to introduce the Excellence Extravaganza.

Noha leaned over to Serenity and whispered in her ear, “Mummy, I can’t see the stage.”

“Shh, Noha, just sit still and listen.”

Noha sighed, slumped back in her chair and fell asleep before Melissa had finished her opening speech.
Chapter Seventeen – The children are missed

The final notes of Ella’s piano recital chimed through the air, and the audience erupted into applause. The noise startled Noha awake, as the lights were turned on, and Melissa took the microphone. “Let’s hear it again for the children who performed in the first half!”

When the sound lulled, Melissa continued, “We’ll have a twenty minute interval while we set up for the adventurous and exciting second half of our Excellence Extravaganza – refreshments are in the library.”

Chairs scraped, feet stomped and the hall filled with voices as everyone stretched and moved towards the doors, chattering happily and greeting friends and family.

Noha managed to slide past her mother and clutched her father’s hand, “Now can I go and find Hugh, please Daddy?”

“Yes, sweetie, but don’t go too far,” he smiled. “We’ve only got twenty minutes.”

“I won’t!” Noha beamed, weaving her way through the crowd, looking for her best friend.

Abe turned to Serenity as they walked towards the library. “Well, that wasn’t too shabby,” he remarked.

“It wasn’t too relevant, either, Abe,” Serenity snapped. “I don’t see the point of sitting through this when it’s obvious that Melissa has stopped India from performing,” she finished sourly. “I would also like to know where my wayward daughter has gone, I can’t see her in this crowd, can you?” she continued.

“Oh, you know India,” said Abe gently, “she’ll be sitting somewhere stewing about it all. She’s probably hooked up with Jack, he wasn’t in the performance, either – which I don’t really get. Anyway, she’ll show up.”

“Whatever,” shrugged Serenity, “I’ve had enough – I’m taking the boys home!”

Abe’s mouth dropped open and he stood still, watching as Serenity strode towards the car park, pulling the boys along with her, their small hands in her fist.

“You ok Abe?” said Tara, putting her hand on his shoulder to greet him as she and Maggie caught up on the path to the library.

“You look a bit pale,” Maggie added, as she joined them.
“Serenity’s just taken the boys home in a temper,” he moaned, giving the two women a hug. “Have you seen India?” he asked. “I don’t think she’ll be too happy with tonight.”

“I don’t think Jack will be too happy, either,” said Tara. “I can’t understand why his understudy was on, instead of him.”

“I’m sure they’re both fine,” said Maggie. Let’s get some tea.”
Chapter Eighteen – India and Mrs Kuja have a chat

India woke with a start and sat up on the lounge. “Where am I?” she asked, disoriented.

“Ah, you are awake, child,” soothed Mrs Kuja from a lounge chair across the room. “I am assuming you are hungry, shall I prepare something for you?”

“Oh, hi, I mean, good morning Mrs Kuja,” stammered India, rubbing her eyes. “Umm, yes, that’d be great, thanks.”

“Very well, you may freshen up in the bathroom whilst I prepare the food to break our overnight fast,” instructed Mrs Kuja. “You will find a towel, relevant items and fresh clothes laid out for you in the dressing room.”

“Ok, umm, thanks,” mumbled India, struggling to her feet and moving down the hall.

* * * *

India returned from her shower, dressed in pressed white cotton pants and a light blue t-shirt. “Thanks for the clothes, Mrs Kuja,” she said happily. “They fit just right, and they’re nice and soft and light. I usually have these really bright colours, and these are – wow! What a feast!” she finished, looking at the dining table full of every kind of breakfast food imaginable. “Yu-u-u-meee! Beat you to it!” she challenged, sitting quickly and starting to pile food on her plate.

“I am glad you are satisfied, my dear,” smiled Mrs Kuja, delicately placing small amounts of food on her plate and laying her serviette across her lap. “Now that we have some time, you might like to tell me how you came to be here, last night.”

India paused with her loaded fork midway to her mouth. “Well, would you believe that they put Sunshine in as Cleopatra?! After everything we did for them to save the school. Oh, oops, sorry Mrs Kuja. I didn’t mean to bring that up again. Anyway, and then Jack – hey, wait a minute!” she exclaimed dropping her fork. “Where is Jack? He was going to meet me here,” she said, worriedly.

“Whatsoever do you mean, my dear?” replied Mrs Kuja. “You certainly could not expect Jack to come to Bottick, could you? His parents would not hear of it,” she said.
“Oh, that’s just like Jack!” India said in frustration. “He just won’t do what he wants to do. He’s so busy being a goody two shoes hero and doing just what everyone tells him to do. But, this time he promised, he promised that he was sick of it all, too,” finished India, sadly, loading her fork up again with food, and piling it into her mouth.

Mrs Kuja nibbled slowly from her plate, and dabbed the corners of her mouth with her serviette. “Now, shall we try again please child? How did you come to be here, last night?”

“Oh, it’s pretty simple, really,” spluttered India through a mouthful. “I have decided that I am a Bottick girl through and through! No more of that sugar coated Zaranden. I want to come back here and help you.”

“Well, that is gratifying news,” purred Mrs Kuja. “I welcome you back, child.”

India blushed from her neck to her forehead. “Thanks,” she blurted. “Ummm, I was just wondering, ummm, do you think I might have some powers now? You know, some of my own powers, not with your pearls and hair kind of power?”

“We shall have to see,” replied Mrs Kuja. “Would you care to accompany me to Ovidon, India?”

“Are you kidding?!” shouted India, standing suddenly and tipping her chair over. “Are you KIDDING?! Well, ye-es plee-eese,” she danced around the room. “Woo hoo-oo, wo-ah ho-ah!”

“I am delighted to see that the idea brings you such pleasure,” Mrs Kuja said with a smile so big it was threatening to burst into a laugh. “Shall we clear the table and –”

“I’m way ahead of you there!” crowed India, balancing piles of dishes on her arms and tottering into the kitchenette. “Hey, I keep forgetting to ask you what your weird power-cry means, what was it, scooby something or other?”

Mrs Kuja’s face became very serious. “I am not yet certain that you may be given that information, child.”

“Oh, come on, Mrs Kuja,” insisted India. “You know that I’m ready, that’s why I’m here, I’ve decided, like you said I had to! I’m a Bottick girl!”
Bonnie Kuja, Headmistress of Bottick, took India’s chin in her right hand, tilted India’s face towards the window, and peered at her closely. India simply smiled. Her black eyes crinkled around the edges, sparkling with anticipation.

Mrs Kuja released India’s chin and the corners of her mouth lifted. “Very well, my dear. I do believe that you are correct. You have shown great fortitude and conviction, yes, I am ready to share this great tale with you.”

India jumped high and punched the air with her right fist. “YES!” she shouted, as she landed on the lino with bent knees. She straightened up, bounded over to plonk onto the lounge, sat up very straight, looked directly at Mrs Kuja, and sang, “Ready, please, Mrs Kuja!”

Mrs Kuja laughed, and sat down on a dining chair opposite India. “This is a very important moment, my dear,” she said. “You are the first person to hear this tale, and you must hold it sacred, do you agree to this?”

“As I said, Mrs Kuja, I’m ready!” exclaimed India.

“Very well, then I shall begin - ”
Chapter Nineteen – Mrs Kuja tells her tale

Mrs Kuja looked beyond India, out the window onto the grounds of Bottick, as she told of growing into the most powerful woman in Ovidon. This is what she said –

When I was little Bonnie Kuja I was a princess, at least in my mother’s eyes. Of course, it goes without saying that my mother ruled the household, if not my world.

In fact, my Mama Kuja (as everyone called her) was a great inventor and was very well respected in the gadget community. She invented all kinds of devices before anyone else had even imagined such a thing might be possible, and they all related to nature and the environment.

Who would have thought that my Mama Kuja’s wave-making machine would be used by tourist parks to keep crowds happy? Who would have thought that her hydroponics system would be used for growing masses of vegetables to help feed the world’s population? Could anyone have imagined that world leaders would one day use my Mama Kuja’s invention of holograms to bring important messages to other countries?

When I was a child, I was Mama Kuja’s princess and a kind of apprentice to her; I was almost like a witch’s owl or cat. Mama’s inventiveness was impressive when I was nearby. I seemed to have a special kind of energy that sparked bright ideas for Mama, and brought the world’s molecules into alignment, so that whenever I was by Mama’s side, Mama’s creativity was almost like magic.

I enjoyed being my Mama’s helper, but I desperately wanted to make my own Suitably Impressive Nick Nacks, as I called them. I had so many ideas about ways to change the world by making these inventions that I spent all my days and all my nights thinking about them and putting together new mixtures of things that I found around the house, and in the yard. I wanted to be a good inventor, like my Mama Kuja.

One night, when I went to have my bath, I explored the cupboards to find new liquids to combine. I found so many different bottles and containers full of interesting smells and textures such as shampoo, soap, Epsom salts, bath crystals, lipstick, face powder, mascara, perfume and talcum powder.
When I had finished my bath, I let out the water, put the plug back in and started mixing all my new-found ingredients. They made a huge mess, and smelled very strong, but I kept pouring and mixing with my hands.

All the time that I was mixing, I was concentrating on how I could make this mess into Suitably Impressive Nick Nacks, so I kept saying the words over and over in soft whispers.

Eventually, the mixture became very thick and started to form a ball, which I rolled around and around the sides of the bath until it became smooth. I found that I could stretch it and drape it over my arms. It was like a kind of runny play-dough.

I was very excited to have created a new invention, and carefully put away all the bottles I had been using, cleaned the bath, and put my invention under my pyjama top to carry it to my room.

Now, even though I was happy with my invention, I didn’t know what to call it, and I didn’t know what it could do. It was very important that my invention was special enough to show my Mama, so I had to wait until I knew the answers to my questions.

I spent many hours looking for inspiration, holding my invention, playing with it, and saying the words ‘Suitably Impressive Nick Nacks’ out loud, over and over again. I sat with my invention in my lap and wrote the words down, I looked at the letters, I doodled pictures of them, I closed my eyes and traced their shape in my dreams.

Until - one seemingly ordinary day, I was sitting in my back garden with my invention in my lap. I started to say my words and found something completely different coming out of my mouth, it was a new word.

As soon as the word formed in the back of my mouth, my whole body started to shake, my back straightened and I jumped to my feet as if my body had taken control. I looked to the sky and put my left arm high above my head. My mouth opened and I thundered “SOOBINACKAS!”

Birds flew to perch on my shoulders, butterflies danced in a circle around my head to the thrum of cicadas, and the ancient blue tongue came out from under the verandah to stand sentinel on the rock next to me.

“Where’s my princess?” called my Mama Kuja from inside the house. “I need your magic company to finish my invention here, my pretty girl. Come to Mama.”
I turned towards my mother’s voice, and immediately my head and arm dropped. The birds and butterflies flew off so quickly it was as if they simply vanished, and the cicadas stopped singing, leaving the most awful silence. Only the blue tongue’s tail could be seen as he ambled back underneath the house.

I picked my invention up off the lawn, ran into the sun room, which was my mother’s inventing room, and threw my arms around her waist, lifting my face to cry out; “Mama! I am magic, you always say I am and now I know how!”

“Well, of course you are, my pretty girl, that’s why I called you in to be beside me,” Mama replied.

I started jumping up and down and smiling more than I had ever smiled in my whole life, “I knew you would understand, Mama. Oh! I am so excited!”

Now, my Mama Kuja was a tall woman with broad shoulders and long black hair that was streaked with grey. When I started jumping, Mama’s dark brown eyes were framed by heavy black frowning eyebrows, her hands were on her hips and she started breathing very loudly.

Mama extended her right arm and put her hand on top of my bobbing head; “Stop!” she commanded. “You are not really magic, my girl. There is no such thing. You are a child with an overactive imagination. You must never say that you are magic again, not to me, not to anyone, do you understand me?”

My eyes filled with tears, and my body started shaking in a different way. “But Mama, you always say I have the magic touch, I can show you, come outside and see.”

“Miss Bonnie Kuja, I said stop! Do not speak this way again. You’ve clearly been in my studio too much. Go to your room and play with your dolls. Enough now! Do as I say.”

I ran as fast as I could through the lounge room and kitchen, down the hall, and to my bedroom. I thudded onto the floor, cross-legged, and sat with a very straight spine, cradling my invention in my lap. I looked out my window and raised my left arm. “Soobinackas” I whispered.

Nothing happened.

I stood up slowly, carried my invention to my dressing table and put it in my special nick nacks tin – it used to have biscuits in it. I called my tin Willow, because
that was the name on it’s bottom – it had a red rose and white flowers on the lid, I thought it was very beautiful and would keep all of my special things safe.

After I put my invention away, I looked around at my dolls and bears, whispered all their names, and told them, “I’m not crazy, I really am magic, I’ll show Mama...”

****

Mrs Kuja closed her eyes at the end of her tale, and bowed her head slightly.

India, who had been sitting silently with her shining eyes fixed on Mrs Bonnie Kuja’s face, stood up quietly and went and put her arms around Mrs Kuja’s neck. “Poor little Bonnie Kuja,” she said softly.

Mrs Kuja briefly leaned into India’s embrace, then abruptly opened her eyes, took India’s hands and stood up, bringing India with her. “Yes, that is very thoughtful of you my dear,” she croaked, clearing her throat. “Now - we have work to do and you may accompany me if you so desire,” Mrs Kuja concluded briskly.

“Right, let’s go!” rallied India with enthusiasm. “Umm - but what are we doing, exactly?”

In response, Mrs Kuja looked to the sky, threw her left fist in the air, held India’s hand, and boomed “Soobinackas!” They sped through space like rockets, and stopped in the darkest place imaginable.

“Wow!” exclaimed Cindia. “That completely turned my tummy upside down, Bonjuka – oh, wait, you’re Bonjuka – we really are in Ovidon again! Yay-yes, ya-ha-a – but why is it so dark. Why can’t I see you, I can’t even see my own hand - ”

“Shh child,” calmed Bonjuka. “We are in the part of the black hole that I captured when you, as you say, ‘sucked me up’.”

“What?!” panicked Cindia. “You captured a black hole? How is that even possible? And now you’ve brought me into it?! Oh no, I’ll never get home, how could you do this to me, I thought we were friends, I thought – ”

“Enough, Cindia,” growled Bonjuka. “I believed you had grown beyond this childishness. I may still return you to your mediocre family and your dull life. Remember - I am - BONJUKA!” she roared.
Tears sprang to Cindia’s eyes as she backed away from Bonjuka. “I’m really sorry, Bonjuka,” she choked. “I’m just a bit scared, I mean - we’re in a black hole,” she finished lamely.

“There, there, my dear,” Bonjuka soothed, moving towards Cindia, stroking her hair. “My powers tend to be somewhat dominant here in Ovidon. All will be well. Shall we continue?” she invited.

“Ok,” sniffled Cindia, brightening up a bit. “What do we do next? I want you to tell me how you captured the black hole – wow – you really are good at this stuff - ”

“Cindia! You will cease your chatter, please. You may now follow me,” instructed Bonjuka. “Hold my cape to ensure that we are not separated.”

Cindia felt for the fabric and picked up the ends of the cape as if she were carrying the train on a bride’s wedding gown. Together they floated downward through the dark air in a spiralling motion.
Chapter Twenty – Noha sends the alert

Noha ran at full pelt, and threw her arms around Abe’s waist. “They’re gone,” she panted, turning her head to speak to Tara and Maggie.

“What’s happening, sweetie?” asked Abe, peeling Noha’s arms from around his waist, bending down to talk to her.

“Oh Daddy, they’re gone!” she repeated, tears welling in her eyes.

“Oh, now, let’s take this one step at a time,” Abe continued patiently, beckoning for Tara and Maggie to bend down next to him. “We’re all ready to listen, you just tell us what has happened.”

“India and Jack and Hugh have all gone,” Noha hiccuped. “I went looking for them and they’re not here! Something horrible has happened!”

Abe let out a quiet chuckle, “Oh, Noha. I’m sure they’re just hiding from you – you and India told me about the elaborate game you all played last night. It’s just a game, sweetie,” he reassured his daughter.

“No it’s not a game, Daddy!” blurted Noha as she threw her arms around his neck and started crying loudly.

Tara and Maggie exchanged a look and a hesitant nod.

“We have to talk,” Tara mouthed silently over Noha’s head to her father. Abe widened his eyes and slightly lifted his shoulders in a shrug. “Ok,” he mouthed back.

Maggie put her arm around Noha’s shoulder. “Come on darling, let’s get you a cool drink,” she suggested as she gently untangled Noha from Abe’s embrace. “I know how much you love the White’s home-made lemonade!”

“What’s going on,” asked Abe, standing up and rubbing his knee. “I’m getting a bit old for all this bending,” he reflected.

“Well, Abe, it’s a bit complicated,” replied Tara straightening up next to him. “Let’s go to the bench in the front playground, it’ll be quiet there.”

They made their way down the candlelit path and across the expansive lawn to sit on the wooden bench under the jacaranda tree.

Tara took a deep breath and told Abe the story of the old gloop tin, the children’s adventures and the struggle to save Zarenden – only pausing now and then to answer Abe’s astonished questions and to calm his mounting anxiety.
“So, they really are quite safe, Abe,” Tara said as she wound up the story. “All we have to do is call them, and they’ll come home.”

“Well, good,” replied Abe. “What are you waiting for?”

Tara took Abe’s hand, “Come on then, let’s find Maggie. We should all be together when they come back.”

Without any more discussion, Abe took off at such a pace that Tara was almost running to keep up with him. They burst through the library door with so much energy that the room full of parents, teachers and children turned to see what the commotion was.

Tara held her hand in a semi-wave, smiled, “Sorry, misjudged the door - ” and walked more slowly towards Maggie and Noha.

“Maggie, we’re needed outside,” said Tara evenly. “Here’s your Dad back, Noha, why don’t you get him some lemonade, or maybe a chamomile tea? I’m sure he’d like something,” she finished, with a wink to Abe.

As the women walked outside, Maggie asked, “How did he take it?”

“As you’d expect! He wants us to call them back home. What do you think?”

“Definitely,” said Maggie. “I think they’ve caused enough trouble for one night, don’t you? If we call together they’ll know it’s serious. You ready? On three - one, two, three - ”

Abe and Noha had followed them out of the library, and saw the women call in unison, “Time to come home!”

From the strain on their faces, and their wide open mouths, it looked as if they were yelling at the top of their voices, but no sound came out.

“What’s wrong?” flustered Abe, “Why can’t you talk?”

“Oh, we’re fine,” answered Tara in her usual voice. “It’s how it works. No sound here, plenty of sound in Ovidon.”

“That’s pretty clever,” said Noha. “We can hear you really well when you call and we’re in Ovidon. They’ll come back now, Daddy,” she said, taking her father’s hand. “Midnight Jack and Houston always come straight home when their Mums call, and Cindia comes with them,” she said.
Chapter Twenty One – Houston and Midnight Jack

Soundly sleeping, Houston slowly coasted through the inky air, carried downward by an invisible spiralling current. He had a small smile on his face, as if he was enjoying a special dream.

