

**Contemporary Themes for
Modern Tweens**

Exegesis

MCW

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Donna Blaber

Contents

Attestation of Authorship	3
Acknowledgements	4
Intellectual Property Rights	5
Confidential Material	...	...	...	...	...	6
Exegesis: <i>Contemporary Themes for Modern Tweens</i>	...					7
Tackling Real Issues in Upper Middle Grade Literature	...					7
Ages and Stages	...	...	...	...	...	12
Methods of Engagement	...	...	...	...	...	15
Place Matters	...	...	...	...	...	21
Into the Future	...	...	...	...	...	27
Just End It	...	...	...	...	...	28
Bibliography	...	...	...	...	...	30
Thesis: <i>The Rock</i>	...	...	...	...	...	Embargoed

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed: Donna Blaber

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Contemporary
Themes
for
Modern Tweens
an Exegesis to *The Rock*

Contemporary Themes for Modern Tweens

"The bottom line is that if something is actually happening to children - whatever it is - it's important to have a way to talk about it with children, and often that way is through a book."

David Levithan, *Publishers Weekly*, May 9, 2016.

Tackling Real Issues in Upper Middle Grade Literature

Contemporary Themes for Modern Tweens is an exegesis accompanying the creative work *The Rock*, the draft manuscript of a fictional Upper Middle Grade/Young YA novel. Set in the rural districts of Whāngārei, *The Rock* is a realistic story with mystical elements. It revolves around Jessie, a twelve-year-old country girl who becomes a victim of cyberbullying, after she inadvertently views questionable content online at a friend's home. Before long, Jessie is entangled in mounting peer pressure and disintegrating relationships; her life becomes increasingly complicated and difficult for her to understand. Jessie blames her 'bad luck' on a piece of obsidian rock she finds at Whale Bay, after she discovers online that when taken without permission, this rock brings ill will. By way of her dreams, she is swept backwards through time and into the life of Hine, the rock's former keeper, a girl from the Moa Hunter period, who also has problems to resolve.

Through creating *The Rock*, I was striving to formulate an understanding of how to include controversial subject matter for an Upper Middle Grade audience, without being too explicit. Throughout *Contemporary Themes for Modern Tweens* I will examine the thinking and research that led to the creation of *The Rock*: the importance of tackling real modern-day issues in contemporary Upper Middle Grade children's literature; the genre, its audience and

its restrictions; the methodology employed to keep controversial matter non-explicit; and the development of children's identity through reading novels set in recognisable landscapes.

The contentious issues written into *The Rock*, which include the inadvertent viewing of inappropriate material online and cyberbullying leading to the subtle suggestion of suicide, were chosen deliberately for its relevance to young people aged 10-13 years. Over the past decade digital-savvy children across all socio-economic groups have been exposed to inappropriate material online, especially in homes where there is little or no supervision. Notwithstanding the rules in their own home, parents have little control outside their own environment, for example in the homes of their child's friends. In some cases these children/youth are permitted to store their devices in their rooms, where they may be used late at night, sometimes without parents' knowledge.

Cyberbullying continues to dominate headlines as a major modern-day challenge for pre-adolescent and adolescent youth. The act involves posting mean, embarrassing, untrue or hurtful messages and/or images on devices, social media sites, or the messaging boards of online games. It has been defined as "*wilful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices*" (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009, p. 5). The abuse can be extremely vindictive. As the perpetrator does not see the victim during the act, they are insulated from their response and this anonymity encourages them to communicate more offensively than they would offline (Benzmiller, 2013, p. 934).

Cyberbullying generated by peers is particularly damaging and has become increasingly common, especially between girls. It is suggested that children aged 11-14 are among the most vulnerable (Marriner, 2015). Unlike traditional bullying which seldom leaves the school yard, cyberbullying can continue 24/7. Home is no refuge, making it particularly invasive and inescapable. Victims can feel angry, sad and hurt as a result of their experiences

(Beran & Li, 2005) and students have reported anxiety related to the mere threat of electronic bullying occurring after school (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007, p. 569). Such anxiety can lead to social withdrawal, depression, violence and in some cases, self-harm and/or suicide.

As a mother, journalist and writer working extensively with children (as a visiting writer with the New Zealand Book Council's Writers in Schools programme, and through independent school visits and running creative writing workshops), I felt duty-bound to write a fictional story for tween readers, set in a New Zealand context, which attempts to provide insight and hope through the realisation of its protagonist. Children use fiction to explore issues affecting their lives in a safe way, and because these issues are affecting youth, including, in some cases, children as young as nine or ten, it is important to reach them through literature.

