

Ghost Bird

by Lisa Fuller



This incredible mystery thriller actually gave me goosebumps quite a few times. It has a lot going for it thematically. But first, let's talk a little about the plot. Twins Stacey and Laney are in their final year of high school and live in a small country town in Queensland with their single Mum. Although they look identical they are polar opposite; Stacey is the 'good' one who stays home covering for her sister while Mum works overtime at the hospital. Meanwhile, Laney is sneaking out with her boyfriend at night. And suddenly, just like that, Laney disappears without a trace. Stacey grows more concerned as the days stretch on and her nightmares become more vivid; through her dreams she can sense Laney and is intrinsically linked to her lost sister. But has no idea where she is. She must draw on her family's stories that have been passed down to unravel the mystery. And time is running out.

The themes of colonial history, violence, family, trauma and ancient Indigenous knowledge all intersect in *Ghost Bird*. It's wrapped up into a compelling narrative of high-schooler turned detective Stacey who must unravel the town's past and present history of racism, and work with the rival Miller Family to patch up their grudges and jointly confront the terrors that lurk. Lisa Fuller confronts the ongoing repercussions of the continuing displacement of First Nations people and what they experience. As such, there are confronting scenes and is best recommended for readers high in the older reader bracket.

While there are dark moments littered throughout, there is light and love and the power of family that forms the core of this book.

This is a unique and suspenseful, atmospheric page turner that taps in to the terrors hiding in the shadows.

This is How We Change the Ending

by Vikki Wakefield



Vikki Wakefield realises a quietly despairing suburb of Bairstal on the fringes in Australia with this novel. For me, it is a highlight of 2019. With poetic prose and beautifully fragile characters featured throughout in children and adults alike.

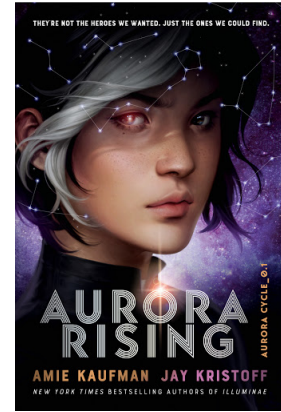
In this character-driven story, we meet sixteen year old high schooler Nate McKee is a 'worrier' as he puts it: 'I worry about the big stuff: climate change, animal cruelty, the state of politics, boat people, whose finger is on the button, bigness, nothingness, all of it.' His father Dec (short for Declan) as Nate informally calls - him is the opposite. His mantra is no worries. He is muscular, is riddled with tattoos and scars. Nate's home life is horribly chaotic. His drug affected mother left home and Dec has married a young woman, only eight years older than Nate. He is forced to share a room with his infant twin stepbrothers as his own room is used to grow marijuana.

This story is compelling, largely because of protagonist Nate who is something of an autodidact. While he is intelligent and enlightened, he shies away from attention lest he is crushed when he is already so powerless – his aim is be invisible. But when sentences from his notebooks start appearing on building walls, can he make a difference?

***This is How We Change the Ending* is my favourite pick of my lot – it is beautifully written with powerfully rendered characters struggling to find their place in a world where the odds are stacked against them.**

Aurora Rising

by Amie Kaufman
& Jay Kristoff



This book is an all killer, no filler fun ride – and also slated to be the first in a series. Set in the year 2380 featuring an ensemble of teenage space cadets from Aurora Academy, which is essentially an intergalactic United Nations high school. The story begins around two characters that we meet early on - star pupil Tyler Jones who is an Alpha and as captain will handpick his own squad from the cream of the soon to be graduated pupils before beginning peacekeeping missions across the universe. Just before the momentous day of graduation, he comes to the aid of a space ship that has activated its SOS beacon, This is also how meet the coincidentally named Aurora, or Auri. Tyler discovers her in a cryogenically induced sleep and is sole survivor of the Hadfield, a ship that went missing two hundreds years ago.

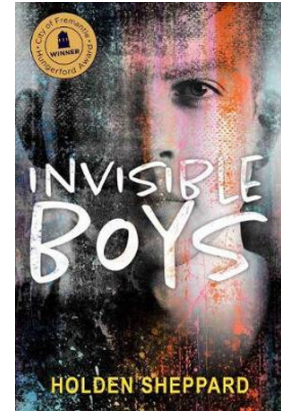
Tyler's dreams are dashed when his heroics make him miss the graduation and the following squad selections. He is left with a group of socially challenged misfits that he must teach for Squad 312 to work together in order for them to succeed. But things ain't easy and begin to unravel on their maiden voyage on a standard mission when stowaway mystery girl Aurora is discovered, and then things get dangerous. When everything they know is turned upside down, they will need each other to survive.

There are a diverse group of characters in Squad 312 with a range of cultures, languages and physical abilities, which mirrors are real life society. Kaufman and Kristoff show that by banding together, we can transform from parts into a whole.

Overall, it is a refreshing sci-fi thriller with clever, smart mouthed dialogue. Highly enjoyable.

Invisible Boys

by Holden Sheppard



Perth based author Holden Sheppard has drawn on his experiences to form a story told from three teen characters set in his hometown of Geraldton in Western Australia. We meet these characters at a precarious time in their lives as they grapple with their sexuality and newfound implications on the expectations of living in a small town and dealing with the status quo of so-called normal society.