Wrapped in his cotton cocoon, Midnight Jack was being circled through the dark by the same clockwise air-flow. He no longer made any sound, as if he was sleeping as well.

They had been floating this way for quite some time, hushed and resting. There didn’t seem to be any top to this spiral, and there didn’t seem to be any bottom. Houston and Midnight Jack were simply suspended in dark space, twirling softly, descending through the air.

Quite suddenly this calm was shattered when a single word cut through the air, clapping piercingly in Houston’s ears. Waking with a start, he echoed the word in astonishment, “Bonjuka?!?”

Houston sat up, trying to focus in the dark. “Midnight Jack, where are you?!” he called frantically.

“Hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo,” came the mournful reply from the spinning cocoon, which had also been awakened by the thunderous name.

Houston looked towards the sound, which seemed to be below him, and used the force of the current to carry him closer. “I don’t know what that is, but I need some kind of help,” he muttered to himself, then called out loudly “Midnight Jack! Where are you?!”

The sound below became louder and quicker.

“Ok, ok, I’m coming,” said Houston impatiently as he started moving lower with a running kind of motion. It looked like he was duck diving through the air, as he went headfirst down the spiral.

Closing the gap towards the sound, an extra stretch of his arms brought Houston into contact with the cocoon. He slipped the fingers of his right hand through the thread. “Gotcha,” he triumphed, bringing his left arm forward for a better grip, and holding on tight.

“Well, you’re not an owl after all, are you?” Houston said as he explored the cocoon with his fingers, feeling for a loose thread.
“Aha!” he exclaimed when he found the thread’s end. “I’m going to open you up now, so be nice,” he said pulling on the thread and winding it up between his left elbow and hand, as he’d been taught to do in weaving at school.

As the cocoon rapidly unspun, the sound became even louder. It was distinctly speaking English words, now, saying, “Houston, HOUSTON!”

Then, as the last of the thread was unwound, the sound was unmistakeably, “Stop!”

“Midnight Jack?!” laughed Houston excitedly, jamming the thread into his pocket. “Is it you?”

“Yes, Houston,” replied Midnight Jack irritably. “Now will you stop me from spinning, please? I’m very dizzy.”

Houston leapt towards his brother and threw his arms around him in a big hug. “There,” he said grinning in the dark. “That should stop you!”

“Yes, well, thanks Houston,” Jack mumbled. “I didn’t think I’d ever get out of that cocoon,” he finished, briefly returning the hug.

Houston and Midnight Jack remained quiet for a few minutes, slowly spiralling downwards with the air-current, looking towards each other, but unable to see in the darkness.

“This is really weird,” said Houston, still holding onto Midnight Jack. “It’s like going down the gurgler.”

“Yes, like Bonjuka’s pulled out a giant plug and is draining us to somewhere,” agreed Midnight Jack.

“Well,” said Houston briskly, “we can’t just wait to be glugged down into some space-sewer. How did you get here, maybe we can get back out that way?”

Midnight Jack didn’t reply, but lifted his shoulders and hung his head, shaking it slowly.

“Midnight Jack,” said Houston sternly, “I can feel you moving, and I’m guessing you shrugged or something. You know I can’t see you in this pitch black. How did you get here?”

“Bonjuka lassoed me, and wrapped me up with the tapestry thread,” confessed Midnight Jack. “I wanted to wipe her out and she caught me! I don’t know where we are. How did you get here?”
“It’s ok, you couldn’t help it. I bet she caught you by surprise,” comforted Houston, patting Midnight Jack’s hand. “I went looking for you at the back of the school hall. When I went to open the door, I was thrown here to Ovidon.”

“I know we are in Ovidon, Houston,” replied Midnight Jack irritably, “but what part are we in?”

“I think we’re in Bottick going down to the basement storeroom,” replied Houston sensibly. “Hona told me about the long spiral staircase that Bonjuka took them down to get their uniforms on their first day at Bottick.”

“Yes, you’re right, Houston!” exclaimed Midnight Jack. “I was battling Bonjuka in her office when she roped me, so we must still be here. Why don’t you get us some fire so that we can see for sure?”

“It doesn’t work, Midnight, I’ve already tried. My waggling didn’t ignite fire, my whooshing didn’t blow air and my sucking didn’t bring objects to me. But it’s ok,” said Houston energetically. “I know what to do. It’s time to get moving!”

With his left hand, Houston gripped Midnight Jack’s right hand tightly and started moving against the flow of the air, heading upstream in an anti-clockwise direction, and bringing his brother with him. Houston’s head was bent forward and his tight curly hair was like a helmet, pushing through the thick air. His muscley little body was leaning left, into the curves of the spiral. His strong legs were kicking, his left arm was behind him pulling Midnight Jack along, and his right arm was pushing forward. Houston was moving quickly, towing Midnight Jack in a kind of lop-sided freestyle, heading skyward.

“Wait, Houston,” shouted Midnight Jack, unable to free his hand from his brother’s determined fist. “What are you doing?!”

“Just keep moving, Midnight!” cried Houston. “We’re creating a whirlpool, just like we do when we’re swimming at home. Come on, you can help me – kick your legs and use your left arm to push – we’ll be doubly strong.”

“Houston, you’ll create a vortex, we’ll be dragged to the centre of this black twisting mess!” panicked Midnight Jack.

“No, Midnight,” panted Houston, quickening his stroke, swimming through the air. “We’ll reverse the flow, we’ll move up, we’ll stick to the edges, and we’ll be flung out wide, free of this ink! Just help me – air’s my thing, remember!?!?”
Midnight Jack didn’t reply, but started to kick his legs and push with his left hand, his right hand clutched firmly by Houston. The brother’s looked like an unbalanced goanna, slithering from side to side, going around in circles, heading north.

“That’s it, Midnight!” encouraged Houston, puffing and starting to sweat. “Keep it up and we’ll be out of here in no time.”
Chapter Twenty Two – It’s all happening at once!

“They should be here by now,” worried Tara.

“Let’s call again,” replied Maggie, taking Tara’s hand. “They might’ve been a bit out of range,” she smiled.

“We’re not using mobile phones, Maggie!” replied Tara in frustration. “They’ve never taken this long before.”

Maggie put her arm around Tara’s shoulders. “They’re strong and resourceful boys, they’ll be fine,” she said. Tara leaned her head against Maggie’s, and sighed.

Abe was pacing in circles around the women, with Noha holding his hand tightly and almost running alongside him to try and keep up. “Why don’t we just go to them?” he asked, stopping suddenly.

“We can’t,” Tara replied tersely, lifting her head. “We’ve tried before, but it only works for the kids. We’re lucky that they can usually hear us. It’s the best we’ve got.”

“Well, call them again,” demanded Abe. “This is crazy!”

Noha put her arm around her father’s waist. “It’s ok, Daddy. They’ll be home soon,” she said reassuringly.

“Hang on,” said Abe. “You could find them, couldn’t you Noha? You’re a child, you could go through the whatever and find them in that place.”

Tara broke away from Maggie’s embrace and walked over to Abe and Noha. “There is no way that we are sending another child into Ovidon tonight!” she said fiercely. “If our boys and Cindia can’t hear us, Noha won’t be able to either. Then where will we all be?”

“Ok, ok,” agreed Abe. “But, we can’t just stand around here wondering where they are. What are we going to do?” he asked frantically.

*****

“Why are we going in circles?” Cindia asked softly in the dark, quiet air, still holding Bonjuka’s cape.

“Really?!” squealed Cindia. “That’s great, Bonjuka, we can finally all enjoy Ovidon together! Is Houston here, too? Let’s run-fly-whatever-we-do in this really strange, blinding-black space so that we can find them quickly. I can’t wait!”

Bonjuka turned to face Cindia through the ink. “It is clear that you suffer from over-excitement, my dear” she stated. “Please remember that I am conducting this exploration. You are merely assisting and will follow my instructions.”

Cindia blushed in the dark. “Sorry, Bonjuka,” she muttered. “It’s just - well, it’s so peculiar here, I thought that if we had some fun it might lighten it up a bit! Get it?!? Ha-ha. Lighten it – ”

“Enough! Please show some restraint, child,” commanded Bonjuka. “You did, however, ask one important question. I am unaware of Houston’s present location, nor, for that matter, do I know the whereabouts of your younger sister, Hona. I believe we must acquaint ourselves with such knowledge.”

Bonjuka turned towards the current and continued to cruise with the flow of the air, spiralling downwards with her cape trailing out behind her, clutched tightly by Cindia.

***

Houston and Midnight Jack were moving at an extraordinary pace, which made the air swirl faster and faster in an anti-clockwise direction. As the brothers were heading higher, the strength of the vortex was tugging at their capes, threatening to pull them down and into the energetic centre.

“Stay - on - the - outside - Midnight” shouted Houston through his exertion.

“Yes - sir - ” spluttered Midnight Jack in return.

“Oh - ha - ha - ha - ” replied Houston between breaths.

“Careful - Houston - you’ll - open - a - black - hole - with - that - sound - !” joked Midnight Jack, while he kicked and pushed through the air as hard as he possibly could.

Houston laughed. “Ok - Midnight - let’s - really - get - this - party - started - !” he replied, squaring his shoulders and doubling his effort in spinning the air. “Woo - hoo - !”

“We have to go home and find the gloop!” said Tara, brightening at her idea. “We know that’s how the children went to Ovidon in the first place. It might help us.”

“Yes! Let’s go!” agreed Maggie. “Abe, is your car close? We’re parked way up the road,” she asked, as they almost ran down the path towards the front gate.

“Car’s right here,” Abe replied, as they entered the car park. “Pile in – seatbelt, Noha,” he finished, just barely waiting for everyone to be buckled in before driving off.
Bonjuka stopped so suddenly that Cindia banged into her, and lost her grip on the cape.

"Ow, Bonjuka!" exclaimed Cindia. "What did you do that for?"

"Hush, child!" replied Bonjuka tensely. "I am assuming you have not yet noticed the change in the air. We are no longer moving."

Cindia stood quietly in the air for a few moments. "Wow, I see what you mean. So, what's happened to our mellow ride down the dark spiral?"

As Cindia finished her question, Bonjuka slammed into her in the opposite direction, sending Cindia tumbling through the air.

"Hey! Watch where you're going!" cried Cindia, her voice becoming faint as she was carried away from Bonjuka.

"Come back here, child," commanded Bonjuka. "We don't have time for your games. My work is being reversed!"

The air was moving again, but anti-clockwise. There was a strong current being driven from below, and it was beginning to move very, very fast.

"I can't find you - " called Cindia, her voice barely audible through the sound of the air whipping rapidly past Bonjuka's ears.

"Really, my dear, you must be more careful," shouted Bonjuka. "I do not have time to find you at the moment. Maintain your safety and I will return. I am BONJUKA!" she cried, plunging downwards.
Chapter Twenty Three – The final battle in Ovidon

The air had taken on such momentum that it had almost become a solid mass cutting through the space above. Houston and Midnight Jack were able to relax in the slip-stream just outside its edge. They were lying on the air with their hands behind their heads, gazing into the nothingness of the dark, recovering their breath after their hard work.

The brothers were quietly, but steadily flying skyward, when a loud word boomed through the dark – BONJUKA!

“This is it, Midnight,” Houston said softly. “She’s back. Let’s go!”

“I’m right with you, Houston!” replied Midnight Jack taking his brother’s hand. They reactivated their lopsided-goanna kicks, pushing the air with such force that it accelerated the spin on the tunnel to a blazing speed. As it reached maximum pitch, colourful jets of gas spurted out the top of the tunnel, and a bright circle of white light broke through the darkness way below.

“Look at that, Midnight!” yelled Houston as he leaned outwards at the edge of the tunnel, firmly gripping Midnight Jack’s hand, so that they looked like a pair of acrobatic water skiers.

“Incredible,” agreed Midnight Jack. “But look at that!” he crowed, pointing to the silhouette of a large mass plummeting down the centre of the tunnel.

Bonjuka was caught in the grip of the vortex core, and was being pulled swiftly towards the bright white light. “I will return! I am BONJUKA!” she boomed as she sped past Houston and Midnight Jack.

The brothers laughed and hi-fived each other’s spare hand.

“Well, I just can’t wait - ” started Houston.

“Quick, Houston, there’s someone else coming!” interrupted Midnight Jack, pointing towards the top of the tunnel, where another silhouetted form was falling quickly through the air. “It’ll be Cindia, I was looking for her at Bottick before Bonjuka captured me.”

“Give me your legs. I’ll hold you from the outside and you’ll have to grab her,” said Houston, moving his hands to Midnight Jack’s ankles, and leaning back into the slipstream as firmly as he could.
Midnight Jack leaned forward into the centre of the air tunnel and his outstretched arms extended like liquorice just in time to wrap them around Cindia as she came hurtling down. “Pull, Houston!” yelled Midnight Jack.

Houston brought his brother and Cindia back towards him, walking his hands over Midnight’s legs and body as if he were made of rope. With a final heave, Midnight Jack and Cindia tumbled out of the pull of the vortex, into the relative calm of the slipstream. Even so, Houston maintained a firm grip on both their hands.

“Oh my goodness, what a tummy-turning-tumble that was,” gushed Cindia. “I’m so glad you two were here to catch me. At least we have some light now so you actually could see me! Have you seen Bonjuka yet? I don’t know where she’s got to - ”

“It’s great to see you too, Cindia, but we have to get going,” hurried Houston. “This air tunnel’s got a mind of its own now, we’d better head on up and out!”

“Houston’s right,” agreed Midnight Jack. “Cindia, you hold onto one of our hands each, Houston’s got this covered.”

“But, what about Bonjuka?” persisted Cindia. “I can’t leave her in this, she might need my help.”

“Bonjuka’s ok, she’ll work it out,” said Midnight Jack evasively.

“Let’s go, people,” cried Houston. “All aboard, we are ready for take-off,” he joked.

Houston and Midnight Jack held Cindia firmly in their hands, and then recommenced kicking and pushing through the slipstream, although this time they headed straight up. Skimming the outside of the air tunnel, the children were on an express flight towards the opening at the top, and within moments they had burst through the rainbow gas onto the roof of the Bottick school hall.

“Now I’ll shut this one down,” said Houston decisively as he formed his mouth into a perfect circle and, with a deep breath, whooshed a powerful hot wind across the surface of the air tunnel. The wind blew out the rainbow jets of gas and the tunnel instantly closed.

An enormous noise echoed through the night, as the Bottick roof re-formed, and something deep in the building slammed.
Chapter Twenty Four – The children are called home – again!

Tara raced down the hallway of the house to look for the gloop tin in Jack’s bedroom. “Come on, Jack, where have you buried it - ?” she muttered as she turned over piles of clothes and books, and rummaged through his drawers – “Aha!” she exclaimed, finding the tin on the bookshelf, hidden in plain sight! It was a beautiful tin with white flowers and red roses on it, even if they were a bit faded.

Tara emerged from the bedroom to hear raised voices, and she quickened her step up the hall, almost bumping into Serenity who was standing at the entrance to the kitchen, her hands on her hips.

“Hello, Serenity,” said Tara carefully. “It’s good you are here.”

“Tell that to my lone-ranger husband,” Serenity replied loudly, her face reddening as she glared at Abe.

“I didn’t tell you about India earlier because this was what I expected!” Abe shouted back. “We are doing everything we can,” he finished more softly.

“Abe, you ring me to say my daughter has gone missing - ” Serenity seethed, moving into the kitchen slowly “ - and then expect me to believe this ridiculous story about some game they’ve been playing, and then you expect me think everything will be ok?! Just what planet are you actually on?”

Maggie crossed the room to Serenity, “Now Serenity, I know this is hard to grasp, but – ”

Serenity took a step back and put her hand up towards Maggie. “No, don’t start with the platitudes, Maggie. We have rules in our house, and number one rule is that the children will be where they say they will be!” Serenity exploded. “Just make sure you find my daughter,” she continued as she stormed out of the house, pulling Noha along by the hand.

“Daddy - ” called Noha with tears in her eyes.

“It’s ok princess, I’ll see you soon,” Abe called after her.

Tara went over to Abe, put her arm around his shoulder and steered him to a seat. “It’ll be ok. I’ve found the tin - we’ll find the children,” she promised, putting the tin on the kitchen table. “I’ll make us a cuppa while you and Maggie have a look.”

Maggie sat down next to Abe and opened the tin. “Well, it’s just as I remember it. A pile of multi-coloured gloop in an old Willow tin,” she reflected.
“That’s it?” said Abe, disbelievingly. “This is the missing link?” he asked stretching the gloop and releasing it so that it sprung back like an elastic band.

Tara laughed. “It’s more powerful than it looks, Abel!” she said, putting out cups of tea for them all, and sitting down. “I’d like to look at the tin more closely,” she said, scooping out the gloop and putting it on a saucer.

Tara turned the tin upside down. “Nothing here, just the brand ‘Willow’,,” she reported, turning the tin around to look at the back. “Ah,” she breathed, “here’s something. Maggie, do we still have a magnifying glass in the study?”

“Sure, I’ll get it,” offered Maggie, getting up from the table and returning a few moments later.

“Look at this,” said Tara. “There’s a tiny inscription on the back of the tin. It’s scratched in very uneven writing, and says ‘Soobinackas by BK’,” she continued. “What on earth could that mean?”

Abe suddenly stood up. “Of course!” he exclaimed. “It must be that woman in the story you told me, what was her name, it was a ‘B’ name, wasn’t it!?!?”

Maggie stood up as well, and clapped Abe on the back. “Yep, you got it,” she agreed. “It must be Bonjuka that the children have told us about.”

“So what’s the ‘K’, then?” asked Tara, putting the gloop back in the tin. “The ‘BK’ might stand for Bonnie Kuja, the Headmistress of Bottick,” she mused.

“Whichever it is,” said Maggie with a no-nonsense tone, “it’s not going to help us to bring our children home. I think we should try calling them again.”

“Yes,” agreed Abe and Tara at the same time.

“Abe, now that you’ve touched the gloop, you might join us, it should work for your voice, too,” offered Tara. “We can take a child’s name each. Maggie, you take Jack, I’ll take Hugh and Abe, you take India. On three - ”

The three adults held hands for luck, and yelled each child’s name at the top of their voices, then said together “ - come home NOW!”
Chapter Twenty Five – The children leave Ovidon

“Did you hear that?!” the three children said at the same time. Then they all said “jinx!” at the same time, and laughed.

“We’re seriously being summoned this time,” said Midnight Jack, floating down off the Bottick roof. “I heard at least three very loud voices.”

“Hang on,” said Houston, flying along beside his brother. “There should only be two voices.”

“I know what you mean,” said Cindia, landing on the ground next to them both. “The extra voice was my Dad. I’m sure of it.”

“That’s really odd,” said Midnight Jack, moving towards the door of the Bottick school hall. “And a bit ominous, I mean, why would your Dad know about Ovidon?”