In an article published in the Dominion Post entitled *Why social media is like giving your 15-year-old the keys to a Lamborghini* (Edwards, 2016), cybersafety expert, John Parsons, says there has been a disturbing drop in the age children are using social media platforms and restricted games over the last two years. *"I have now started to see 7 and 8-year-olds having profiles created for them by mum and dad."* Parsons states that creating these accounts puts children into an environment where they don't have the skills to safely communicate. While the legal age for most social media platforms is 13, in the same article, University of Otago psychology professor Elaine Reese argues that *"while most social media sites have the age limit of 13, many kids that age would still grapple with the social requirements, potentially leading to vulnerability to bullying behaviour."*

To date, there is little literature in a New Zealand context, which covers these issues for Upper Middle Grade readers. In August this year, I attended the 2016 IBBY Congress (International Board on Books for Youth), to support my research in this field. Witi

Ihimaera was one of three New Zealand authors who gave an opening address. He spoke of how quickly his grandchildren had evolved into the digital age. He invited delegates to consider child safety through literature, and questioned how we could "*give them the stories to make the right decisions.*" He said writers needed to think about the subjects and contexts in our stories because "*story is not moving fast enough, it's falling back on old themes.*"

Internationally, the notion of what is appropriate for tween readers is beginning to expand. Some Upper Middle Grade literature has begun to touch upon topics once considered taboo and only suitable for teenage readers. In an article entitled *Middle Grade Books Take on Mature Topics* (Corbett, 2016), published in the Publishers Weekly (para. 7), Lisa Von Drasek, curator of the Children's Literature Research Collections at the University of Minnesota, and a former children's librarian at the Bank Street College of Education said "*The years between 11 and 14 are the most fluid with regards to maturity and growth - mental and physical. This age group can be the most neglected as a group because they are impossible to categorise.*"

My research explores whether it is possible to write a 'soft' or Young YA novel in a New Zealand context, which tackles modern-day issues, that is able to be read by an Upper Middle Grade/tween audience. Ideally the end result is a novel sufficiently layered, that it may also be read by, or read aloud to a younger Middle Grade audience, to encourage classroom/home discussion. The issues covered in *The Rock* are essentially confusing matters to deal with at such a young age. Nevertheless, this audience is increasingly challenged by modern-day issues and locally generated literature is required to support their experience of the world.

Ages and Stages

During the course of creating *The Rock*, I endeavoured to formulate an understanding of what is acceptable and required, to write about controversial subjects in Upper Middle Grade/Young YA literature. Standard content restrictions for Middle Grade readers include no profanity, graphic violence, drugs or sexuality. The market contains numerous genres including adventure, historical, science fiction, fantasy, horror and mystery. Romance is the only genre that is excluded. The focus of Middle to Upper Middle Grade novels tends to be on friends, family, and the character's immediate world and their relationship to it. Characters react to what happens to them with minimal self-reflection, and stories revolve around the protagonist 'finding their place' or 'fitting into' the world. At the end of the story, the protagonists in Middle and Upper Middle Grade novels, remain children (Backes, 2004).

By comparison, in Young YA literature the protagonist endeavours to individualise and find their place in the world. Backes (2004) suggests YA should include secondary characters who open the protagonist's eyes to life beyond their own experiences, while in Upper Middle Grade reading when a character changes, the change should be attainable so the reader believes they could do it too. In *The Rock*, as is the case for a lot of tweens, Jessie bridges both worlds. At first she endeavours to fit in, and then as the story develops, she evolves and finds her space within the world, all whilst trying to deal with a range of emotionally charged obstacles.

Upper Middle Grade books connect the gap between Middle Grade and YA. Traditionally Upper Middle Grade books resemble Young YA in storytelling, but do not cross over into YA topics such as sex and suicide. One of the main differences between Middle Grade and Upper Middle Grade literature, is the grey area between right and wrong. Middle Grade has little moral grey area; in Upper Middle Grade literature this is introduced,

and the protagonist's inner world becomes more complex. I employed both moral grey area and complex inner world approaches in *The Rock*. However, as I learnt throughout the creative process, juggling moral grey area with age level appropriateness is a challenge.