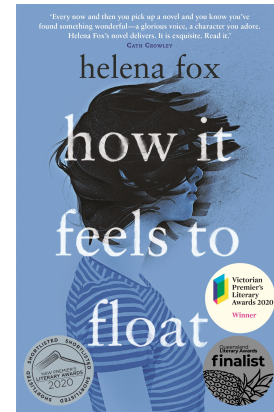
Charlie is a punk rocker, who is outed as gay against his will when he meets up with a family man in a casual hookup. Zeke, an intelligent yet closeted boy who comes from a Sicilian family heritage. Kade – or ‘Hammer’, as he is known – is an egotistical and straight speaking AFL player – essentially a boofhead - who is singularly obsessed by the sport and dreams of making it big one day.

This book took me by surprise. Sheppard has managed to delve into stereotypes of punks, nerds and jocks without subverting their character traits but made them more emotionally complex to examine the environmental effects that have made them who they are.

There are moments of triumph and complete heartbreak in this book. Most importantly, there is a lesson for everyone to truly embrace difference to give those invisible boys out there the opportunity to be who they truly are.

How it feels to float

by Helena Fox



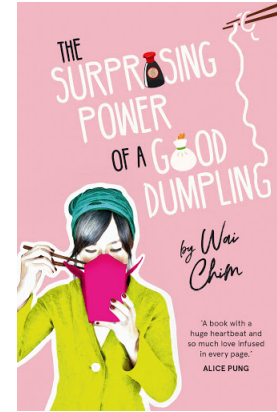
How it Feels to Float by Helena Fox is a sprawling piece of poetry splashed upon its pages. Sixteen year old Elizabeth Grey, or Biz as she is nicknamed, lives with her twin infant brothers and her mum. While everything seems okay on the surface, Biz is floating away. She constantly tussles with her grief from the ongoing trauma of her father's death and complications she experiences through her burgeoning sexuality. Years after her father's death, he comes to visit her and becomes a fixture in her life telling her stories. One day he disappears. As her mental health becomes increasingly unstable and the line blurs between reality and fiction, Biz resolves to put back the pieces together again by finding her father out in the real world.

Intergenerational mental illness, loss and disassociation are key themes that Fox explores with great finesse. The pacing of the story is slow that allows Fox to draw the reader in with emotive, powerful language and is a great study into the character of Biz. She feels deeply and is constantly processing the world she lives in. The minute details of the everyday are expounded into facts, figures and ratios. Reading the text feels like Fox has taken a microscope to a garden, seeking to turn over every stone and you are sucked into this induced state that the Biz is experiencing.

***How it Feels to Float* is a beautiful and hopeful novel of living with mental illness.**

The Surprising Power Of a Good Dumpling

by Wai Chim



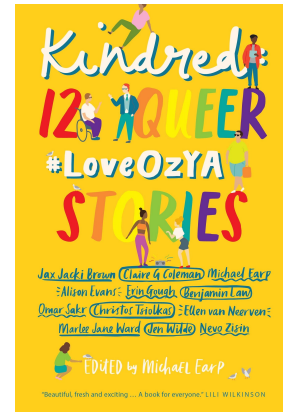
The Surprising Power of a Good Dumpling follows high-schooler Anna Chiu lives in Sydney with her siblings and mother, while her Dad runs the family Chinese restaurant a few hours north in Gosford. Anna's treading water at school and keeping up appearances while doing her best to support her brother and sister. Her Mum has had long periods of time in bed for weeks in the past. This time, when she gets up and about at last, things go from bad to worse. Things aren't great at the restaurant either and Anna eagerly wants to help out in the holidays. On the upside, new delivery boy Rory is around the same age and starts working there too before they hit it off and begin a relationship. Things at home start to unravel increasingly fast before her Mum is hospitalised in a psychiatric ward. Anna finds that she has to be the glue that keeps the family from spinning out of control on all fronts.

Chim has successfully achieved the task of putting a story of the difficulties of mental illness out into world that is very approachable and – excuse the pun – easy to digest. I mean this very much to the author's credit, as I found there is real clarity and the text is uncluttered, enabling for the narrative to unfold.

***The Surprising Power of a Good Dumpling* is easy to read and in no nonsense terms presents a straight up portrayal of mental illness and how it touches those around us. Hopefully it leads to conversations with friends and family to talk about their own mental health.**

Kindred: 12 Queer #LoveOzYA Stories

Edited by Michael Earp



Kindred is an anthology of LGBTQIA+ short stories from a fantastic cast of authors from around Australia. With a wildly far ranging mix of voices, these writers combine their experience to produce a book that examines what it means to be queer from all perspectives. Some are first time authors for young adults, and their backgrounds are as diverse as their stories, with many of them working as podcasters, playwrights and screenwriters.

There are some real highlights. Benjamin Law's 'Questions to Ask Straight Relatives' is a humorous autobiographical telling of how he dealt with coming out to his Grandmother, and how he turns her questions back on her of how she has made choices dictated by society's expectations. And most surprisingly – for me anyway – was the totally life affirming and heart warming tale by Jen Wilde called 'Waiting', featuring a girl who meets a whole new group of friends and embrace her for who she is.

I recommend *Kindred* as a book for young adults and adults in general. It shows a great depth of empathy, understanding and feeling that will broaden your perspective.