“Maybe we’ve been gone for ages,” speculated Houston, putting his fingers on the door handle with Midnight Jack’s. “I don’t think we could have heard anything in that air tunnel.”

“That wasn’t an air tunnel,” said Cindia, putting her hand on top of Houston’s. “It was - ”

The rest of her words were whipped through the ether, along with the children, until they clattered into the boys’ kitchen like mis-matched cutlery, and fell into the embraces of their relieved parents.

****

“A black hole!?!?” the adults all echoed from their seats around the table, when India finished her story of going to Ovidon.

“We’re lucky to be here,” said Jack. “If Hugh hadn’t been such a muscley little thing - ”

“Hey!” said Hugh. “You’re not so delicate yourself, Jack.”

Jack laughed. “It was a compliment, little brother! You really saved the day, or the night, or whatever it was in that dark, endless space!” he said, playfully punching Hugh on the shoulder.

“Oh - ok,” smiled Hugh. “It was pretty good fun though, don’t you think?” he asked, turning to the adults at the table. “What I really liked was - ” he continued, launching into a long story about his favourite parts of the adventure.
“Here we go,” Jack whispered to Tara. “Another ‘Hugh’s Highlights’ session. This could go on for ages. Can India and I go into my room for a while, please?”

“Yes, that’ll be ok, but not for too long, Jack,” replied Tara softly. “Abe phoned Serenity to let her know that India’s back. She’s on her way over, and I expect that she’ll take India home.”

Jack motioned for India to follow him. They excused themselves, left the table and went down the hall to Jack’s bedroom.

“I’m really worried about Bonjuka, I mean Mrs Kuja,” said India, sitting on the bed when they closed the door. “I mean, we left her behind in a black hole, and she was really nice to me,” she finished with tears brimming in her eyes.

Jack sat down next to her. “Look, she’s gone, India. We saw her sucked into the bright white light at the end of the tunnel. We couldn’t let her keep going; she would’ve destroyed Zaranden and taken over everything.”

“No, Jack. You didn’t talk to her!” said India, standing up and walking to the window. “She’s not that bad. She’s just by herself all the time and Ovidon makes her powers a bit, well, over-powering, if you know what I mean.”

There was a knock before Jack could answer, and India turned to look at the door as it opened. It was Serenity, who popped her head around the door first, then entered.

“Speaking of over-powering,” India mumbled under her breath. “Hi Mum, what brings you here?” she said out loud.

“Come here, India,” said Serenity softly, holding her arms out to her daughter. India ran across the room and buried her face in her mother’s hair, wrapping her arms around her back. Serenity held her daughter tightly, then sat down on the bed with her. “Tell me what’s been happening,” she said.

Jack excused himself and went out of the room, back to the kitchen, where he asked Tara for some of her famous popcorn. “There’s lots of story-telling going on here tonight,” he explained. “I think we need some sustenance!”

Tara smiled. “Popcorn it is, then!”
Chapter Twenty Six – Jack and India make a discovery

After everyone had left, and the family had finally fallen asleep, the phone rang in the silent house, waking Jack with such a start that he was shaking as he ran up the hall to answer it. “Hello,” he said, muffling his voice with his hand to keep it as soft as possible.

“It’s me, Jack, I need your help,” whispered India fervently.

“India, it’s the middle of the night! What’s wrong?” he asked irritably.

“It’s Bonjuka, or Mrs Kuja, I don’t know which,” India rambled. “But I keep thinking about that huge slamming noise that came from somewhere in Bottick when Houston closed the black hole,” she said.

“It could have been anything, India,” said Jack as quietly as possible in frustration. “We did close a black-hole, I mean, that’s going to make some noise!”

“Come on, Jack,” India pleaded. “I’ve got a really strong feeling that Mrs Kuja needs our help. Please?”

“Ok India,” sighed Jack. “I’ve already told you that she’s gone. But if it’ll help you to see for yourself, I’ll meet you at the end of your street in fifteen minutes. We’ll go on our bikes, ok? Don’t bring Noha, I won’t bring Hugh.”

Jack hung up the phone and went into the kitchen to leave a note for his parents. He crept back to his own room, picked up the gloop tin and snuck into Hugh’s room. Checking that Hugh was fast asleep, Jack put the tin on Hugh’s bookshelf. “Just in case,” he whispered.

Jack returned to his room, changed out of his pyjamas and was out the door, on his bike and at the end of India’s street well before fifteen minutes had passed.

“Thanks, Jack,” said India when she joined him.

“Did you leave your parents a note?” Jack replied.

“Yes Mr Responsible, I did,” said India, as the children started to ride off. “Even I’ve had enough drama from my parents for one day,” she continued. “Did your parents tell you that Mum wants Mrs Kuja to be sacked. ‘That monster is not safe to be in charge of children’,“ India said, mimicking her mother.

“My parents agree, but no one has to worry – she’s gone anyway,” he said.

“I’m not so sure about that,” pondered India, steadily cycling.
The children rode alongside each other without any more conversation, until they reached the end of the long driveway up to the Bottick building.

As they put their bikes against the wall, Jack asked, “What’s the plan?”

“Just follow me, I know where to look for her,” replied India, walking towards the Bottick school hall.

“India, the black hole didn’t leave anything behind in the hall! I think this is a bit silly,” said Jack, as they reached the far side of the building.

“Sh, Jack,” whispered India. “We don’t know who’s around,” she said, as she found a door and went to turn the handle.

“Wait!” cautioned Jack. “Last time I touched a door here, I landed in Ovidon. I don’t think we should go back again, our parents would - well I don’t know what they’d do, but it wouldn’t be good.”

“Ok, ok,” India soothed. “I’ll just try this first - ” she said, pushing against the middle of the door, which opened with a groan of its hinges. “There we go, no handles!”

“Ok, but why is the door open, India? Don’t you think that’s strange?”

India stepped onto the tiny landing at the top of a very steep and dark spiral staircase. “I’ve been telling you, I think that Mrs Kuja’s here. She must have forgotten to bolt the door. This is where she took me and Noha to get our school uniforms,” explained India quietly. “You get a bit dizzy going down, but it should be ok.”

“Did you bring a torch or something?” asked Jack, moving into the small landing as India started her descent on the stairs.

“Way ahead of you, Jack,” smiled India, bringing her mobile phone out of her pocket and turning on the light. It lit up a narrow area, only reaching as far as one step in front of India. “It’s not the biggest and the best, but Mum gave it back to me tonight and it’s charged. It’ll do the trick – stay close.”

Jack put his hand on India’s shoulder and they walked softly down and around, down and around the stairs until they emerged in a room with sandstone walls and corridors leading off into other places.

“I think the bright white light at the end of the black-hole ended down here,” said India softly in Jack’s ear.
“Even if it did, India, it wouldn’t have left anything or anyone behind,” replied Jack, equally softly. “India, I don’t want you to be upset, but – ”

“I know you think she’s gone, Jack,” said India. “But I have a feeling that she’s here somewhere. Are you coming or not?” she asked, starting to walk up one of the corridors.

“Yes, ok, India, just stay close with that light, it’s pitch down here!” said Jack, quickening his pace to catch up to her. “Are we actually moving?” he asked. “It seems like that tiny light keeps showing me the same shelf with the same neat stack of boxes.”

“There’s just a lot of them,” said India dismissively. “Come on, Jack, we’ve got heaps of rooms to check.”

The children’s sports shoes were quiet on the slate floors, only occasionally making a rubbery squeaking sound as they made their way from one door to another on the sides of the long corridors. Every door that the children pushed was locked. Neither of them touched a door handle, however, the bolts across the door frame were clearly padlocked.

“This is impossible,” whispered Jack. “We’re just walking and walking and nothing’s open.”

“I just need to find the right corridor. They all look the same, but she must be here somewhere - ” India insisted, walking more quickly towards the next alcove with a door. “It moved!” she exclaimed when she pushed against it.

“Let’s take this easy, now,” said Jack, moving to stand next to India. “We’ll do this together. You shine the light and I’ll push the door wide open, but we’ll both be standing slightly to the side, ok?”

“You watch too many movies, Jack,” laughed India. “We can just go in,” she said, pushing the door open and walking through with the light in her hand.

“Hello?” called India. “Are you there Mrs Kuja? It’s me, India,” she said, shining the light around the room, but only lighting up a puddle on the floor under their feet as they moved.

“There’s no one here, India,” said Jack. “But it looks like someone has been here,” he observed, pointing to some boxes on the floor with their lids removed. The
torch showed that there were empty spaces on the shelves at waist height, where the boxes should have been.

“Find a proper light, Jack, we’ve got to work out what’s missing, and who’s been here,” India said excitedly, kneeling on the floor next to the boxes, shining her light into them. “This one says, ‘Bonnie Kuja dolls’ – wow, Mrs Kuja told me about these, but the box is empty.”

Jack groped along the closest wall, but couldn’t find a light switch. He took a step forward to try the other wall, and walked into something which brushed against his forehead. “Yuk!” he yelled. “India, quick, shine the light over here!”

India did so and started laughing. “It’s the cord to turn the light on, Jack! You just have to pull it,” she told him.

“That was horrible, I thought it was a spider’s web,” he said as he turned the light on. “Well, that’s better we can actually -”

“Jack? What’s wrong, you’ve gone pale,” said India, turning her head to see what had caught Jack’s attention.

The far right hand corner of the room was lit up and sitting on a comfortable old recliner, next to a table covered with tapestry threads, was Mrs Kuja. On the other side of the chair there was a tapestry frame, with three quarters of a tapestry completed.

India sprang off the floor and ran to her teacher. “I knew it! I knew you would be here!” she cried delightedly, standing in front of Mrs Kuja, bouncing up and down, clapping her hands. “How did you get out of the black hole, what was it like to go through that really bright white light, tell me everything – wow, I can’t believe you made it here - well, of course I can believe it, that’s why I came looking for you! but – I mean – wow! I’m so glad to see you, I -”

“India,” interrupted Jack, coming over to stand next to her and putting his hand on her shoulder. “You’d better stop. Have a closer look - she’s not moving,” he said gently.

“What?” asked India, turning to look at Jack and dropping her hands by her side. “What are you talking about?” India turned back to face her teacher. “Mrs Kuja, what does he mean?” she asked.
Mrs Kuja was staring straight ahead, not responding to anything that India or Jack were saying or doing. She looked a bit younger than she had earlier in the day, and was dressed in a navy blue skirt-suit with her hands folded neatly in her lap. Her left ankle was crossed over her right, and her polished shoes enclosed her flesh-coloured stockings.

“Mrs Kuja?” prompted India, stretching out her hand to her teacher’s face. It went straight through Mrs Kuja’s head to touch the seat, and India snatched her hand back to her chest. “Oooo, gross - what was that?!” she cried.

“India, come and stand here, I think I know what’s going on,” Jack instructed, guiding India to a point about 3 steps directly in front of her teacher’s chair.

Jack walked over to the lamp which was set up for the tapestry frame, but was facing Mrs Kuja. “You see, the lamp’s facing the wrong way. I think if I just do this - ” he said, as he bent down and turned the lamp on.

“Greetings child,” Mrs Kuja said, moving forward in her chair. “Clearly you have taken the trouble to find me, and I thank you for that.”

“Ahhh!” squealed India, jumping backwards and falling over one of the open boxes. She sat up, but remained on the floor, her hands covering her mouth, as Mrs Kuja continued speaking. Jack went and sat next to India, putting his hand on her back for comfort. “It’s a Hologram,” he whispered.

“I intend to be brief, so please pay careful attention,” Mrs Kuja went on. “The fact that you are here, listening to me now, is evidence that I am no longer available to be the Headmistress of Bottick. I am also unable, at the present moment, to enter Ovidon. I wish to commend you on your courage and determination.”

India looked at Jack. “Sounds like she knew it would be us who found her!”

Jack shrugged.

Mrs Kuja continued, “I counsel you to be true to yourself, consider your family and friends, and remember who is important to you. Farewell, my dear.”

Mrs Kuja fell silent and stopped moving, settling back into her original position, her hands folded neatly on her lap.

“Does that mean she’s dead, Jack?” trembled India, with tears rolling down her cheek.
“I don’t know what it means,” replied Jack, giving India a hug, and helping her to stand up. “But she’s definitely gone.”

THE END
But wait, there’s more...the last words go to:

India

Let me tell you - it’s just not the same at Bottick without Mrs Kuja, and of course, there are plenty of students, and even more parents, who think that’s a good thing! Well, that’s their opinion, and everyone’s entitled, I guess.

I don’t get to go to Mrs Kuja’s office any more, or her house, because the new Headmistress has taken it all over – of course - but sometimes I peer in the window to look at the tapestries. I think about the fun times with Bonjuka in Ovidon and the long talks with Mrs Kuja in Bottick. This all sounds kinda sappy, but – well, anyway -

Every now and then I go back to that room in the basement and play the hologram – I keep wondering if I’ve missed a clue about how to talk to Mrs Kuja, or how to find Bonjuka. I’ve even tried the ‘Soobinackas’ trick, but it doesn’t work for me.

Here’s something you wouldn’t believe - I went exploring behind the shelves in the basement room and there was another door in the wall - well, ok, you’d believe that! But here’s the thing - I opened the door – of course – and wow! It’s like Mrs Kuja re-created her Mama’s sunroom - the room is full of little Bonnie Kuja and Mama Kuja’s inventions! Now, if only I knew how to use them -

My last bit of news is that I’m the Bottick School Captain, and I make a very good one, even if I do say so myself! I’m in charge and the students have to listen to me. It’s like being Cleopatra every day - you can imagine how much fun I have with that! And - I’ve persuaded the new Headmistress that a School Captain does work with very, very fair hair!

Noha

My Mummy and Daddy say that Bottick is the best school for our family, and my brothers are all going to come here too, when they’re old enough.

India’s much nicer to Daddy, these days. Her own Daddy isn’t around much, and she doesn’t mind. She says ‘Abe’s the best,’ which is a pretty big deal.

My Mummy likes the way that everything at Bottick’s the same, you know, the uniform and hair and all that – ‘it’s good for the spirit’ she says, whatever that means. Lucky for me I already have brown hair.
I'm really glad that Mrs Thistlethwaite is the Bottick Headmistress now. She’s started up a gymnastics program because she used to love it and I’m so good at it. She helps me with my practice a lot, so we have lots of chats.

She even told me that Mrs Kuja is her big sister, but she made me promise not to tell anyone. I’ve only told Hugh and he thinks it’s creepy. Well, I guess he’s right, I mean, who knows what Mrs Thistlethwaite can do?

Just in case, Hugh gave me the tapestry thread that he unwound from Midnight Jack in the black hole. He found it in his pocket when he was putting his pants in the wash. It’s kind of a souvenir because I didn’t go to Ovidon with them all that night.

But Hugh also says that it might come in handy for me, you never know. I’ve got it carefully wound up in my old tin where I keep all my special things. It’s rainbow pretty and really strong.

**Midnight Jack and Houston**

“Ah, this is the life,” said Houston as he and his brother were reclining on the funnel of slow-moving waterspouts, cruising across the sparkling blue ocean.

“Hmm mmm, the perfect massage,” agreed Midnight Jack, folding his arms under his head, with his eyes closed under the endless sapphire sky. “It’s a shame we promised Tara and Mum that this’d be our last play-time in Ovidon.”

Houston rolled over onto his tummy, pillowing his head on his arms. “Yes, but at least they let us out to celebrate after your fantastic performance last night, Sir Caesar!” he smiled, cheekily.

“Come on Houston, get it right. Caesar’s not a ‘sir’!” Midnight Jack said playfully, sitting more upright. “How great was it, though, that Melissa finally agreed we could put on our Excellence Extravaganza, complete with India!”

“The best bit was having both schools at Bottick for all the inside stuff,” said Houston, moving onto his side, propping his head up on his bent arm and looking at his brother.
“Sure - but my favourite was the procession to Zaranden, and singing with the drums circling the rock for the finale,” reflected Midnight Jack, sitting fully upright, gazing at the horizon, then winking at his brother. “You up to it?” he challenged.

Houston sat up straight. “Ok,” he chuckled. “Let's get ready - ”

Houston formed his mouth into a perfect circle and blew down the inside wall of his waterspout, increasing the width of the column and the speed of the spin.

Midnight Jack’s arm stretched across the breadth of his waterspout’s rim, and he swirled his finger along the rim in circles, as if he was playing a tune on the lip of a crystal glass. His waterspout widened and spun faster.

The brothers balanced themselves on the brim of their spouts and together called – “One, two, three - ”

Midnight Jack and Houston careened down, around and around, inside the giant watery slippery-dip, laughing loudly and singing the chorus from the night’s performance, over and over, at the top of their voices:

“It’s something unpredictable but in the end is right
I hope you had the time of your life.”
Lesbian Families in Children’s Literature

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Master of Creative Arts – Research

from

University of Wollongong

by

Vivien Tait, BA (Communications)

Faculty of Creative Arts
University of Wollongong

2009
Certification

I, Vivien Tait, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Creative Arts - Research, in the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged.

The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Vivien Tait
28 August 2009
Table of Contents

Abbreviations / Definitions ............................................................................................................ 4
Abstract........................................................................................................................................ 5
Acknowledgements...................................................................................................................... 6
1 My Creative Work..................................................................................................................... 7
2 Me and my Research .............................................................................................................. 8
3 Talking about lesbian families............................................................................................... 9
4 …within a context.................................................................................................................... 10
5 The taboo................................................................................................................................. 11
6 …the inappropriate.................................................................................................................. 12
7 …and the diversity.................................................................................................................. 12
8 The impact............................................................................................................................... 15
9 …the knowledge..................................................................................................................... 17
10 …and the stories.................................................................................................................... 19
11 The selection.......................................................................................................................... 20
12 …the availability..................................................................................................................... 21
13 …and the seekers................................................................................................................... 24
14 Next steps............................................................................................................................... 24
Appendix A: Annotated Bibliography – Research Sources ......................................................... 31
Appendix B: Research Survey, methods, results and reflections ................................................. 49
Appendix C: Lesbian families; who are we and where do we fit? .............................................. 106
Abbreviations / Definitions

ABS  Australian Bureau of Statistics
CALD  Culturally And Linguistically Diverse
Gay families  Families headed by gay male parents
GLBTQ  Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer
        (interchangeable with LGBTQ – authors tend to have a favourite form)
Heterosexist  The belief that heterosexuality is superior, ‘normal’ and dominant
Homophobia  Prejudice, fear or dislike of LGBTQ people and practice
Homopositive  Text, attitudes and perceptions which are open and inclusive of people who are LGBTQ
Homosexual families  Families headed by parents who may be LGBTQ
Lesbian families  Families headed by lesbian parents
LGA  Local Government Area
LGBTQ  Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer
        (interchangeable with GLBTQ)
Same-sex families  Families headed by parents who may be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer
Straight families  Families headed by heterosexual parents
Abstract

This research gathered and analysed the opinions of Parents, Booksellers, Primary School Librarians and Public Children’s Librarians in the lives of children aged 9-12 about ‘why or why not’ children should have access to literature showing lesbian-parented families and/or other diverse family types.