In *The Rock*, the word count was intentionally set at 40,000 words. The accepted word count for an Upper Middle Grade audience falls between 30,000 to 40,000, unless it is an established fantasy series. Furthermore, as children tend to 'read up' (for example 10-year-olds are interested in reading about what 12- and 13-year-olds are doing), I purposely chose an older protagonist. Backes (2004) suggests that:

The standard age categories are Middle Grade (ages 8 to 12, with protagonists up to 13 years old); Upper Middle Grade (ages 10 to 14, protagonists generally being 12 to 14); and YA (ages 12 and up, with protagonists rarely under 13 years old).
(Backes, 2004, p. 36)

Vocabulary choice was also an important consideration, not only in terms of acceptable practice, but also to provide a reading challenge. To endeavour to allow *The Rock* to be read by a younger audience, it is written in such a way so that where there is innocence it is not broken, and where there is knowledge, further understanding is built. The process of writing the subject matter into the story without being explicit for the audience was difficult.

After researching current New Zealand literature, I could not find evidence of any novels specifically for an Upper Middle Grade audience, covering the distinct set of subject matter I'd chosen to write about. *Batjack* (CreateBooks, 2013), an entertaining Middle/Upper Middle Grade novel written by New Zealand author Ann Neville with a 13-year-old protagonist, was the closest I could find. However, while it is an excellent guide to bullying,

cyberbullying is only briefly mentioned; the content posted on *YouTube* doesn't greatly affect the protagonist's emotional state, as the bully comes off worse than the victim. I also reviewed *R.I.P. Cyberbullying, A Guide for Parents and Teachers* (CreateBooks, 2014), a short non-fiction guide by the same author, which was filled with useful tips.

However, it wasn't until I delved into New Zealand YA literature (aimed at youth aged 14 plus), that I found further subject matter introduced. Author Mandy Hager's YA novel *Dear Vincent* (Random House, 2013) gently and intelligently negotiated suicide, expressing the pain of trans-generational depression and the healing power of art. While Hager's *Singing Home the Whale* (Random House, 2014), a love story between a human and a whale, dealt head on with the protagonist's underlying emotional struggle following negative criticism posted about him on the internet. *Closed, Stranger* (Penguin, 1999) by Kate De Goldi, also YA, sensitively handled suicide, incest, and betrayal, and Ted Dawes' YA novel *Into the River* (Penguin Random House, 2012), the first book to be banned in New Zealand for more than two decades, was also influential in my thinking. Of particular interest were Dawes' views regarding "suitable reading ages":

The vigorously prosecuted attempts to put this book out of the reach of people under the age of 14 are wrong-headed and misguided. I have been teaching English for too long to believe that there is any such thing as the "right" age to read a novel. Readers seek out novels that speak to them. Reading a 270 page book is a major commitment. Along the way the readers will wander into worlds and scenarios they may never encounter in their lives, but if they do, perhaps they will be better equipped to deal with them. (Dawes, 2015, para. 14).

As I also believe it is important to provide sufficient material for adolescents and pre-adolescents to explore modern-day problems, I persisted to chase these themes in my work, attempting to frame them within the constraints of the genre and audience, and writing them in amongst typical themes of friendship, family, the protagonist's immediate world and her relationship to it.

Methods of Engagement

To engage readers and incorporate modern themes, I knew I needed to create the right environment. I rewrote certain controversial passages dozens of times until I was satisfied that the final copy would not corrupt innocence. For example, in *The Rock*, Jessie visits her friend Kylie's home where the family's internet policy is different from her own. At home, Jessie is only allowed online when there is an adult in the room. But at Kylie's house there are no such restrictions. After watching music clips on *YouTube*, Kylie Googles kissing in the shower. "*A boy came onto the screen and started to kiss a girl. She was wearing a bikini.*" (*The Rock*, p. 58). Jessie is mildly disturbed; she loathes watching sappy drama movies with her parents; it makes her uncomfortable. But when Kylie laughs at her reaction, Jessie goes along with it. What happens next is written with intent: readers will only understand what they already have knowledge of; before further damage is done, Jessie swiftly exits the scene.

Kylie tapped on the screen again and it instantly filled with a mosaic of images. "Look what happens when...". She was cut short by her mother, calling from the hallway. "Jessie, your mum's here!" Jessie leapt from the bed and ran out of the room. "Thanks for having me," she yelled over her shoulder to

Veronica, as she raced towards the front door, and out to the car. (The Rock, p. 59)

This passage narrowly avoids being overt, by implying what may be on the screen. However, for those with experience or knowledge, it's clear that the images are undesirable. To complete this scene, I considered what readers with no understanding of the subtext would think. The gap in their understanding is filled, in the following scene:

The images spun around and around in Jessie's head, chasing each other like a looped slide show, making her feel dizzy.
"Feed your mind with bad stuff and that's what you'll see," Dad once said after a vaguely scary horror movie. So, thanks to Kylie, this was her penance. Great. (The Rock, p. 60)

This passage implies that the images may be scenes from a horror. Furthermore, it underscores that the images disturb her, no matter what they are. Towards the end of the story the protagonist refers to the content again as "*questionable stuff online*" (*The Rock*, p. 192). By treating the scene in this way, I've endeavoured to take into account the 'reading up' factor, enabling an innocent 9- or 10-year-old (Middle Grade reader) to rationalise what is happening, but maintain appropriateness at the same time.

Upper Middle Grade literature avoids writing about encounters of a sexual nature. If there is a romance, it tends to be friendship based, with themes of loyalty and trust. Anything more is strictly limited to a crush or first kiss. This consideration of the audience is incorporated into *The Rock* beginning with a scene in which Jessie realises why she is being bullied. Kelly likes Reuben, one of Jessie's best male friends.

It was the expression on Kelly's face, that gave her away. She stood with her hands on her hips, lips slightly parted, soft doe-eyes tracking Reuben's every move. Suddenly everything clicked into place. Kelly liked Reuben. And everyone knew that what Kelly wanted, Kelly got, one way or another. (The Rock, p. 112)

Once Jessie has this realisation, a slow awakening/remembrance begins.

He'd lived across the road when she first met him. They were both only four years old. It was his eyes that caught her attention. They glowed a welcoming shade of light brown in his sun-tanned face, as he offered up a yellow buttercup, placing it under her chin to see if it would cast a golden glow. His eyes drew her in but it was his smile and kind nature that kept her; they'd been good friends ever since. (The Rock, p. 93)

Later, after he stands up for her in regards to the cyberbullying incidents, her awareness of how she feels about him grows, as she watches him kicking goals:

He was so focussed; eyes set on the posts, following the line of the ball all the way back to his foot, checking and rechecking before making the kick. His hair was flicked back in its usual way but one loose lock dropped down over his left eye. He repeatedly ran his fingers through his hair to sweep it away, without losing a moment's concentration. Jessie watched, mesmerised. She was about to walk away when he caught her

eye. He waved, his smile was like it always was when he looked at her, a radiant beam of light. She waved back. He'd known she was there all the time. The thought gave Jessie tingles and made her legs feel weak. She wondered what it would be like to kiss him. (The Rock, p. 131)

However, the relationship with Reuben does not proceed beyond this acknowledgement of their deep and long lasting friendship. The question as to whether or not there is more, remains unanswered.

As I continued my research, focussing on cyberbullying and its affect on young Middle Grade readers, certain themes repeated themselves. These included: cyberbullying is a growing problem for tweens (two out of every five children in New Zealand have been bullied online); children/youth internalize their problems; and anxiety, depression, self harm and suicide in relation to cyberbullying are a real risk. Currently, New Zealand has the second highest rates of youth suicide in the OECD. In 2015, a total 564 people committed suicide in New Zealand, including 10 children between the ages of 10 and 14, up four from the previous year, as reported in the New Zealand Herald ("Mum of 10-year-old suicide victim speaks out," 2016). In the same article, Chief Coroner Neil Maclean said that "*suicide had to be 'brought out of the shadows' and he was worried by the increases in certain demographics,*" (para, 23).

Earlier this year, 12-year-old Palmerston North Intermediate student Kyana Vergara, died suddenly at her Palmerston North home. Only after she had passed away did her family discover evidence of the troubling social media postings she'd received. Her sister said: "*I just think it was typical bullying. The hurtful words that young kids say and don't realise. You call them ugly, you call them fat and it does damage but they don't realise that.*" (Hurley,

2016, para, 7). Disturbingly, nobody realised it was happening, Kyana always had friends around and she didn't act like someone who was being bullied.

In an opinion piece posted on the Nutter's Club Facebook page, Mike King, a mental health advocate, said Kyana's passing was a tragedy and a sad reflection on our society.