This informed conclusions about what might happen for children aged 9-12 if they can read stories showing lesbian-parented or other diverse families, and what might happen if they cannot read stories like this; whether they live within lesbian-parented/diverse families, or not.

This qualitative work sits somewhere between Action Research and an Ethnographic study, and is informed by my lived experience, as well as by literature and other primary source material such as media debate, weblogs and Surveys/Interviews with relevant adults.

Acknowledging that adult decisions have a direct impact on children’s access to different themes in fiction, this study poses questions and aims to start conversations which may: assist the adult decision-making community to enter into discussion about children’s access to concepts of family diversity in the stories they read; and open pathways for children to have increased access to these themes in literature; which would potentially decrease discrimination and help children better understand diversity in families.
Acknowledgements

Writing the novel ‘Midnight Jack and Houston’ has been a journey of love, filled with joy. I shared this with my children, who are great inventors of magic and inspiration, and who are astute, emotionally intelligent and completely sensible. They keep me grounded. Thank you my beautiful boys, Shannon and Zeke.

The research which naturally emerged from the novel has been engaging, fascinating, revealing and fantastic fun! The people who have participated have been generous, curious, enthusiastic and so helpful. I strongly appreciate that all the participants; most of whom live busy, overwhelming and complicated lives, managed to find the time and interest to lend me their thoughts. Thank you.

The University of Wollongong takes pride of place in the supportive-learning-environment stakes – from my direct Supervisor, to the wonderful Olena and her knowledge, and the Heads of Post-Graduate studies. In the midst of my own challenges and busy-ness over the six years of this journey, my Supervisor, Alan Wearne, has walked alongside me, gone into bat for me and given me time to breathe when the world crashed in. You are a star, thank you.

My family and my friends, and those of my work colleagues who have grown into this group, those who have listened to my broken record, those who are in my own ‘circle of love’, those who are with me on this stage of my journey, and those who are now absent – how grateful I am to have you in my life, and to be in yours. Thank you.
1 My Creative Work

“What’s that you’re playing?” I asked my, then, 11 and 8 year old children.
“Midnight Jack and Houston,” replied my oldest son, jumping off the lounge.
“Yeah, we’re superheroes,” declared my youngest son, spinning in a circle, his right arm pointing at something on the ceiling.
“That sounds fantastic,” I laughed. “Tell me more about it.”

The boys talked excitedly over each other, starting a conversation with me that would last 6 years in the writing of ‘Midnight Jack and Houston’.

Though this story is firmly rooted in our lived experience, and is peppered with our family anecdotes and expressions, it is definitely a work of fiction and has benefitted from the wonderful imaginations of my talented children, who really know how to play!

My sons chose their grandparents’ names for the Midnight Jack/Jack and Houston/Hugh characters, demonstrating the importance of their family connections, even in their creative play.

In other mirrors of their lives, the male lead characters have two mothers (lesbian parents), the children are in Year 6 (Jack) and Year 3 (Hugh), and they attend an alternative school, Zaranden.

Moving into the fiction, the characters Jack and Hugh discover an entry to another world, Ovidon, where they become Midnight Jack and Houston. In this world, Midnight Jack has the ability to use the powers of the earth and water and Houston uses air and fire. Neither character is actually a superhero, but is able to interact with their respective elements when they are in Ovidon.

The boys have two good friends; India (Year 6) and Noha (Year 3), who later emerge as Cindia and Hona, respectively, in Ovidon.
The children’s nemesis is the Principal of the mainstream school (Bottick); Mrs Bonnie Kuja. The Principal also has access to the other world, Ovidon, where she transforms to become Bonjuka.

Bonjuka wants to destroy Zaranden and have all the children come to Bottick, and she makes some progress in influencing Cindia to help her towards fulfilling this aim.

Midnight Jack and Houston, later supported by Cindia and Noha, strive to save their school. All the children work towards conquering Bonjuka and bringing harmony to the two schools.

2 Me and my Research
This Research sits somewhere between Action Research and an Ethnographic study, and is informed by my lived experience. As members of a lesbian family, my children and I are positioned firmly in the centre of the Research; in the development of the questioning, information gathering and analysis. Thus, my own reflections and insights have helped to shape and interpret the Research.

Arising out of the themes in the Creative Work, this Research is primarily concerned with knowing more about the availability and impact of children’s fiction for 9-12 year olds in which lesbian-parented families are depicted. I have partially achieved this by examining Literature and Data. The sources that I have cited follow this Report. This list is expanded upon in the attached Annotated Bibliography at Appendix A.

I also used a Research Survey which was distributed to four categories of adults: Parents/Carers; Booksellers; Primary School Librarians; and Children’s Librarians in Public Libraries. These adults were selected as being key stakeholders in the lives of children aged 9-12 years, in order to gather and analyse their opinions about ‘why or why not’ children should have access to literature showing lesbian-parented families and/or other diverse family types.
The Research Survey results have informed conclusions about what might happen for children aged 9-12 if they can read stories showing lesbian-parented or other diverse families, and what might happen if they cannot read stories like this; whether they live within lesbian-parented/diverse families, or not. The Research Survey, methods, results and reflections is detailed in Appendix B.

3 Talking about lesbian families...

Much of the available data, information and literature regarding this fiction has bracketed lesbian-parented families with gay male-parented families, or issues surrounding both, and use the term 'lesbian/gay-parented families', which I find unwieldy.

As my interest is in lesbian-parented families, I will primarily use the term ‘lesbian families’ throughout this Report. For me, this term makes reference to the parents who are lesbian, but also to the culture or ethos within the family unit, which influences and informs the course of the lives of both the children and the adults.

However, where I am making reference to gay male-parented families, bisexual parents, transgender parents, queer-parented families, or other family structures, I will use the specific terms.

In conducting the Survey, it was clear that there is no shared, agreed way of talking about lesbian families – particularly when respondents were making comparisons between lesbian families and families headed up by heterosexual parents. They frequently referred to the latter family structure as ‘normal’, which naturally leads to the positioning of lesbian families as ‘abnormal’ or outside normal. This referencing was used equally by respondents who were from lesbian families and those who were not.
The language we use, and the ways in which lesbian families are incorporated in our general interactions as members of shared communities, is not the primary subject of this research. However, it was a theme that emerged during my study and one that was central to much of the literature that I read.

Whilst it is not essential in the context of this Report, it can be helpful to consider these issues in order to better understand the life experiences of lesbian families. It may also inform thinking around the importance of children’s literature depicting lesbian families. To this end, I have attached the outcome of my reading, my discussion and reflections at Appendix C: Lesbian Families; who are we and where do we fit?

4 …within a context.

A respondent from each category emphasised that it is essential to consider the context of the issues before making a decision about whether a topic might be taboo or inappropriate, or neither, in children’s fiction.

Parents outlined that they would discuss the nature of the book or topic with their children, and/or they would read it first, to ensure it was appropriate. The views of public librarians are discussed later in this report in relation to the closely related issue of censorship. Booksellers explained that they respond to the needs of their customers, and so will stock a range of fiction if it is available and relevant. However, one bookseller stated that “if [the books] weren't selling I would not continue to stock them. Pure economics.”

Schools, on the other hand, face a range of restrictions or guidelines which shape their decision making, such as the aims or ethics of the school:

- We are a Catholic school and this goes against our school values, so the majority of parents would be horrified that we might present this type of fiction in our library.

Other schools contextualised their reluctance to provide fiction showing lesbian families as being responsive to the school parent population. They explained that there may be high numbers of families within religious communities, or from
a range of cultural backgrounds. They stated that they would expect a “huge backlash” and “complaints” if they stocked or read these stories to children in the school.

Another school believed that it was difficult to stock fiction which had “controversial” themes, which is how lesbian families were perceived in this instance. Their suggestion was that:

Public libraries can take up the challenge as they have a broader mission statement than we do for controversial subjects. Parents who wish for their children to read stories [with lesbian parents] could then borrow from there to get their message home. The public can request certain books to be purchased through the public library so their selection process can fall on that criteria too.

In their choice to avoid ‘controversial’ themes, this school explained:

…it’s in everybody’s interests to have a calm and non hostile environment in our school. In primary school students are young and don’t need controversy in their curriculum, and their subjects do not lend themselves to the [depiction of lesbian families] as part of their core units of study.

It is easy to see how foreign this environment could feel to children in lesbian families, which is significant because they are at school for at least six hours a day, Monday to Friday, thirty nine weeks of the year. For a total of 1,170 hours of their lives every year these children primarily encounter an environment where their very family structure is considered to be so different that people would be “horrified”, and teachers could expect “a huge backlash”, should it be discussed. This position leads some teachers to choose not to buy the books in the first place, in order to ensure that they have a “non hostile” environment.

The question would be: non hostile to whom?

5 The taboo…

Taking the comments, above, into consideration, it is important to note that only one respondent identified “gay and lesbian issues” as being taboo, which was equal to “cultural related cruelty” and “criminal behaviour” at 1% each.
Much more significant, according to the results, is the belief that violence is taboo (27%), which was mentioned in many forms, from animal cruelty through to mutilation, torture and murder. Other suggestions include: sexual themes (17%), which ranged from images of young people kissing through to eroticism, sado-masochism and 'explicit extremes'; and negative or bad language and swearing (8%). Incest, rape, racism and scary concepts or images were also mentioned in this context.

6 ...the inappropriate...

This elicited similar responses, with 23% citing violence as the most inappropriate topic, followed by 19% suggesting sexual themes. Racism and Drugs and Alcohol themes (8%) were equal, with an explanatory position that these themes may prove to be too sophisticated for children at this age. Other topics included supernatural themes, self-harm, incest and suicidal thoughts/actions. One parent suggested “religious beliefs” and a school stated that “irregular family situations” are inappropriate topics for children this age.

Clearly schools are obliged to ensure their collections are appropriate within the context of their policies and school or community populations. These policy-driven and socially-imposed restrictions are noticed by Ford (1998, p130):

Paradoxical though it may seem, disease and death – even death caused by AIDS – are safer territory for authors of children’s fiction than the theme of lesbian love and commitment...

At the same time, the Survey results demonstrate that, overwhelming, the individual respondents did not consider depiction of lesbian families in fiction to be taboo or even inappropriate for 9-12 year olds.

7 ...and the diversity.

The inherent restrictions in many school policies and guidelines speak to the challenges that children in lesbian families may face. Much of the literature addressing the needs of these children in both the home and the school
environment stresses the importance of children being able to recognise themselves in the stories they read.

In ‘Diversity Breeds Controversy’ op de Beeck (2005) interviewed publishers, a bookseller, and an author – all of whom believed that it is essential that children have access to books that depict lesbian parents. Bubon’s comment (cited in op de Beeck 2005) summarises these views:

> What I think is so wanted is books that are are about other stuff, and just happen to show a kid who has two moms so you’re not addressing it as the issue.

Within my own context of the Creative Work, and the information provided as background to the Survey, I made it clear that ‘Midnight Jack and Houston’ is just that, a story in which two of the characters just happen to have two mums.

This position is also supported by Survey respondents, who believe that it is important that all children have access to stories that reflect their lives, as noted by one school:

> Of course, some children need to have particular families depicted in fiction and I’d try to make sure they did.

Showing diverse family structures in fiction has historically become important in the context of children who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, who may have a variety of skin colours, whose families speak languages other than English at home, who may have a variety of cultural backgrounds, who may have a someone with a disability in their family, and so on. Anti-bias in curriculum, with an emphasis on early intervention in the provision of information about family diversity, has developed in order to respect the needs of these families, and to acknowledge their life experiences. As stated by Bluemli (2009):

> …there are plenty of wonderful books to be read. But that’s not the same thing as also being able to see yourself in the pages and pictures of a book. Gay is the new Black.

Even so, there is still a clear reluctance for the tried and true education strategies around family diversity to be adapted to, and stretched to include,
children in lesbian families. Proving an example of a failed attempt to address
this issue with the ‘Children of the Rainbow: First Grade’ curriculum that was
developed in New York City in 1991, and discontinued by 1993, Casper and
Schultz (1990, pp 20) explain that all references to ‘gay-headed families’ were
removed in response to strong sentiments from senior public figures, including
those from the:

Community School Board 24 president, Mary A. Cummins… [who] was quoted as saying, “I
will not demean our legitimate minorities, such as blacks, Hispanics and Asians, by lumping
them together with homosexuals in that curriculum” (Myers, 1992, p.134)

Respondents in my research were asked about how important it was to depict
family diversity in fiction, using a scale that went from ‘very important’ to ‘very
unimportant’ against a range of family structures. 91% of responses saw the full
range of family structures as being ‘important’ (31%) to ‘very important’ (60%).
Interestingly, all of the family structures, including lesbian and gay parents, were
given close to equal weighting in these categories, receiving a very similar
number of responses.

Only 5% of responses were in the ‘unimportant’ (2%) to ‘very unimportant’ (3%)
range, with a different weighting outcome from the responses. The only family
structures selected in the ‘very unimportant’ category were gay male, lesbian
and unmarried parents, with the addition of parents with a mental illness,
communal households and heterosexual parents in the ‘unimportant’ category.

One school noted that the presence of fiction showing diverse family structures
could be helpful in combating bullying, and assisting with children’s better
understanding of their peers, particularly because:

…children in this community have learned not to say things about each others families -
there is a high level of difference. If children are bullying others, we try to see what their
needs are and respond to those.

Respondents also suggested additional family structures to include in children’s
fiction, which were: Transgender People, Gay and Lesbian Aunties, Uncles and
Grandparents (Leichhardt bookseller); Mixed-race families (Campbelltown
librarian); Adoptive and Foster Parents (parent); Donor offspring (parent); and Parents who use Drugs and Alcohol or are in Prison (Campbelltown school). All of these suggestions arose out of specific contextual needs. For example, the Campbelltown school explained that many children recounted these life experiences at ‘news time’ on Monday mornings.

Ray and Gregory (2001, p31) found that children in lesbian families did not feel as comfortable discussing their life experiences in this way, either at ‘news time’ or other times:

…90 per cent of children in Prep to Grade 2 had openly told people at school about their parents’ sexuality. However, in Grades 3 to 6, [aged between 8 and 12 years] 39 per cent of children in the study had kept the sexuality of their parents to themselves or had told just one person. In quite a few cases the children kept their “secret” for many years.

Could increased exposure to fiction which is not issues-based, and shows lesbian families, support children aged 9-12 in finding a place in the stories and lives that we all share?

8 The impact…

Children’s development between the ages of 9 and 12 sees them starting to break away from their primary sense of identity as being children within the family unit, to become more aligned with their peers and the perceptions that accompany those relationships. Children at this age are acutely aware of ‘difference’, which can be something as simple as their hair colour, or more complex in the way in which their family is structured. Brannelly and Miller (2009) note that children in the middle years work towards finding their place in the social structure, and have specific needs which must be acknowledged, understood and responded to.

In this context, what impact might children experience from reading a story depicting a lesbian family? Some respondents believed that this would not be a positive strategy, which is summarised in this quote from one of the schools:
Until this is commonly an “acceptable” and perhaps common sort of family in society generally – which is still quite a way away in my opinion - I feel it would be better for the… students not to have their situation drawn attention to... After all we don’t want other students and their parents to have opportunity to discriminate against these children (of the lesbian parents) and we also don’t want people to judge the children for their parent’s way of life.

Additionally, the timing of the introduction of this concept became an important theme in the responses, as this parent stated:

This is a tricky age for boys. To introduce the topic at this age is really too late because it is often already taboo. This may expose the boy with lesbian mums to some teasing from peers. The topic should be well and truly introduced before the age of 9 so that it is not seen as unusual or not normal. BUT it is important for teachers to work to redress the imbalance and if the topic is introduced well, the presence of fiction for this age group can provide great education. Teachers need training and support to do this work in classrooms from Kindy.

However, the vast majority of respondents expressed belief that this type of story would be beneficial for the children in a lesbian family. When describing how they believed the children would feel, with exposure to this type of fiction, they used words such as “accepted, affirming, empowering, encouraging, normalising, positive, powerful and validating” and they assumed that the experience would help the children to develop better “confidence” and “self esteem”.

When it came to the peers of these children, the respondents believed that this type of story would be “helpful” and would promote “tolerance and understanding of different family types”. These opinions are consistent with those expressed in the literature by Gates et al (2003, p6), Chapman (1999, p6) and Cowhey (2005b) outlining that children’s literature is an educational tool and can influence children’s opinions as well as empower and validate their life experiences. For example, Hunt (1994, cited in Gruner 2009, p216) states that:

…it is arguably impossible for a children’s book (especially one being read by a child) not to be educational or influential in some way; it cannot help but reflect an ideology and, by extension, didacticism.
If we accept this position, as I do (and as did the majority of my Survey respondents), and believe that fiction can be influential and beneficial for children, how do adults ensure that children can both be introduced to the concept of, and read about, lesbian families?

9 ...the knowledge...

100% of respondents in my research believed that it was the responsibility of the Parents/Carers to introduce the concept of family diversity to children. They also strongly believed (100%) that the manner in which children were actually introduced to this concept was through parents/carers or through peers (95%).

Multiple Survey respondents expressed concern that the views, perspectives and beliefs of lesbian families might be “forced upon” others, or that they might be “offensive” to people in heterosexual families. This is summarised by one parent:

If I think a child would benefit from a story with [gay or lesbian] characters I would buy these for them, but I would be hesitant to give these books to any straight family if they didn’t have a personal interest in the issue (for example a kid who has invited my daughter to her party) - because I would not like them to think I was being inappropriate or forcing my personal interests.

It is clear that this parent is being sensitive to the needs and life situation of her child’s peers and families. However, would most heterosexual parents hesitate in providing a book to a child in a lesbian family that showed ‘straight’ characters? It is unlikely, because this type of story would be considered ‘the norm’.

There was clear acknowledgement (85%) that extended family members provide this information to children, and that the media (88%) probably had a role in the introduction of lesbian families to children. There was a fear, however, that the media would “sensationalise” the issue and that this was not an ideal way for children to be “exposed” to lesbian families. Respondents
pointed out that the media *can* and *does* inform children about family diversity, however, “it is often for the wrong reasons”, or is “dramatised and used to sell papers.”

On a positive media note, though, a librarian observed that the:

ABC is not afraid to delve. A gentle and slow exposure to differences means that it is not an issue and children grow up with this.

In 2004 the Australian Broadcasting Commission featured a lesbian family on its children’s program ‘Playschool’, a decision which led to debate across the country.

Whilst gay and lesbian supporters welcomed the depiction of family diversity, and their own family structures, there was a significant backlash from other sections of the public. The federal children’s Minister of the time, Larry Anthony, is quoted by Nguyen (*The Age* 4 June 2004) as criticising the ABC’s duty of care to parents:

“When it comes to my children, when I want to explain about same-sex couples, it should be up to parents, it should be up to me, not the Australian broadcaster," the father of three said.