Our kids feel they are not being heard... They feel like they are constantly being judged... Whatever their reason, as a parent it is scary to know that our kids feel they can't talk to us and that needs to change. (Mike King, 2016)

Sue Nicholson, the mother of a 10-year-old who took his own life in 2009, also spoke of New Zealand society and how children need to be taught more about how to deal with emotions to avoid further tragedy.

We don't talk about stuff as a community. We're embarrassed. We're scared of it, and we pass that on to our kids. We also hide a lot of our emotions. And so children don't know who to talk to anymore. ("Mum of a 10-year-old suicide victim speaks out," 2016).

In order for *The Rock* to be relevant and create change, I needed to feed some of this opinion into my work. So in *The Rock* there is disparity between Jessie and her mother. She is often busy when Jessie needs to talk to her, and so after a while Jessie gives up trying.

The book made Mum moody. You could always tell how well it was progressing by her mood. One day she would be in high spirits; the next day, in the doldrums. So you had to pick your moments to talk with her. The trouble was that Jessie's moments

and her mother's weren't in sync. Mum got angry too, if anyone distracted her, but Jessie had big questions that needed answers. Like how old did you need to be before you were allowed to dye your hair? Her questions caused Mum to swat at the air, as if flicking away an annoying fly. After a while, Jessie gave up trying to ask for advice, it was easier that way. (The Rock, p. 54)

However, as the story moves on towards its conclusion, Jessie comes to realise that even if her mother wasn't available, there was a whole community of other people she could turn to for support who would have listened to her problems. Even though she had felt alone, it wasn't the case at all.

One of the trickiest issues to write about for an Upper Grade audience was the suggestion of suicide. This was especially so whenever I considered traditional restraints. However, a report in the *American Publishers Weekly* in May 2016 gave me heart that it was the right thing to do. Publisher Beverley Horowitz said:

The cultural changes that are happening now are coming a hundred or a thousand times faster. The fact that you are seeing more serious issues in middle grade is not so much a literary trend as it is a response to these huge cultural changes we're going through. (Corbett, 2016, para, 4)

I also wanted to communicate that online bullying is not tolerated in New Zealand and when suggestions of suicide are made, it's reportable to the police. To do this, it was necessary to create the right environment. I tried to incorporate it several ways, but none were

suitable for the audience. Finally I decided upon "*Just End It*" (*The Rock*, p. 122) within the text of a comment posted online.

Beyond the aforementioned New Zealand literature regarding suicide, the best example I found internationally was *The Last Time We Say Goodbye* (Harper Collins, 2015) by author Cynthia Hand. The story revolves around a text, received by the protagonist, which may have changed the outcome if she'd responded. However, upon further research I discovered that although some websites list this title as being suitable for readers aged 10 plus, many librarians and reviewers were not of the same view, listing it as YA, or suitable for readers aged 14 plus. Amongst this older audience, another stand-out title was *Destroying Avalon* (Fremantle Press, 2015), in which cyberbullying led to the suicide event.

Whether suicide is an acceptable topic for Upper Middle Grade readers is a subject that will continue to be researched and debated. As David Levithan publisher and editorial director at Scholastic stated in the Publishers Weekly, "*The bottom line is that if something is actually happening to children - whatever it is - it's important to have a way to talk about it with children, and often that way is through a book.*" (Corbett, 2016, para, 8).

Place Matters

As I sit at my desk watching pūkekos prance beneath plum trees against a backdrop of swaying grass and multi-layered hills, I am reminded of the importance of place in my life. Of my own youth growing up on the outskirts of Auckland in the '70s, playing tennis on newly sealed streets, taking shortcuts to school through overgrown sections full of sticky paspalum stems, their tiny black seeds gluing themselves to my bare legs. Walking the dog

after school, beachcombing, fruit raiding, flower picking, Sunday School and Santa parades, and popsicles from the dairy on the way home.

In *Be My Neighbor: Exploring Sense of Place Through Children's Literature*, Stephanie Wasta states:

Clearly place shapes all of our lives in many ways, from the types of activities we engage in, the traditions we follow, the foods we eat, the languages we speak, and the attitudes we acquire. Helping elementary students gain an awareness of place can provide them with a clearer sense of self and a greater appreciation for diversity. (Wasta, 2010, p. 189)

Everyone has read a book that has helped us remember who we are. Books that we can see and hear ourselves in. Books that sing to us when they speak of bush, beach and baches, of Ag Days and Calf Club, and of rusted-out Combis and souped up cars. Personally, the first book I remember reading and thinking wow, this is right here, was Maurice Gee's *Under the Mountain* (Oxford University Press, 1979). I hung onto every word. When Emily Perkins in *Writers in Conversation* asked New Zealand writers Kate De Goldi, Glenn Colquhoun and Alison Wong, about their first memory of reading something that they recognised in terms of place, Kate De Goldi said:

It was reading 'The Runaway Settlers' by Elsie Locke because it takes place between Canterbury and the West Coast, which were my native earths really. So when she had the Taramakau River in there it was incredible, it was incredible to see it on the

page. (Perkins, E., de Goldi, K., Wong, A., & Colquhoun, G.,
2011, p. 24)

Glenn Colquhoun spoke of one of his great talismans of poetry: Hone Tuwhare's 'To a Māori Figure Cast in Bronze' outside the Chief Post Office in Auckland.

*It was the first time I read a poem about something I knew
about as a kid. As a boy I always used to look at that Maori
figure, and to think that someone had written a poem, and that
Tuwhare had written about it in the vernacular that I
understood, you know, 'the many piupiu bums' and the 'souped
up guitars' in the middle of that poem, and I thought 'I know
people who talk like that'. (Perkins, E., et al., 2011, p. 24)*

The search for identity is a trope common to YA literature, and research has repeatedly shown that place, identity and well-being in children and youth are often closely connected (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996; Day, 2007; Green & White, 2007). As the year progressed I became increasingly interested in the importance of building children's identity through reading novels set in recognisable landscapes. If a person lives somewhere for several years, particularly if he or she is raised there, then a 'sense of place' develops, with feelings for the place and its security becoming an anchor for his or her identity (Hay, 1986, 1998, 1990). Over time I came to realise that if place, identity and well being in children are connected then it is entirely possible to support children through contemporary issues using place. I reflected on a conversation I'd had with a primary school teacher in 2015. He said that New Zealand children had an advanced vocabulary for words associated with the

landscape and outdoor activities, and his view was that his students required more books set in New Zealand, with places and scenery that reflected their day to day lives.

As a writer formerly specialising in road trips around New Zealand, setting *The Rock* in small town New Zealand felt like the natural thing to do. Writing about places in the local community and then seeing kids' faces light up when I read excerpts from the manuscript was immensely satisfying. Reflecting upon this experience I believe that writers and readers are looking for the same things. Writers enjoy expressing their own sense of place through words and readers enjoy immersing themselves in landscapes they can understand.

*I did have a feeling, quite a missionary sort of feeling, when I came to write my first book, based around family, that I wanted to name streets like crazy from Christchurch, and I got the most intense pleasure out of writing names like Paparoa St, Niven St, Sharlick St - you know, they had a whole sort of poetry about them and it's asserting Christchurch. So that's it for me. I never felt like a NZ writer, or a woman writer, or any other of the minorities, but I did really feel like a Christchurch writer. Kate de Goldi, *Writers in Conversation*. (Perkins, E., et al., 2011, p. 24)*

While I enjoy writing descriptive passages, I have little experience of blending them within works of fiction, so I turned to New Zealand children's authors whose work I admire: Mandy Hager *Singing Home the Whale* (Random House, 2014); Joy Cowley *Hunter* (Penguin, 2005); David Hair *The Bone Tiki* (Harper Collins, 2009); Kate de Goldi *From the Cutting Room of Barney Kettle* (Penguin Random House, 2015), and *The 10pm*

Question (Allen & Unwin, 2008); Jacquiie McRae *The Scent of Apples* (Huia, 2011); and Des Hunt *The Peco Incident* (Harper Collins, 2011), *Cry of the Taniwha* (Harper Collins, 2009), *Phantom of Terawhiti* (Scholastic, 2013), *Project Huia* (Scholastic, 2013), and *Steel Pelicans* (Scholastic, 2012), to name but a few. All very different in terms of style but within the pages of their novels I found resonance and an unaffectedness in the crafting of their words, as well as an underlying spirituality, as if the stories themselves had unfolded from the very mountains, rivers, and streets they described.

In *The Rock*, Jessie searches for herself and a sense of identity through place, as she travels through the familiar rural, beach, home and school landscapes of her real life, as well as the virtual landscapes and worlds of online games. Through her dreams Jessie time travels into landscapes that are vaguely familiar to her as she ventures into New Zealand's past. Meanwhile, the landscapes of the afterlife leak into her real life through the influence of 'the rock'.