Other Australian politicians are also on record regarding who they believe should introduce the concept of same-sex relationships and parenting to children, for example, Gibson (*Sydney Morning Herald* 29 May 2006) quoted Morris Iemma, and Pru Goward is on record in *The Age* (4 May 2009). Both politicians stated emphatically that parents are responsible for educating their children about same-sex relationships and parenting, and that there is no place for this in the public domain such as in day care centres and schools. Iemma is quoted as going further than this and labelling this kind of education as “[dragging children] into the gay rights debate”. In this context Iemma was referring to the inclusion of the Australian written and published ‘Learn to Include’ (2006) series, which are books for younger children depicting lesbian families.
These attitudes, and others like them, contribute to the invisibility of lesbian families in the public domain, as well as in children’s fiction. On a daily basis through their schooling, media, communities, advertising, music and fiction, children in lesbian families are continually exposed to images and messages about heterosexist family structures and expectations.

Where and when can they see themselves?

10 …and the stories.

My research does show a small measure of promise in the respondent’s selection of books depicting gay and lesbian-parented families. Respondents were asked to describe the fiction that they had in library collections, stock or had purchased/borrowed for their children. They identified that 15% of their stories depicted heterosexual families, 12% families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Single Parent families were equally represented at 10% each. All of these stories were evenly spread across the ages of 3 to 12 years. In contrast, respondents had stories depicting gay (5%) and lesbian (6%) families which were primarily appropriate for children aged between 3 and 6 years of age.

These results need to be read with an understanding of who the respondents were, and therefore cannot necessarily be generalised. Four out of the five parent/carer respondents were from lesbian families, and as one parent explained, having books with these themes would be:

…all positive, as we are lesbian parents of a 14 year girl and are in an inclusive and accepting area where we have lived for many years and where gay parent families are not uncommon. Our friends and community are a mixture of straight and gay families and always have been.

Additionally: one bookseller in the Leichhardt area receives “frequent” requests for this type of fiction; a school in that area expected to have “only positive
[comments] at this school, I'm confident" in having lesbian families portrayed in fiction; and a school in the Campbelltown area stated that “there is a family with two mums in this community - it's not a big issue”.

Libraries in both LGAs discussed the importance of not censoring their collections, and valued the flexibility and responsiveness that this approach enabled. The Campbelltown library has “built extra subject headings into the Cataloguing so that people can search for same-sex parent books”, which they have increased in their collection in response to requests, particularly for 3-6 year olds. Another librarian in the Campbelltown area has “recommended items normalising gay/lesbian families when I have become aware of [them], and [they] have been purchased.”

The Leichhardt library is also aware of the local community, and is able to tailor the collection to meet those needs:

Most parents these days are pretty broad minded and they know what is good literature and what isn’t. They are not as judgemental as some from the past! Our library is in a pretty liberated area, so we are exposed to quite a variety of different cultures and people from all walks of life.

11 The selection...

In making decisions about what type of stories to stock, sell, collect, purchase and make available to children aged between 9 and 12, the respondents listed a vast range of criteria. The most common criterion (24%) was that it should be quality fiction which was well written, with good characters and plot. Following closely (22%) was that they should have a broad range of issues, topics and approaches in the fiction, including: families; feelings; ethics/morals; humour; inclusiveness; intelligence; and imagination. Respondents then looked to recommendations, reviews, lists from booksellers, companies, magazines and papers (15%). Additionally, fiction was selected on the basis of what was popular and known - what children are reading or the adults enjoyed as children or now (7%).
Consistent with their thinking around what might be considered taboo and inappropriate in fiction, the respondents (11%) also wanted the fiction to *not be* racist, sexist, stereotyping, using bad language or depicting homosexuality (as sexuality, not family structures) for this age group.

Only one respondent provided a 'Collection Management Policy' which prescribed the types of fiction to purchase for that school, whilst another bedded the decision firmly within the values and principles of the school.

A bookseller emphasised the need for increased presence of lesbian families in both fiction and non-fiction:

> Lesbians need to push our cause, no one else will! For example, I noticed that a book about Raising Girls had no homosexuality or lesbianism depicted. I wrote to the publisher to make the point, but didn’t receive a response. Unless we continue to speak up, we won’t see any changes.

### 12 …the availability…

During the course of this research, it has become clear that historically, and currently, the existence of fiction depicting lesbian families is minimal. Throughout the study, the same (few) novels repeatedly appeared in interviews, Survey results, literature searches and annotated bibliographies.

Even motivated adults attempting to access this information will find it difficult. Fiction showing lesbian parents for children aged 9-12 years is generally available (and only to purchase) from specialist bookshops. It is not available in most school, university or public libraries.

My research has shown that the public Children’s librarians have been responsive to requests from the members of their communities, however, public policy and social commentary does not support the availability of this fiction as a matter of course. Why is the accessibility of this literature, by default, the responsibility of gay and lesbian families? Surely the children in our families are
as important as the children in heterosexual-parented families, and it is equally important for our children to see their lives mirrored in the stories they read.

Even where gay or lesbian characters are depicted in children’s or young adult’s fiction; the availability of homopositive stories is even more limited. Kanner (2002) identifies that the vast majority of adult and young adult literature that shows diversity in sexuality is dominated by white, middle class characters (often male), and depicts homosexuality as a “plot or device” and a “problem” to be overcome, not as a social reflection or critique. The “problem” or “issue” of this diversity is often shown to equate to disaster and danger, with the characters ending up being punished, for example by losing their job or experiencing community distrust.

This is echoed by Linne (2000, p202), where he states that:

Writers and publishers of young adult literature problem novels seem to have a difficult time resolving the “problem” of what to do with young queer characters. Often they just kill them. – [italics in original]

Although young adult literature is perceived to be in another category to children’s literature, development over time shows that the lines have become blurred, to the extent that it is sometimes difficult to tell the difference.

Wolfson (2006) outlines three main ‘revolutions’ in Children’s Literature. The first was instigated by John Locke c.1690, where he developed the moral message to help children grow into responsible adults. The next was in the mid 19th Century where there was a shift away from moralising to entertaining. A prominent voice in this time was Lewis Carroll, and the era was known as the Golden Age of children’s literature because it celebrated innocence and playfulness. Then, in the 1970’s, there was a belief that the media influence had already destroyed the ‘innocence’ of childhood, so literature started to push the boundaries of what was acceptable to children.
It was around this time that children’s fiction depicting gay and lesbian characters was developed, although Chapman (1999, p8) notes that “between 1977 and 1983, [only] six books with a gay or lesbian theme were published”. Prior to, and during the 1970s, homosexuality was pathologised, medicalised and viewed negatively – of course, it is arguable that this is still the case in many communities and parts of the world.

Two children’s books are repeatedly referred to in this context – Newman’s (1989) ‘Heather Has Two Mommies’ and Willhoite’s (1990) ‘Daddy’s Roommate’. These were the first books to be published by Alyson Wonderland – a publishing line that focuses on stories for children of gay and lesbian parents, as discussed by Dahlin (2005). Lauded as ground-breaking, ‘Heather Has Two Mommies’ was both celebrated and denounced. Bluemle (2009) highlights that controversy was sparked by Newman’s discussion of alternative conception, which was later removed from the 10th anniversary edition.

The body of critique of these, and similar, books is summed up by Casper and Schultz (1999, p158):

Given the relative newness of this topic in children’s books, many of the books that contain gay parent themes are – as we might expect – very pointed and often contain rather impoverished story lines.

Recent years have seen a shift in this approach, with children’s stories emerging which have positive depictions of gay and lesbian characters and family situations. As Hall (2002) notes:

…children’s texts have been written to challenge directly sexist, racist, classist, ageist, and finally, heterosexist ideologies. Most of the homopositive works for very young children, picture books, attempt to normalize lesbian and gay relationships by focusing on the experiences of happy families headed by two parents of the same sex.

Even so, Hall then goes on to identify only a small handful of books which are currently available.
13  ...and the seekers.

The narrow field of available literature informs conclusions about the number of actual requests made and received for fiction with lesbian families for 9-12 year olds, as reported by the respondents in my Survey.

The results show that: over half (60%) of respondents had not requested, nor received a request, for fiction showing lesbian families; where 40% had made or received a request for books with lesbian families, although some of these were for non-fiction. Bluemle (2009) has noticed that:

...like all overlooked minorities, gay families put up with their lack of representation in mainstream children’s books with uncommon patience and grace...

If the books are not available, it is likely that the respondents have not yet developed an expectation that it is possible to access this type of fiction. Therefore, they 'make-do' with what is available on the shelves, in the catalogues or on the recommended lists of book titles.

14  Next steps...

In writing 'Midnight Jack and Houston', I hope to have contributed to the inspiring, budding and pioneering body of work for children aged 9-12, whether they are in lesbian families or not.

Arising out of my Creative Work, this research has barely started to tease out the threads of the complex issues surrounding children’s fiction for 9-12 year olds that depicts lesbian parents. In fact, the research has probably raised more questions than it has answered.

It is clear that there is a gap in the market for this fiction, and that there are multiple barriers for anyone who is attempting to fill this gap. The stories need to be written, of course, and they need to be good enough to satisfy the current appetite for quality fiction. Then, the author needs to find courageous publishers, booksellers, schools and libraries to make the stories readily available. Finally,
parents and carers need to know that such stories exist, that they are good quality, and that they are available for their children to read.

Both Survey respondents and the literature have given us insight into the benefits and barriers that exist for 9-12 year old children accessing literature that depicts lesbian families. Children will experience positive messages and mirrors of their lives in reading these stories, which is particularly important at a time when they are developing their sense of separateness from their families and have a heightened sensitivity to difference.

It is also true that there are strongly entrenched community, school and individual values which work against this possibility, and create controversy and challenge when these stories actually are manifest.

Certainly, the average child would not regularly select a fictional work that showed lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer characters within the story – because such stories are not readily available. In fact, many children (and their families) would never have read a story with these characters or family structures depicted.

Moving into the future, I wonder if our forays into lesbian family portrayals will always be ‘happy focused’. Once upon a time, in the Golden Age, heterosexual literature consistently depicted ‘straight’ families in a positive light. However, with changing needs and times, many tricky issues have found their way into literature, which helps children to better grapple with confusing or painful life experiences.

If the lesbian family is always shown as happy, are we romanticising our world in the name of claiming space in the public domain and proving our ok-ness? On the other hand, if the family is shown as not necessarily happy, does this give fodder to the critics who claim that there is something intrinsically wrong with lesbian families, and does this feed into people’s phobias?
In the meantime, today and tomorrow and tomorrow, let’s work towards this:

- that we have multiple and varied stories written and available for all children, showing lesbian families; and
- that children in lesbian families can regularly, and freely, see themselves, and the people they love, reflected in the stories they read.

What a wonderful achievement that will be, and it’s one that I look forward to celebrating with my children!
References


De Vaus, D 2004, Diversity and Change in Australian Families: Statistical Profiles, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, Australia.


Gates, PS, Steffel, SB & Molson, FJ 2003, Fantasy Literature for Children and Young Adults, Scarecrow Press Inc, Maryland, USA.


Hall, DE 2002, *Children’s Literature*, accessed 08/07/09,  
www.glbtq.com/literature/children_lit.html

Hofman, S 2005, ‘Framing the Family Tree: How teachers can be sensitive to students’ family situations’, *Rethinking Schools*, Vol. 19, No. 3 – Spring 2005, accessed 03/08/09,  
http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/19_03/fram193.shtml

Kanner, M 2002, *Young Adult Literature*, accessed 08/07/09,  
www.glbtq.com/literature/young_adult_lit.html

Lamont, A 2008, ‘Getting the facts of life’, *Sydney Star Observer*, 3 September, accessed 18/06/09,  

Learn to Include 2009, *Early Childhood education material which includes same sex parent families 2009*, accessed 07/06/09,  
http://www.hotkey.net.au/~learn_to_include/


Op de Beeck, N 2005, ‘Diversity Breeds Controversy – Meeting the demand for stories of gay/lesbian family life is not easy, and conservative opposition doesn't help’, *Publishers Weekly*, 25 April, accessed 06/06/09


Appendix A: Annotated Bibliography – Research Sources

1 Children’s Fiction: Published material that I have reviewed

1.1 For 9-12 year olds


Charlie is in Year 6 and tells lies. He finds a mysterious skull which makes him tell the truth, which he finds awkward until he understands the skull’s power.


Holly has two mums and decides that she doesn't want it to be a secret any more.


Zack is 11 years old and describes his family as being himself, his mother and her lesbian partner.


Jasmine is in Year 3 and her brother Michael is in Year 5. Leading up to Father’s Day, Jasmine tells her classmates about her gay father, and the information spreads through the school with some difficult consequences for Michael. This book was written by two lesbian mums with help from their sons.


Gloria’s mums take her to a Gay Pride parade, where she meets people she knows and also encounters homophobic demonstrators. The underpinning message is that love is the most important consideration.


Amelia’s parents are divorced, and because her mother is a lesbian she is not allowed to live with her and rarely sees her. Amelia had no choice about who she wanted to live with when her parents divorced. When she turned 11, Amelia felt that running away with her mum would allow her the freedom she always wanted.

When their teacher announces she is going to be a grandmother, a group of children is introduced to different/diverse types of families, including: grandparents, foster parents, divorced parents, same-sex parents, and blended families. The book also includes examples of racial and economic diversity.


An almost 12 year old girl’s parents are divorced, and she flies alone to Seattle to stay with her Aunty and her Aunty’s female partner for the summer holiday, where she has some mystery adventures.

### 1.2 For younger children


Heather was conceived through artificial insemination. She is part of a lesbian parented family, the structure of which is discussed at Heather’s playgroup using a simple and positive approach. Other non-traditional family structures are discussed as well.


This picture book asked the title question and answers that it is the people who love you the most. The diversity of families, including gay and lesbian, is shown.


In this fantasy tale, two children with lesbian mums fantasise about what it would be like to have a father. When they are alone for a day, the children make themselves a daddy machine, and multiple dads pop out.


The fairy tales in this story all contain a gay or lesbian character, including one story about a boy who has two mums.

A boy enjoys family life with his father and his father’s partner, where they do all the usual family chores and activities. This is a warm and loving story.

1.3 **Teen or Adult Fiction, which has helped with context:**


This is a collection of short fiction written by lesbian and gay parents showing the diversity of parenting in these communities.

2 **Web Sites and Resources relating to LGBTQ issues**


This is a New York based Association which aims to support the counselling profession to be affirming of LGBTQ issues, and assists in this process by providing an Annotated Bibliography.


Describing itself as aiming to provide material that reflects the entire city population, this UK based library service has multiple collections dedicated to LGBT peoples, which include: books and films on video and DVD, community news magazines and posters and leaflets about local and national events.


A Diversity Resource compiled in sections which include Books, Video Recordings and World Wide Web Sites which address gender, sexuality and parenting issues.

An important Website created and maintained by a support and advocacy organisation for children of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender parents.


This Union website provides information on a range of topics which may impact its members.


The Feminist Bookshop stocks the broadest range of LGBTI fiction and non-fiction that was encountered in this research, with owners/staff that have in-depth knowledge of the needs of these communities. The LGBTI Booklist includes sub-categories of: Lesbian Newsletter; Lesbian Life Skills; Lesbian & Gay Parenting; Lesbian and Gay Youth; Coming Out; Transgender Issues; Domestic Violence (LGBT); Lesbian Fiction; Lesbian Classics; and Children's Books – Same Sex Families.


The Gay & Lesbian Rights Lobby (GLRL) is an advocacy and support organisation which comments on and seeks to influence law, media, policy makers and the community, on behalf of the needs and rights of GLBTQ communities.


The Gay & Lesbian Rights Lobby (GLRL) maintains a database ‘Relationships’, which summarises the advocacy and outcomes for equal rights for its LGBTQ communities.

The Gay & Lesbian Rights Lobby (GLRL) maintains a data base ‘Take-Action’, which summarises the advocacy for equal rights for its LGBTQ communities.

Learn to Include 2009, *Early Childhood education material which includes same sex parent families 2009*, accessed 07/06/09, http://www.hotkey.net.au/~learn_to_include/

As stated on the Website: “Learn to Include (LTI) is an Australian non-profit organisation publishing inclusive children’s books. Our fiction and non-fiction titles and other resources feature diverse families, including families with same-sex parents.”


Describing itself as a site which celebrates ‘children’s books loved by adult readers’, this provides a sound list of children’s fiction which contains gay and lesbian characters and themes.


This is a list of books which include lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender concepts to assist schools in delivering curriculum from Kindergarten to Year 10.


This Bibliography was created in order to support children from gay and lesbian families, acknowledge the diversity of families in the communities, and respond to the myths/stereotypes in the interest of the safety and well-being of all children.
3  Non-fiction: LGBTQ Parenting


This article uses data from the ABS Census of Population and Housing, the ABS Family Transitions and Characteristics Survey and the ABS Marriages Collection, and examines trends in couples’ living arrangements and demographics.


The ABS extrapolates ‘themes’ from the data, regularly updates it, and presents the information a user-friendly summary, which includes links for further resources/referencing.


The Australian Human Rights Commission is responsible for upholding Human Rights of all people through: education and public awareness; discrimination and human rights complaints; human rights compliance; and policy and legislative development. This site updates relevant news and legislation relating to Human Rights, which includes the Rights of same-sex couples and families.


Bernstein defends the position of families with same-sex parents, and tells the stories of gay and lesbian parents engaged in social change in America. Their challenges, views, passion and dedication to raising healthy and well-adjusted children are showcased.


Posted to focus on books for younger readers who have gay or lesbian parents, this article examines the barriers to, and availability of, this literature. Bluemle reviews some existing texts, and calls for more to be written and available.

The overall aim of this research was to examine whether planned lesbian families differ from heterosexual families in their desire and motivation to have a child.


This book outlines parenting strategies for gay and lesbian parents, with a particular focus on the specific challenges these parent and their children can, and do, face. Activities, examples and tangible suggestions are provided.


This text reviews young adult literature which includes GLBTQ content and identifies the positive, helpful, judgemental and damaging depictions and themes. It also includes an Annotated Bibliography.


This article reviews the history and impact of two significant publishers of texts with lesbian and gay content, Alyson Books (and then Alyson Wonderland, for children’s fiction with these themes) and Cleis Press, at their quarter century anniversary.

De Vaus, D 2004, Diversity and Change in Australian Families: Statistical Profiles, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, Australia.

This text examines trends in ‘the family’ over the last 30 years, and presents snapshots of insight relating to diversity and other issues. Chapter 7, ‘Same-sex couples’ pp80-88, examines the law and perceptions relating to same-sex couples, and includes comparisons of income, education levels, professions, and other demographics to opposite-sex couples.

This longitudinal study reports the data from interviews with 84 lesbian regarding parenting, relationships, motives for becoming parents, preferred method of conception, life barriers and coping methods. The Researchers intend to conduct follow-up interviews over the course of 25 years.


This is a follow up to the above longitudinal study of lesbian families where the children were conceived by donor insemination. The data is presented and analysed, as is the impact of homophobia on lesbian family life.


Examining the last thirty years, this text identifies trends in the changing definition and composition of Australian families. Using a range of articles and extracts, the book looks at diversity, various ‘heads’ of families including same-sex, sole parent, grandparent, step, blended and carers, and speculates about the future of what is called ‘family’.


Based on research involving parents and secondary school children in LGBT families, this report identifies endemic bullying and non-responsiveness from schools, the factors which LGBT parents consider in school selection, their commitment to, and participation in the school system delivery, and the role which the education system plays and can improve in ensuring the safety and well-being of these students.

This study examines structures and relationships of lesbian, bisexual and prospective parents, and considers all aspects of the family including conception, the role of the biological father in the children’s lives, supports for the family, challenges and positive experiences.

Millbank, J 2002, Meet the parents: a review of the research on lesbian and gay families, Foreword Sosnov, A & Schembri AM, Gay & Lesbian Rights Lobby Inc (NSW), Darlinghurst, NSW.

This important piece of Australian work examines the history (to that date) of the available research into lesbian and gay families, with a view to providing evidence which would lend strength to the ‘battle for legal and social equality for lesbian and gay families’.

Millbank, J 2003, And then…the brides changed nappies: Lesbian mothers, gay fathers and the legal recognition of our relationships with the children we raise, Gay & Lesbian Rights Lobby Inc (NSW), Darlinghurst, NSW.

This study commenced with a discussion paper relating to legal rights around family recognition and practice, and proposed a range of recommendations which were practical and achievable. The report summarises the outcome of significant consultation with gay and lesbian communities, and research into gay and lesbian family structures and parenting issues, with a view to influencing major reform in public policy and law towards equal rights for lesbian and gay families.


Muehlenberg challenges the validity of notions of family diversity and change, and cites historic factors to support his view that the family only has one definition, this being “any group of people related by blood, heterosexual marriage or adoption”.

39
Op de Beeck, N 2005, ‘Diversity Breeds Controversy – Meeting the demand for stories of gay/lesbian family life is not easy, and conservative opposition doesn’t help’, Publishers Weekly, 25 April, accessed 06/06/09
http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA526625.html

Op de Beeck notes that even though books do exist which are of interest to gay and lesbian parents and their children, or for “nonconformist kids”...“there remains a ‘big hole in the market’ according to Linda Bubon, co-owner of Woman and Children First bookstore in Chicago”. Additionally, “All children deserve to see themselves reflected in their books.” Nicole Eiger, publisher Tricycle Press, in op de Beeck’s article.


A forerunner in this field, Pies provides an overview of all aspects of parenting for lesbian parents, and includes exercises and activities which guide potential parents’ planning and thinking.


This study examines the difficulties which children with lesbian and/or gay parents may face, and suggests some strategies for responding to these challenges.

Snow, JE 2004, How it feels to have a gay or lesbian parent: a book by kids for kids of all ages, Harrington Park Press, New York.

Children of different ages use their own words to talk about how and when they learned about their parents’ sexual orientation as gay or lesbian, and the effect it has had on them.


This article reports the controversy that occurred when a Childcare Centre in Tempe, Sydney, used books which depicted same-sex parent families.

This article reports the controversy that occurred regarding the depiction of donor insemination, and other conception methods, contained within the children’s book ‘Where Did I Really Come From’ which was revised and launched in September 2008.


This article also reports the controversy that occurred regarding the depiction of donor insemination, and other conception methods, contained within the children’s book ‘Where Did I Really Come From’ which was revised and launched in September 2008.


This article reports the controversy that occurred when the popular children’s television show ‘Playschool’ depicted a lesbian family.


This text confronts the myths and stereotypes regarding the potential effect on child development for those raised in a lesbian family, and takes the time to explore the experiences of the children themselves.


This text examines the concept of ‘family normality’, and the ways in which this has changed over time.
4 Non-fiction: Diversity and/or Identity


This book highlights the necessity of maintaining a clear commitment to multiculturalism, anti-bias and social justice in all work and support of children, and includes some practical, concrete examples of how to achieve this, and how to include lesbian families in this context.


Written for children aged 7 and over, this book defines families in a variety of ways, including the recognition of racial and economic factors and same-sex, divorced and foster parents.


This Fact Sheet outlines the concept of anti-bias and its importance as a framework in the support of children in their early formative years.

Scourfield, J, Dicks, B, Drakeford, M & Davies, A 2006, Children, Place and Identity: Nation and locality in middle childhood, Routledge, Great Britain.

This book explores the notion of identity for children at the local, national and global levels using information gathered from interviews and focus groups with children.

5 Non-fiction: Child Development


This Discussion Paper proposes the need to develop a framework for supporting children in the ‘middle years’ to respond to their specific needs and help them to build resilience, and the role that Out of School Hours Care (OSHC) services can play in this.

This fact sheet summarises an extensive review of the research literature concerning the health and well-being of children in lesbian-parented families, undertaken by a Melbourne research team.


Published to engage public debate around possible law reform, this Occasional Paper is one in a series of three, includes a focus on lesbian parents accessing Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART), and looks at the impact on their children.


Writers with a wide variety of experience with this age group have contributed to the production of this multi-faceted look at the school aged child.


This Fact Sheet offers a simple checklist of expected milestones from children aged between 9 and 12 years in all aspects of their development.

6  **Non-fiction: Children’s Literature Theories**


Reporting on the Diversity Matters Conference in England, Atkins summarises the range of issues that impact children’s literature in its accessibility and relevance to broad audiences and communities.
Chew, CM-L 2008, "It's stupid being a girl!" The Tomboy character in Selected Children’s Series Fiction, PhD Doctorate, Murdoch University, accessed 13/05/09, Dissertations/Theses: Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) database.

This thesis examines the evolution of the tomboy character as it relates to adult notions of the appropriateness and desirability of gender definitions and representation.


Kay Chick discusses the benefits of gay-sensitive literature and the controversies and challenges associated with its use. She describes several examples of high-quality picturebooks with gay and lesbian characters, and points out gaps in existing literature.


This article presents a detailed and thorough critique of the commercial viability of children’s fiction containing gay themes, using the stories of Leslea Newman to argue the public, press, publishers and authors’ potential levels of acceptance of this genre.

Gates, PS, Steffel, SB & Molson, FJ 2003, Fantasy Literature for Children and Young Adults, Scarecrow Press Inc, Maryland, USA.

This text helps teachers and students of literature develop their own understandings of this genre in order to evaluate and promote the joy of fantasy in the classroom or in other learning environments.

Gruner, E 2009, ‘Teach the Children: Education and Knowledge in Recent Children's Fantasy’, Project MUSE, Children’s Literature, Volume 37, 2009,
In this essay, Gruner examines the ways in which learning occurs for children when they access literature, and emphasises that children learn and are influenced by the very act of reading a story.

Kanner, M 2002, *Young Adult Literature*, accessed 08/07/09,
www.glbtq.com/literature/young_adult_lit.html
Kanner explores the range of young adult literature for readers over the age of 12, which contains gay or lesbian themes or characters, noting the ‘problem’ focus, lack of diversity, and lack of positivity in this range.

Hall, DE 2002, *Children’s Literature*, accessed 08/07/09,
www.glbtq.com/literature/children_lit.html
Hall looks to literature from the nineteenth century, to date, that shows gay or lesbian themes and characters, sometimes in circumspect and understated ways. He notes the transition towards more targetted, overt literature celebrating diversity and non-traditional families.

Hunt offers a history of primarily British children’s literature, along with an assessment of its literary, sociological, and pedagogical roles. He also examines the ways in which children’s literature is used, as well as the different readership by children and adults.

Kidd, K (ed.) 1998, ‘Special Issue: Lesbian/Gay literature for Children and Young Adults’, *Project MUSE, Children’s Literature Association Quarterly, Volume 23, Number 3, Fall 1998*, pp114-119, accessed 07/06/09,
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/childrens_literature_association_quarterly/toc/chq.23.3.html
Kidd provides an overview of the history of lesbian and gay children’s literature and the issues that have impacted, and continue to be debated, within this field.

This paper promotes acceptance of a range of topics in texts in order to provide children with literature which will develop their critical thinking skills.


Wolfson provides a critical analysis of the broad ranging Anthology, which, she proposes, focuses on harsh ‘realities’ in modern times and takes children’s literature away from the ‘magic’ and ‘enchantment’ of previous Anthologies.

7 Non-fiction: Schooling, Curriculum, Community


This book researches, listens to, and makes recommendations about the realities of lesbian and gay-headed families interfacing with the education system and its people. Issues relating to institutionalised homophobia, gender definition and role models, the curriculum, and scope for change and responsiveness are explored with a view to improving the safety and wellbeing of students, their families and the teachers/staff within the education system.


Chapman explores the purpose of teaching children to read and the ability that the stories have to empower them, with particular reference to the changing American family, diversity, and the needs/view/perceptions of, and about, gay and lesbian families. She compares this with the values of the school systems and curriculum and considers ways in which this might be improved, including a “plea” for fiction for children which includes “positive portrayals of gay people in the general community”.

46

Cowhey reflects on the impact of legalised same-sex marriage as it applies to the children in classroom, and the concept of equal rights for all in families.


Cowhey presents a series of statements, strategies and explanations designed to ensure inclusive classrooms for all children, and particularly those from lesbian and gay families.


Based on her own experience as a parent and teacher, Hofman discusses ways in which to approach the issue of family with children. She also calls on all members of the school community to be advocates for their friends, neighbours and colleagues who are GLBT.


The authors examine the place of gay and lesbian perspectives in the daily reading and writing of elementary classrooms.


Linne examines a range of queer literature and critiques its form and impact.
Muehlenberg, B 2006, ‘Mums and Dads to be Banned’, weblog post, *Culture Watch*, 6 June, accessed 18/06/09,  
http://www.billmuehlenberg.com/2006/06/05/mums-and-dads-to-be-banned/  
In response to the release of Vicki Harding’s ‘Learn to Include’ series, and the teacher’s manual that was developed to accompany it, Muehlenberg provides a commentary on his opposition to gender/role-neutral language, arguing the importance of continuing to use heterosexist terminology.

This workbook poses a variety of issues and problems which are commonly faced by teachers in the classroom, and proposes strategies for using literature in the personal development curriculum.

Rubin, S A 1995, ‘Children who grow up with gay or lesbian parents: How are today’s schools meeting this ‘invisible’ group’s needs?’ Master of Science paper, University of Wisconsin- Madison, accessed 03/05/2009, Dissertations/Theses: Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC) database.  
The research explores the availability of library books and other resources depicting non-traditional and alternative family experiences and lifestyles. It also examines the educator’s attitudes and school support services for children.

The ideology of “Queer thinking” is explored by many contributors, with an emphasis on decreasing isolation and empowering both those who are queer and those who are in their lives, towards an inclusive education system and society.
Appendix B: Research Survey, methods, results and reflections

Potential participants were invited to contribute to the study in one of two ways – Completing a Survey or Participating in an Interview. The same set of questions was used for either participation method in order to ensure consistency in gathering information and analysis of the data.

1  Completing a Survey
Participants were invited to fill in a Survey, which was distributed by email and took approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. The Survey was presented in a Microsoft Word format, which was usually completed in soft copy, and emailed back to the researcher. A small number were printed and returned by post or by hand. Results were compiled in a non-identifying way using an Excel spreadsheet.

2  Participating in an Interview
The researcher identified a sample of participants from the two different geographic locations – Leichhardt and Campbelltown Local Government Areas (LGAs) – and selected two representatives of each group of stakeholders (booksellers, parents, school and public librarians) in each area, with a maximum of 16 interviews.

The researcher used the Survey questions as a framework for conducting face-to-face interviews, having provided this information ahead of time for preparation.

The interviews were organised by phone and/or email. The interviews typically took forty five minutes to an hour, and the researcher travelled to the participant's location for convenience, at an agreed time. She took hand-written notes of the interview, which were compiled in a non-identifying way, using an Excel spreadsheet.
3 Design

The research focussed on two geographic locations – the Leichhardt and Campbelltown LGAs. These two locations have significantly different demographics, socio-economic indicators, and adults with potentially different views about the inclusion of lesbian concepts in literature for 9-12 year olds.

The key stakeholders - booksellers, parents, school and public librarians – were selected because they are the adults who have the decision-making power about what children are able to read, or are able to select to read.

The decision to send the Survey to as many stakeholders as possible in the catchment areas provided the maximum possible return rate and information gathering.

The individual interviews of a sample group of stakeholders gave more depth to the collection of the information, and allowed for both the interviewer and the interviewee to use the Survey questions as a basis to explore the concepts further.

Whilst the Research collected information from a number of participants, the nature of the Survey, and the Research itself, is qualitative. The questions were primarily open in order to invite discussion.

In consideration of the small scale of the Research, it was designed to provide an entry-snapshot into the issues surrounding this subject.

4 Return Rate

The researcher distributed 66 Surveys by email and Interview, and received a total of 20 responses, which included 5 Interviews, representing a 30.3% return rate.

The following table summarises the responses that were received:
## Survey and Interview Response Rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Campbelltown LGA</th>
<th>Leichhardt LGA</th>
<th>Other LGAs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents/Carers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booksellers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 – of which:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 Interview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>4 – of which:</td>
<td>2 – of which:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarians</td>
<td>2 Interviews</td>
<td>1 Interview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Library</td>
<td>3 – of which:</td>
<td>1 – of which:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s Librarians</td>
<td>1 Interview</td>
<td>Interview booked,</td>
<td>cancelled due to illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals:</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 5 Geographic impacts/comparisons:

The data about the differences in the LGAs is firmly in the public domain. The researcher’s initial consideration in selecting these two LGAs was the potential to notice the difference in the population, cultural backgrounds, Aboriginality, family configuration, age ranges, housing styles and ownership, and socio-economic status.

Given that this study did not attract sufficient responses to reach any conclusions about the potential similarities/differences between stakeholder adults in the two LGAs, the researcher chose to omit an analysis of the LGA comparisons from this Report. In fact, the only comments that were received regarding the LGA-specific issues were from the Public Libraries:

The Campbelltown LGA is a typical Australian community - there are Mc Mansions and then multiple public housing estates. There are single parents, extended families, divorced parents, same-sex parents - great diversity. Families have come to rely on Libraries for their own and their children's reading - they can't afford to keep buying books. – Campbelltown Librarian.

Our library is in a pretty liberated area, so we are exposed to quite a variety of different cultures and people from all walks of life. – Leichhardt Librarian
6 Parents/Carers:

This was the most difficult group of people to access, given that the researcher was trying to find people who were unknown to her. The greatest success was in accessing lesbian parents/carers (6 out of the 8 respondents), rather than heterosexual parents/carers. This may be attributed to the support networks for lesbian parents, which were approached with a request for the Survey to be distributed. The women who responded to this request were extraordinarily generous, and the Survey was distributed fairly broadly.

Of course, the people who did respond were those who are part of a network of connected lesbian families, and therefore may not be representative of all of the lesbian families in Campbelltown or Leichhardt. However, as stated, this Research did not have the scope to be exhaustive, simply to provide an entry-snapshot into the issues surrounding this subject.

Whilst some respondents were in the designated catchment areas, others came from other inner-city suburbs, as well as the Blue Mountains. This is the nature of our communication system based on email and technology. The Survey was distributed electronically, and posted on Facebook (undertaken by one respondent), which meant the geographic location of respondents was not easily controlled.

The Researcher could have refused to accept these responses, however, believed that the input from the parents/carers was more important in this entry-snapshot study, than the potential comparisons between the LGAs.

7 Booksellers:

Two booksellers in the Leichhardt area participated in the study (one through an Interview) and were able to present some interesting insight into their business and decision-making processes around the selection of fiction for children aged 9-12 years, particularly with a focus on lesbian families.
Campbelltown LGA is dominated by larger book-chains, which did not give consent for their local staff to participate in the Research. The overall lower economic capacity of the population of Campbelltown makes the potential success of smaller, independent booksellers less likely. This would be supported by the comment from the Campbelltown Librarian, regarding families’ inability to continue to pay for the purchase of books.

8 Primary School Librarians:
The results included double the response from the Campbelltown area, however, the high number of disadvantaged schools probably contributed to this. With demographics which attract the attention of the social sciences, and the human services arenas, the Campbelltown area is often the subject of studies. It may be surmised that they are therefore better prepared and open to contributing to research.

The Leichhardt area staff did explain that their time is severely restricted, some stating this with regret. However, one Teacher Librarian was extremely helpful in offering to distribute the Survey more broadly through a network of Teacher Librarians.

9 Public Library Children’s Librarians:
As could be expected, there is only one Children’s Librarian in each LGA, and Campbelltown’s position is currently vacant. However, the Campbelltown Librarians made themselves available, with one providing an interview and two others completing Surveys. The Leichhardt Children’s Librarian was equally available; however the interview was cancelled due to illness. The Librarian subsequently filled in and returned a Survey.

10 Participant Information Sheets, Surveys, Consent Forms:
Copies of the Participant Information Sheets, Surveys and Consent Forms specific to each category follow, in this order: Parents/Carers; Booksellers; Primary School Librarians; and Public Library Children’s Librarians.
PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENTS AND CARERS
This is an invitation to participate in a study conducted by a student at the University of Wollongong.

TITLE: Research Study into Lesbian Families in Children’s Literature

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH
The purpose of the research is to gather and analyse the opinions of parents, booksellers and librarians in the lives of children aged 9-12 about ‘why or why not’ children should have access to literature showing lesbian-parented families and/or other diverse family types. This will inform conclusions about what might happen for children aged 9-12 if they can read stories showing lesbian-parented or other diverse families, and what might happen if they cannot read stories like this; whether they live within lesbian-parented/ diverse families, or not.

INVESTIGATORS
Ms Vivien Tait
Student, Master of Creative Arts – Research (MCA-R)
0418 274 015
vr984@uow.edu.au

Mr Alan Wearne
Supervisor, Faculty of Creative Arts
(02) 4221 3555
awearene@uow.edu.au

METHOD AND DEMANDS ON PARTICIPANTS – You will be asked to participate in one of two ways:

1 Completion of a Survey
The Survey will be distributed by email and will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. The Survey is presented in a Microsoft Word format, which can be completed in soft copy, and emailed back to the researcher. It may also be printed and returned by fax or post. Results will be compiled in a non-identifying way.
2 Participation in a face-to-face interview

The interviews will be organised by phone and/or email. The interview will be based on the Survey which has been broadly distributed, and which will be provided to the participant prior to the interview to provide context. The interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes. The researcher expects to travel to the participant’s location for convenience, and will do so at a suitable, agreed time. The researcher will take hand-written notes of the interview, which will be compiled in a non-identifying way.

POSSIBLE RISKS, INCONVENIENCES AND DISCOMFORTS

Apart from the 30-45 minutes of your time for either the Survey or the interview, we can foresee few risks for you. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and if it touches on any challenges you or your children have experienced, and this is distressing or uncomfortable, you may withdraw your participation from the study at any time and withdraw any data that you have provided to that point. The researcher will also put you in contact with a local support organisation, if you request this. Refusal to participate in the study will not affect your relationship with the University of Wollongong or the Researchers.

FUNDING AND BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH

This study is unfunded, and is conducted by a student as part of her Master of Creative Arts – Research (MCA-R) course. Acknowledging that adult decisions have a direct impact on children’s access to different themes in fiction, the results of the research may: assist the adult decision-making community to open discussion about children’s access to concepts of family diversity in the stories they read; open pathways for children to have increased access to these themes in literature; and help children better understand diversity in families. Findings from the study will be published in a Research Report as part of the completion of the MCA-R course and possibly published in relevant journals. Confidentiality is assured, and you or your children will not be identified in any part of the research.
ETHICS REVIEW AND COMPLAINTS

This study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Science, Humanities and Behavioural Science) of the University of Wollongong. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way this research has been conducted, you can contact the UoW Ethics Officer on (02) 4221 4457.

Thank you for your interest in this study.
SURVEY FOR PARENTS AND CARERS

This is an invitation to participate in a study conducted by a student at the University of Wollongong.

**TITLE:** Research Study into Lesbian Families in Children’s Literature

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH**

The purpose of the research is to gather and analyse the opinions of parents, booksellers and librarians in the lives of children aged 9-12 about ‘why or why not’ children should have access to literature showing lesbian-parented families and/or other diverse family types. This will inform conclusions about what might happen for children aged 9-12 if they can read stories showing lesbian-parented or other diverse families, and what might happen if they cannot read stories like this; whether they live within lesbian-parented/ diverse families, or not.

This aspect of the Research will be compiled on **Sunday 28th June 2009**, so your responses by that time would be very helpful, thank you.

What suburb are you in?

____________________________________________
Questions:

1. What topics do you believe are *taboo* to be included in fiction for children aged 9-12 years?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. What topics do you believe are *inappropriate* to be included in fiction for children aged 9-12 years?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
In your opinion, how important is it for children aged 9-12 years to have access to fiction showing the following aspects of family diversity in fiction;

*Tick one box on each row:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Diversity Depicted</th>
<th>Level of Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unimportant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Unimportant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay male parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Parent carers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with a Disability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with a Mental Illness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal households</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families from Culturally And Linguistically Diverse backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4 Please **tick all boxes** that indicate what fiction you have bought/borrowed for your children/teenagers that depict the following aspects of family diversity:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Diversity Depicted</th>
<th>Age in years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Parent carers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families from Culturally And Linguistically Diverse backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with a Disability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with a Mental Illness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal households</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In your opinion, whose responsibility is it to introduce the concept of family diversity to children age 9-12:

*Tick all boxes which are relevant:*

- Parents/Carers
- Extended family members
- Teachers
- Education Curriculum
- Librarians
- Government
- Welfare organisations
- Media
- Other (please specify)
In your experience, how are children aged 9-12 exposed to the concept of family diversity?

_tick all boxes which are relevant:_

- Parents/Carers
- Extended family members
- Children’s Peers
- Teachers
- Education Curriculum
- Librarians
- Government
- Welfare organisations
- Media
- Other (please specify)

____________________
Imagine 12 and 9 year old boys who are sons of lesbian parents going to an average public school.

What impact do you think exposure to fiction that depicts family diversity might have on them and their peers?

What response (positive and negative) could you expect to receive from your friends and family if you were to buy/borrow fiction for children aged 9-12 years depicting lesbian parents?
9 In the last 12 months, approximately how many requests have you made for fiction for children aged 9-12 years that depicts lesbian parents?

_______________________________________________________________

10 What criteria do you use when selecting fiction to buy or borrow for children aged 9-12 years?

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________
Consent Form for Parents and Carers
Research Study into Lesbian Families in Children’s Literature

Researcher: Vivien Tait

I have been given information about Lesbian Families in Children’s Literature. I have (please tick the relevant statements):

☐ discussed this research project with Vivien Tait, a student in the Masters of Creative Arts – Research (MCA-R) course offered by Wollongong University.

☐ read and understood the Participant Information Sheet provided by Vivien Tait explaining the research project.

☐ understood that this is part of a MCA-R degree supervised by Alan Wearne from the Creative Arts Faculty at the University of Wollongong.

I consent to participate in a survey and/or interview to be conducted by Vivien Tait as part of her study. I understand that my contribution will be confidential and that there will be no personal identification in the data that I agree to allow to be used in the study. I understand that there are minimal potential risks or burdens associated with this study.

I have agreed to provide my responses to the survey and/or the interview for retention for the purposes of the study, which will be stripped of personal identifiers and coded by Vivien Tait prior to any analysis. I have had an opportunity to ask Vivien Tait any questions I may have about the research and my participation. I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary
and I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time. My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my relationship with the Faculty of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong in any contact I may have as a student, academic, professional or member of the public.

If I have any enquires about the research, I can contact Vivien Tait on 0418 274 015 and/ or Alan Wearne on (02) 4221 3555. If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Wollongong on (02) 4221 4457.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research.

Signed ______________________ Date: _______________.

Name (please print): __________________________________________
PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET FOR BOOKSELLERS
This is an invitation to participate in a study conducted by a student at the University of Wollongong.

TITLE: Research Study into Lesbian Families in Children’s Literature

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH
The purpose of the research is to gather and analyse the opinions of parents, booksellers and librarians in the lives of children aged 9-12 about ‘why or why not’ children should have access to literature showing lesbian-parented families and/or other diverse family types. This will inform conclusions about what might happen for children aged 9-12 if they can read stories showing lesbian-parented or other diverse families, and what might happen if they cannot read stories like this; whether they live within lesbian-parented/ diverse families, or not.

INVESTIGATORS
Ms Vivien Tait
Student, Master of Creative Arts – Research (MCA-R)
0418 274 015
vrt984@uow.edu.au

Mr Alan Wearne
Supervisor, Faculty of Creative Arts
(02) 4221 3555
awearne@uow.edu.au

METHOD AND DEMANDS ON PARTICIPANTS – We seek your participation in one of two ways:

1 Completion of a Survey
The Survey will be distributed by email and will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. The Survey is presented in a Microsoft Word format, which can be completed in soft copy, and emailed back to the researcher. It may also be printed and returned by fax or post. Results will be compiled in a non-identifying way.
2 **Participation in a face-to-face interview**

The interviews will be organised by phone and/or email. The interview will be based on the Survey which has been broadly distributed, and which will be provided to the participant prior to the interview to provide context. The interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes. The researcher expects to travel to the participant’s location for convenience, and will do so at a suitable, agreed time. The researcher will take hand-written notes of the interview, which will be compiled in a non-identifying way.

**POSSIBLE RISKS, INCONVENIENCES AND DISCOMFORTS**

Apart from the 30-45 minutes of your time for either the Survey or the interview, we can foresee no risks for you. Your involvement in the study is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation from the study at any time and withdraw any data that you have provided to that point. Refusal to participate in the study will not affect your relationship with the University of Wollongong or the Researchers.

**FUNDING AND BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH**

This study is unfunded, and is conducted by a student as part of her Master of Creative Arts – Research (MCA-R) course. Acknowledging that adult decisions have a direct impact on children’s access to different themes in fiction, the results of the research may: assist the adult decision-making community to open discussion about children’s access to concepts of family diversity in the stories they read; open pathways for children to have increased access to these themes in literature; and help children better understand diversity in families. Findings from the study will be published in a Research Report as part of the completion of the MCA-R course and possibly published in relevant journals. Confidentiality is assured, and you or your business will not be identified in any part of the research.
ETHICS REVIEW AND COMPLAINTS

This study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Science, Humanities and Behavioural Science) of the University of Wollongong. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way this research has been conducted, you can contact the UoW Ethics Officer on (02) 4221 4457.

Thank you for your interest in this study.
SURVEY FOR BOOKSELLERS

This is an invitation to participate in a study conducted by a student at the University of Wollongong.

**TITLE:**** Research Study into Lesbian Families in Children’s Literature**

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH**

The purpose of the research is to gather and analyse the opinions of parents, booksellers and librarians in the lives of children aged 9-12 about ‘why or why not’ children should have access to literature showing lesbian-parented families and/or other diverse family types. This will inform conclusions about what might happen for children aged 9-12 if they can read stories showing lesbian-parented or other diverse families, and what might happen if they cannot read stories like this; whether they live within lesbian-parented/ diverse families, or not.

This aspect of the Research will be compiled on **Sunday 28th June 2009,** so your responses by that time would be very helpful, thank you.

What suburb are you in?

____________________________________________
Questions:

1. What topics do you believe are taboo to be included in fiction for children aged 9-12 years?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

2. What topics do you believe are inappropriate to be included in fiction for children aged 9-12 years?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
3 In your opinion, how important is it for children aged 9-12 years to have access to fiction showing the following aspects of family diversity in fiction:

**Tick one box on each row:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Diversity Depicted</th>
<th>Level of Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unimportant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Unimportant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay male parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Parent carers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with a Disability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with a Mental Illness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal households</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families from Culturally And Linguistically Diverse backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4 Please **tick all boxes** that indicate what fiction you sell for children and young people depicting the following aspects of family diversity:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Diversity Depicted</th>
<th>Age in years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Parent carers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families from Culturally And Linguistically Diverse backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with a Disability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with a Mental Illness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal households</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5 In your opinion, whose responsibility is it to introduce the concept of family diversity to children age 9-12:

*Tick all boxes which are relevant:*

- Parents/Carers
- Extended family members
- Teachers
- Education Curriculum
- Librarians
- Government
- Welfare organisations
- Media
- Other (please specify)
In your experience, how are children aged 9-12 exposed to the concept of family diversity?

Tick all boxes which are relevant:

- Parents/Carers
- Extended family members
- Children’s Peers
- Teachers
- Education Curriculum
- Librarians
- Government
- Welfare organisations
- Media
- Other (please specify)
Imagine 12 and 9 year old boys who are sons of lesbian parents going to an average public school.

What impact do you think exposure to fiction that depicts family diversity might have on them and their peers?

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

8 What response (positive and negative) could you expect to receive from your customers if you were to sell fiction for children aged 9-12 years depicting lesbian parents?

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________
9. In the last 12 months, approximately how many requests have you received for fiction for children aged 9-12 years that depicts lesbian parents?

________________________________________________________________________

10. What criteria do you use when selecting fiction for children aged 9-12 years?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Consent Form for Boksellers

Research Study into Lesbian Families in Children’s Literature

Researcher: Vivien Tait

I have been given information about Lesbian Families in Children’s Literature. I have (please tick the relevant statements):

- discussed this research project with Vivien Tait, a student in the Masters of Creative Arts – Research (MCA-R) course offered by Wollongong University.
- read and understood the Participant Information Sheet provided by Vivien Tait explaining the research project.
- understood that this is part of a MCA-R degree supervised by Alan Wearne from the Creative Arts Faculty at the University of Wollongong.

I consent to participate in a survey and/or interview to be conducted by Vivien Tait as part of her study. I understand that my contribution will be confidential and that there will be no personal identification in the data that I agree to allow to be used in the study. I understand that there are no potential risks or burdens associated with this study.

I have agreed to provide my responses to the survey and/or the interview for retention for the purposes of the study, which will be stripped of personal identifiers and coded by Vivien Tait prior to any analysis. I have had an opportunity to ask Vivien Tait any questions I may have about the research and my participation. I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary.
and I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time. My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my relationship with the Faculty of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong in any contact I may have as a student, academic, professional or member of the public.

If I have any enquires about the research, I can contact Vivien Tait on 0418 274 015 and/or Alan Wearne on (02) 4221 3555. If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Wollongong on (02) 4221 4457.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research.

Signed ______________________ Date: _______________

Name (please print): __________________________________________
PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET FOR SCHOOL LIBRARIANS

This is an invitation to participate in a study conducted by a student at the University of Wollongong.

TITLE: Research Study into Lesbian Families in Children’s Literature

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of the research is to gather and analyse the opinions of parents, booksellers and librarians in the lives of children aged 9-12 about ‘why or why not’ children should have access to literature showing lesbian-parented families and/or other diverse family types. This will inform conclusions about what might happen for children aged 9-12 if they can read stories showing lesbian-parented or other diverse families, and what might happen if they cannot read stories like this; whether they live within lesbian-parented/ diverse families, or not.

INVESTIGATORS

Ms Vivien Tait
Student, Master Creative Arts – Research (MCA-R) 0418 274 015 vrt984@uow.edu.au

Mr Alan Wearne
Supervisor, Faculty of Creative Arts (02) 4221 3555 awearne@uow.edu.au

METHOD AND DEMANDS ON PARTICIPANTS – We seek your participation in one of two ways:

1 Completion of a Survey

The Survey will be distributed by email and will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. The Survey is presented in a Microsoft Word format, which can be completed in soft copy, and emailed back to the researcher. It may also be printed and returned by fax or post. Results will be compiled in a non-identifying way.
2 Participation in a face-to-face interview

The interviews will be organised by phone and/or email. The interview will be based on the Survey which has been broadly distributed, and which will be provided to the participant prior to the interview to provide context. The interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes. The researcher expects to travel to the participant’s location for convenience, and will do so at a suitable, agreed time. The researcher will take hand-written notes of the interview, which will be compiled in a non-identifying way.

POSSIBLE RISKS, INCONVENIENCES AND DISCOMFORTS

Apart from the 30-45 minutes of your time for either the Survey or the interview, we can foresee no risks for you. Your involvement in the study is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation from the study at any time and withdraw any data that you have provided to that point. Refusal to participate in the study will not affect your relationship with the University of Wollongong or the Researchers.

FUNDING AND BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH

This study is unfunded, and is conducted by a student as part of her Master of Creative Arts – Research (MCA-R) course. Acknowledging that adult decisions have a direct impact on children’s access to different themes in fiction, the results of the research may: assist the adult decision-making community to open discussion about children’s access to concepts of family diversity in the stories they read; open pathways for children to have increased access to these themes in literature; and help children better understand diversity in families. Findings from the study will be published in a Research Report as part of the completion of the MCA-R course and possibly published in relevant journals. Confidentiality is assured, and you or your school will not be identified in any part of the research.
ETHICS REVIEW AND COMPLAINTS

This study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Science, Humanities and Behavioural Science) of the University of Wollongong. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way this research has been conducted, you can contact the UoW Ethics Officer on (02) 4221 4457.

Thank you for your interest in this study.
SURVEY FOR SCHOOL LIBRARIANS

This is an invitation to participate in a study conducted by a student at the University of Wollongong.

**TITLE:** Research Study into *Lesbian Families in Children’s Literature*

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH**

The purpose of the research is to gather and analyse the opinions of parents, booksellers and librarians in the lives of children aged 9-12 about ‘why or why not’ children should have access to literature showing lesbian-parented families and/or other diverse family types. This will inform conclusions about what might happen for children aged 9-12 if they can read stories showing lesbian-parented or other diverse families, and what might happen if they cannot read stories like this; whether they live within lesbian-parented/ diverse families, or not.

This aspect of the Research will be compiled on **Sunday 28th June 2009**, so your responses by that time would be very helpful, thank you.

What suburb are you in?

____________________________________________
Questions:

1. What topics do you believe are taboo to be included in fiction for children aged 9-12 years?

________________________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________________________

2. What topics do you believe are inappropriate to be included in fiction for children aged 9-12 years?

________________________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________________________________________
In your opinion, how important is it for children aged 9-12 years to have access to fiction showing the following aspects of family diversity in fiction;

**Tick one box on each row:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Diversity Depicted</th>
<th>Level of Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay male parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Parent carers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with a Disability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with a Mental Illness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal households</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families from Culturally And Linguistically Diverse backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. Please **tick all boxes** that indicate what fiction you stock for children and young people depicting the following aspects of family diversity:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Diversity Depicted</th>
<th>Age in years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Parent carers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families from Culturally And Linguistically Diverse backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with a Disability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with a Mental Illness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal households</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5 In your opinion, whose responsibility is it to introduce the concept of family diversity to children age 9-12:

*Tick all boxes which are relevant:*

- Parents/Carers
- Extended family members
- Teachers
- Education Curriculum
- Librarians
- Government
- Welfare organisations
- Media
- Other (please specify)
In your experience, how are children aged 9-12 exposed to the concept of family diversity?

*Tick all boxes which are relevant:*

- Parents/Carers
- Extended family members
- Children’s Peers
- Teachers
- Education Curriculum
- Librarians
- Government
- Welfare organisations
- Media
- Other (please specify)

_____________________

88
7 Imagine 12 and 9 year old boys who are sons of lesbian parents going to an average public school.

What impact do you think exposure to fiction that depicts family diversity might have on them and their peers?

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

8 What response (positive and negative) could you expect to receive from parents, children and other community members if you were to stock fiction for children aged 9-12 years depicting lesbian parents?

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________

_______________________________________________________________
9 In the last 12 months, approximately how many requests have you received for fiction for children aged 9-12 years that depicts lesbian parents?

________________________________________________________________________

10 What criteria do you use when selecting fiction for children aged 9-12 years?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
Consent Form for School Librarians
Research Study into *Lesbian Families in Children’s Literature*

**Researcher:** Vivien Tait

I have been given information about *Lesbian Families in Children’s Literature*. I have (please tick the relevant statements):

- discussed this research project with Vivien Tait, a student in the Masters of Creative Arts – Research (MCA-R) course offered by Wollongong University.
- read and understood the Participant Information Sheet provided by Vivien Tait explaining the research project.
- understood that this is part of a MCA-R degree supervised by Alan Wearne from the Creative Arts Faculty at the University of Wollongong.

I consent to participate in a survey and/or interview to be conducted by Vivien Tait as part of her study. I understand that my contribution will be confidential and that there will be no personal identification in the data that I agree to allow to be used in the study. I understand that there are no potential risks or burdens associated with this study.

I have agreed to provide my responses to the survey and/or the interview for retention for the purposes of the study, which will be stripped of personal identifiers and coded by Vivien Tait prior to any analysis. I have had an opportunity to ask Vivien Tait any questions I may have about the research and my participation. I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary.
and I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time. My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my relationship with the Faculty of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong in any contact I may have as a student, academic, professional or member of the public.

If I have any enquires about the research, I can contact Vivien Tait on 0418 274 015 and/ or Alan Wearne on (02) 4221 3555. If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Wollongong on (02) 4221 4457.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research.

Signed __________________________ Date: ______________

Name (please print): _________________________________________
PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIANS

This is an invitation to participate in a study conducted by a student at the University of Wollongong.

TITLE: Research Study into Lesbian Families in Children’s Literature

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of the research is to gather and analyse the opinions of parents, booksellers and librarians in the lives of children aged 9-12 about ‘why or why not’ children should have access to literature showing lesbian-parented families and/or other diverse family types. This will inform conclusions about what might happen for children aged 9-12 if they can read stories showing lesbian-parented or other diverse families, and what might happen if they cannot read stories like this; whether they live within lesbian-parented/ diverse families, or not.

INVESTIGATORS

Ms Vivien Tait
Student, Master Creative Arts – Research (MCA-R)
0418 274 015
vrt984@uow.edu.au

Mr Alan Wearne
Supervisor, Faculty of Creative Arts
(02) 4221 3555
awearne@uow.edu.au

METHOD AND DEMANDS ON PARTICIPANTS – We seek your participation in one of two ways:

1 Completion of a Survey

The Survey will be distributed by email and will take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. The Survey is presented in a Microsoft Word format, which can be completed in soft copy, and emailed back to the researcher. It may also be printed and returned by fax or post. Results will be compiled in a non-identifying way.
2 **Participation in a face-to-face interview**

The interviews will be organised by phone and/or email. The interview will be based on the Survey which has been broadly distributed, and which will be provided to the participant prior to the interview to provide context. The interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes. The researcher expects to travel to the participant’s location for convenience, and will do so at a suitable, agreed time. The researcher will take hand-written notes of the interview, which will be compiled in a non-identifying way.

**POSSIBLE RISKS, INCONVENIENCES AND DISCOMFORTS**

Apart from the 30-45 minutes of your time for either the Survey or the interview, we can foresee no risks for you. Your involvement in the study is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation from the study at any time and withdraw any data that you have provided to that point. Refusal to participate in the study will not affect your relationship with the University of Wollongong or the Researchers.

**FUNDING AND BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH**

This study is unfunded, and is conducted by a student as part of her Master of Creative Arts – Research (MCA-R) course. Acknowledging that adult decisions have a direct impact on children’s access to different themes in fiction, the results of the research may: assist the adult decision-making community to open discussion about children’s access to concepts of family diversity in the stories they read; open pathways for children to have increased access to these themes in literature; and help children better understand diversity in families. Findings from the study will be published in a Research Report as part of the completion of the MCA-R course and possibly published in relevant journals. Confidentiality is assured, and you or your library will not be identified in any part of the research.

**ETHICS REVIEW AND COMPLAINTS**

This study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Science, Humanities and Behavioural Science) of the University of
Wollongong. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way this research has been conducted, you can contact the UoW Ethics Officer on (02) 4221 4457.

Thank you for your interest in this study.
SURVEY FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIANS

This is an invitation to participate in a study conducted by a student at the University of Wollongong.

**TITLE:** Research Study into *Lesbian Families in Children’s Literature*

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH**

The purpose of the research is to gather and analyse the opinions of parents, booksellers and librarians in the lives of children aged 9-12 about ‘why or why not’ children should have access to literature showing lesbian-parented families and/or other diverse family types. This will inform conclusions about what might happen for children aged 9-12 if they can read stories showing lesbian-parented or other diverse families, and what might happen if they cannot read stories like this; whether they live within lesbian-parented/ diverse families, or not.

This aspect of the Research will be compiled on **Sunday 28th June 2009**, so your responses by that time would be very helpful, thank you.

What suburb are you in?

__________________________________
Questions:

1 What topics do you believe are taboo to be included in fiction for children aged 9-12 years?

________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________

2 What topics do you believe are inappropriate to be included in fiction for children aged 9-12 years?

________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________________________
In your opinion, how important is it for children aged 9-12 years to have access to fiction showing the following aspects of family diversity in fiction;

Tick one box on each row:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Diversity Depicted</th>
<th>Level of Importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unimportant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very Unimportant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay male parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Parent carers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with a Disability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with a Mental Illness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal households</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families from Culturally And Linguistically Diverse backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Please **tick all boxes** that indicate what fiction you stock for children and young people depicting the following aspects of family diversity:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Diversity Depicted</th>
<th>Age in years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Parent carers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families from Culturally And Linguistically Diverse backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with a Disability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents with a Mental Illness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal households</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In your opinion, whose responsibility is it to introduce the concept of family diversity to children age 9-12:

*Tick all boxes which are relevant:*

- Parents/Carers
- Extended family members
- Teachers
- Education Curriculum
- Librarians
- Government
- Welfare organisations
- Media
- Other (please specify)
6 In your experience, how are children aged 9-12 exposed to the concept of family diversity?

Tick all boxes which are relevant:

Parents/Carers

Extended family members

Children's Peers

Teachers

Education Curriculum

Librarians

Government

Welfare organisations

Media

Other (please specify)
Imagine 12 and 9 year old boys who are sons of lesbian parents going to an average public school.

What impact do you think exposure to fiction that depicts family diversity might have on them and their peers?


What response (positive and negative) could you expect to receive from parents, children and other community members if you were to stock fiction for children aged 9-12 years depicting lesbian parents?
9 In the last 12 months, approximately how many requests have you received for fiction for children aged 9-12 years that depicts lesbian parents?

______________________________________________________________________________

10 What criteria do you use when selecting fiction for children aged 9-12 years?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
Consent Form for Public Librarians

Research Study into *Lesbian Families in Children’s Literature*

**Researcher:** Vivien Tait

I have been given information about *Lesbian Families in Children’s Literature*. I have (please tick the relevant statements):

- discussed this research project with Vivien Tait, a student in the Masters of Creative Arts – Research (MCA-R) course offered by Wollongong University.
- read and understood the Participant Information Sheet provided by Vivien Tait explaining the research project.
- understood that this is part of a MCA-R degree supervised by Alan Wearne from the Creative Arts Faculty at the University of Wollongong.

I consent to participate in a survey and/or interview to be conducted by Vivien Tait as part of her study. I understand that my contribution will be confidential and that there will be no personal identification in the data that I agree to allow to be used in the study. I understand that there are no potential risks or burdens associated with this study.

I have agreed to provide my responses to the survey and/or the interview for retention for the purposes of the study, which will be stripped of personal identifiers and coded by Vivien Tait prior to any analysis. I have had an opportunity to ask Vivien Tait any questions I may have about the research and my participation. I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary and I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the
research at any time. My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my relationship with the Faculty of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong in any contact I may have as a student, academic, professional or member of the public.

If I have any enquires about the research, I can contact Vivien Tait on 0418 274 015 and/ or Alan Wearne on (02) 4221 3555. If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Wollongong on (02) 4221 4457.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research.

Signed __________________________ Date: ______________

Name (please print): _________________________________________
Appendix C: Lesbian families; who are we and where do we fit?

1 Talking about lesbian families...

It seems that as a society, and as a broad culture, we have not yet found a place for lesbian families in our language. It is difficult to know how much this struggle with language contributes to the actual and perceived ‘invisibility’ of lesbian families, or how much the ‘invisibility’ adds to the gap in language.

When we are repeatedly confronted by a situation in our lives, we are forced to find a way of discussing it, creating a language to accommodate the situation. Much of the literature highlights the difficulties that lesbian families face in making decisions around their ‘outness’, which has been clearly articulated by Casper and Schultz (2000, pp94-96).

Do lesbian families declare their family structure to the family General Practitioner, to the Long Day Care Centre, to the Pre-School, to the Primary School, to the High School, to the Sporting Clubs, to the Dance Class teachers, to the Music teachers, to the Parents of their children’s friends from any of these activities? If they make the declaration, at what point should this happen? What reaction might they expect to receive? Does their employment status play a role in making this decision? Are they likely to ‘bump into’ work colleagues in the personal sphere? Will this negatively impact their employment if they are known to be lesbian?

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer people have grappled with these questions and struggles by for many years. However, the presence of children in their life situation adds a layer of complexity which demands attention and action, and is often not in the absolute control of the adults. Children are well known for making their own declarations about their family situation, and these often occur spontaneously, frequently in public venues, which is noted by Casper and Schultz (2000, p36).
What adults call the parents in lesbian families is another quandary and can give rise to some clunky language. This is summarised well by Sosnov and Schembri in Millbank (2002, pp9-10):

Women who come to parent the child of a partner who has had that child in the context of a previous heterosexual relationship, or, increasingly, through donor insemination (either alone or with a previous lesbian partner) are often referred to as ‘step-mothers’. Women who are non-biological parents in a relationship with a partner where they have jointly planned, conceived and raised a child are often called ‘co-mothers.’ Biological mothers in all of the above situations often have the unhyphenated luxury of being called mothers, but are sometimes referred to as birth-mothers.

Whilst adults struggle with finding a ‘user-friendly’ term to refer to the parents in lesbian families, children are often naturally creative in finding language to ‘name’ their parents.

My own life experience with my children has meant that I have never been called ‘Mummy’ or ‘Mum’. I am known as ‘Didi’, which I consider to be my parent name, and which is a name that I treasure.

My name arose out of our family structure, where my partner of the time gave birth to our first son, and I gave birth to our second son. When our oldest son started speaking, he couldn’t say ‘Mummy Vivi’, or plain ‘Vivi’, which is the ‘pet’ name we had chosen for him to use when referring to me. Instead, he started to call me ‘Didi’, which, in Hindi, is a term used for a respected older woman. I liked it.

Then, when I had birthed our youngest son, it didn’t make any difference how often I was referred to as ‘Mummy’; he took his cues from his older brother and also called me ‘Didi’.

I know, from friends and networks that this kind of naming happens in many other lesbian families. However, this way of naming is specific to the circumstances and people within the lesbian families themselves, and still
doesn’t provide a public, claimed and shared language for all of the systems, institutions and people who lesbian families regularly interact with.

Even though our family has been very settled in using our parent terms, my name, ‘Didi’, doesn’t immediately identify me as the parent of my children. When a child calls their parent by the name ‘Mum’ or ‘Dad’, everyone knows what their relationship is to each other. My children and I frequently find ourselves explaining my parent name, which means that we are frequently explaining our relationship to those we come in contact with. We are not able to simply ‘be’ parent and child in a publicly understood or recognised manner.

Seemingly simple traditions, celebrations and tasks that children are faced with become complicated without a shared language and understanding of the structure of lesbian families. Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Family Trees, School Information and Permission Notes, forms, forms and forms for so many aspects of our lives; all of these circumstances, and more, present daily challenges for lesbian families.

What would happen if our systems and institutions remembered that within diverse families, there are all kinds of parents? ‘Mums and Dads’ would routinely be changed to ‘Parents and Guardians’ or ‘Caregivers’ (although this term feels slightly less personal, in my opinion). This would also then allow inclusion of other family structures which may include same-sex parents, as well as foster parents, grandparents, aunts/uncles, sole parents, residential carers (such as youth refuges, or for children in ‘out of home care’ in a congregate group home setting), and children who have one or more deceased parents.

Many of these issues underpinned the direction that I took in the Research relating to my Creative Work. Knowing that the story was written from the foundation of my family lived experience (with generous helpings of imagination and fantasy) I wondered what kind of impact children’s fiction might have on helping to develop a shared language and understanding of lesbian families
across the spectrum of our communities – whatever the sexual orientation of
the parents in the family might happen to be.

My children were in the middle years of primary school when the story began,
which influenced the level at which the story was pitched, so the ages and
developmental stages of children also became an important factor for my
Research. I asked a number of questions, some of which I have been able to
answer, many of which would be the subject of a much more detailed and
longer Research Study. Apart from the questions I set for the Survey, I also
asked:

- What impact could a Creative Work have on children at this age?
- How much would be needed to make a difference, that is, how many
  stories?
- Which adults are best placed to help me and the children achieve this?
- What is the best way to engage adults in developing a shared language and
  understanding of lesbian families, in order to support children’s
  understanding and further exploration of the issues, and to be able to
  respond to emerging questions?
- Who controls children’s access to literature?
- Are there market forces that guide/control access to children’s literature?
- Are the social forces that guide/control access to children’s literature?
- What themes should be embedded in a Creative Work to work towards a
  shared language and understanding of lesbian families?

Given the relative brevity of the Research Report, I found that I had to sacrifice
another area of Research that I believed would add value in this context; to look
at the use of themes in fiction for boys, which was engaging and fast-paced and
non-violent.

2 …I wondered who we are?

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2009b) provides the following
definition of Family for the purposes of the data it collects:
Two or more persons, one of whom is at least 15 years of age, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering, and who are usually resident in the same household. The basis of a family is formed by identifying the presence of a couple relationship, lone parent-child relationship or other blood relationship. Some households will, therefore, contain more than one family.

Other definitions of family have been explored in a range of theoretical frameworks, and are frequently debated in the public domain – often in the context of gay and lesbian marriage or rights.

However, positioning lesbian families in theoretical frameworks is problematic, given the scarcity of theory specific to this issue. Perhaps the most developed theories in this area have arisen out of the psychology arena, with an emphasis on the therapeutic needs of the lesbian family unit. Other theories that are relevant to lesbian families, but require thoughtful application, are those that surround the social sciences, ideology of the family, adoption, infertility, heterosexism, gay and lesbian liberation, and feminism(s).

A common theme to emerge within these theories is the definition of ‘woman’. In attributing certain gender and/or sexual roles to woman, most of these theories describe (or challenge the description of) woman as heterosexual, reproductive and mother.

In a world that is bombarded with images of the perfect nuclear family consisting of Daddy, Mummy, boy-child, girl-child and point-something-child, the idea of Lesbian Parents may be perceived as a contradiction in terms. However, in practice, lesbians have been mothers throughout time, as outlined by a pioneer in the active and acknowledged lesbian parenting arena, Pies (1988, p18):

Many of us have been raised by grandmothers, mothers, aunts or sisters who were lesbians but were unable to share the depth of that secret with anyone. Many women who were lesbians chose to get married to have children because that was the only way they knew to bring children into their lives, despite what may have been their primary sexual preference.
Of course, not all lesbian families are headed by a couple – there are single lesbian parented families, as well as families who have more than two parents. How the children came to have lesbian parents also differs. The following is not an exhaustive list of possibilities, but is enough to demonstrate the differences inherent in creating and living in lesbian families. There are parents who:

- birthed their children in the context of a heterosexual relationship and then were widowed/separated/divorced/chose not to have the father involved in the first place;
- entered a relationship with a woman who already had children;
- had children as part of a lesbian couple – where one or more of the parents birthed the children;
- underwent IVF or donor or self insemination either as sole parents or part of a couple (or more parents);
- adopted children;
- fostered children;
- became primary carers for siblings’ or other family members’ children.

Debate in some parts of the education sector focuses on introducing children to concepts of family diversity. Cowhey (2005) encourages us to ask the children, “Who is in your family?”, where Hofmann (2005) has listened to children answer this question, and has concluded that:

Families are groupings of individuals who may or may not be living together, but are perceived by the child to be “family.” They may be permanent, temporary, or fluid.

However, not all adults are as open to diversity in families as these authors. Lamont (2008) highlighted the re-release of the Wickham book ‘Where Did I Really Come From?’, which is a book that explains conception to children, and includes images and reference to gay and lesbian parents. Comments by the general public, posted in response to this article, used a range of words and statements to stringently object to the concept of lesbian families, including: sugar coated lie; same-sex relationships forfeit the right to have children; morally bankrupt; this bizarre, politically driven practice you call motherhood.
Further discussion regarding the Australian attitudes to same-sex headed families is provided by de Vaus (2004, p88), with the following:

Although homosexuality continues to be opposed by significant sections of society there appears to be far more acceptance of homosexuality in 2001 than just ten or 15 years earlier.

De Vaus (2004, p87) also explains that the majority of the data which has been collected refers to same-sex couples, not families. However, he believes that general attitudes to homosexuality could be extended to concepts of homosexual families.

Interestingly, de Vaus (2004, p86) refers to the 2003 Australian Social Attitudes Survey which enquired whether adults considered a same-sex couple with children to be a family. He reports that 43% of adults did consider this to be a family, whilst 98.8% considered an unmarried heterosexual couple with children to be a family.

3 …and just how many of us there are?

It is incredibly difficult to find reliable, current data relating to the number of lesbian families in Australia; particularly as our 1996 Census was the first to record same-sex couples, if declared. However, there is some data relating to same-sex couples, which is what has been declared on our Census collections since that time. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2009a):

The number of people living in a same-sex couple relationship has also increased over the past decade. In 1996, 0.2% of all adults said they were living with a same-sex partner. By 2006, this had increased to 0.4% (to around 50,000 people). However, these figures may be an undercount of the true number of people living in same-sex relationships. Some people may be reluctant to identify as being in a same-sex relationship, while others may not have identified because they didn't know that same-sex relationships would be counted in the census.

Since the 1980s, lesbian planned parenthood strategies have spread and diversified. A survey of 386 Australian readers of a Sydney-based lesbian magazine, Lesbians on the Loose (1999, p4) found that 12.7% of respondents
had dependent children, a further 9.1% had nondependent children and a further 19.7% indicated an intention to become pregnant in the next five years. The majority of these intending mothers expected to use donor insemination to do so.

The Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby (2008c) estimates that there are 1,000 children in NSW who have two mums, while Mikhailovich et al’s findings (2001, cited in McNair et al 2002, p40) indicate that of the estimated 8,296 same sex female couples in Australia, 1,483 of them live with children. Further, McNair et al (2002, p40) report that this is not a definitive number, and that the true picture is likely to include many more lesbian parents. They note that the figures do not include single lesbian parents, nor those parents who live in different houses. Additionally, they believe it is likely that many lesbian couples would not have revealed the status of their relationship in the data collection.

De Vaus (2004, pp83-84) provides further informed-speculation on this issue. By considering a range of data, he estimates that in 2004 there were 28,144 lesbian couples in Australia, and that one in five of these couples had a child living with them, equating to 7,036 lesbian-parented families. He also notes that these figures would not be representative of the actual number of lesbian-parented families. These figures have also been based solely on same-sex couples who live in the same house, omitting sole lesbian-parents, and those parents who live separately.

4 …and in what way are we recognised?

As outlined by the Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby (GLRL) (2008b), the States and Territories of Australia implemented legislative reforms to recognise equality between same-sex and opposite-sex de-facto partners. Beginning in 1999, these reforms did not apply to Commonwealth laws, which continued the inequities relating to financial benefits and obligations of the different de-facto couples. Additionally, children living in same-sex families were not recognised by the Commonwealth legislation.
In an historic move towards equality in entitlements to same-sex couples, and in response to the Human Rights Commission’s 2007 report, a range of reforms in Commonwealth laws commenced in September 2008, with the last of the 58 amendments becoming effective as of 1 July 2009. As summarised by the ABS (2009a, p9):

…changes to Commonwealth laws such as the Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws — General Law Reform) Act 2008 and the Same-Sex Relationships (Equal Treatment in Commonwealth Laws — Superannuation) Act 2008 give formal recognition to same-sex relationships in Commonwealth legislation, and will give people in same-sex relationships the same access to government entitlements and superannuation benefits as people in opposite-sex couple relationships.

The final word in this positive step in the gay and lesbian rights movement, which brings greater protection to, and recognition of, lesbian families, goes to the Human Rights Commissioner, Innes (2008):

This reform is long overdue and I congratulate the government on moving to remove the discrimination against people simply because of who they love.