Throughout the creative work, I have endeavoured to weave the belief that magic is inherent in everyday life. David Hair's YA Bone Tiki trilogy, *The Bone Tiki* (Harper Collins, 2009), *The Taniwha's Tear* (Harper Collins, 2010) and *The Lost Tohunga* (Harper Collins, 2011), and Karen Healey's *Guardian of the Dead* (Allen & Unwin, 2010), amongst other works, have been defined as belonging to the 'new genre' of Māori Gothic in *A Made-Up Place: New Zealand in Young Adult Fiction* (Jackson, A., Miles, G., Ricketts, H., Schaefer, T., & Walls, K., 2011, p. 194). Even though it is suggested Hair's books oppose the Māori world view which insists on "*one world in which the natural and the supernatural are inseparable*" (p. 209), there is a similarity between *The Rock* and *The Bone Tiki* in that it's an artefact which enables Jessie to crossover into the past in her dreams. (In *The Bone Tiki* Hair's hero moves between present-day New Zealand and magical Aotearoa because he possesses a

powerful tiki). I suggest that Māori artefacts are a useful tool to bring cultures together and for that reason are also useful in creating a sense of place.

How different, then, is the treatment of Maori supernatural motifs in junior fiction by Pakeha writers - or at least, by New Zealand writers who do not publicly identify as Maori? Looking at novels by Joanna Orwin, Joy Cowley and Margaret Mahy, we find that the supernatural elements are more part of the machinery of the text than its actual subject. A fantasy plot, often focused on a quasi-magical Maori artefact which spans the centuries, is used as a way of exploring the history of Aotearoa/New Zealand, and drawing the young protagonists towards an awareness of their identity as citizens of a bicultural nation. (Jackson, A., et al., 2011, p. 200)

In *The Rock*, the shift occurs naturally through dreams which although supernatural, are described as vividly as real life. Later, when Jessie's Māori friend Aroha confesses to seeing patupaiarehe (mythical fairy folk) collecting fungus in the forest it is accepted by both children as an exciting event. Therefore, I believe that in terms of place *The Rock* endeavours to remain connected to the feelings of the land and offers a perspective closer to that of Māori, than Pakeha, where the spiritual and the 'real' world are entwined: "*Whereas the ghost ought not to be there within the western rationalist perspective, spiritual presences are expected and socially acknowledged in the Maori lived-world, through the intertwining of past, present and future in every moment.*" (Jackson, A., et al., 2011, p. 195).

I strived for oneness not separateness throughout *The Rock* and one way I tried to achieve this was by highlighting that anything is possible. I was conscious of making sure

that I did not unwittingly imply that Māori possess the 'myth-world' while Europeans possess the real one. This was not easy and the process of writing about place has left me completely in awe of the skill of New Zealand's most esteemed authors. I feel I still have a lot to learn about place and many other areas of writing for children and youth.

Into the Future

So now I return full circle to the question of my research, whether it is possible to write a 'soft' or Young YA/Upper Middle Grade novel in a New Zealand context, which incorporates controversial content but is able to be read by a younger Middle Grade audience? After completing the process, I believe that it is. Although the themes in *The Rock* may be challenging for the youngest of readers in Middle Grade to fully comprehend, I think that those who do have knowledge of the topics discussed will benefit from reading this book and those who don't will be better prepared should they strike them in the future.

The audience, as I see it, is primarily younger YA readers looking for a 'soft' read, and Upper Middle Grade readers aged 10-13, who are reading and have matured beyond standard Middle Grade. In libraries, books for Upper Middle Grade audiences are often divided between the Middle Grade and YA shelves; some libraries have Upper Middle Grade sections which cater to tweens. A longer more complex Middle Grade novel like *The Rock*, with characters who are nearly 13, would most likely be considered an Upper Middle Grade novel, but may also be shelved as a Young YA.

Throughout the creative process I've never lost sight of the fact that typically, Upper Middle Grade readers do not have direct access to the novels they read, and so I have carefully considered how my novel will be accepted by parents, teachers and librarians. The

book may be challenged by some in terms of its suitability for Upper Middle Grade in New Zealand, but if so it will find a home amongst Young YA.

I'd like to think *The Rock* could be marketed to teachers, parents, librarians, and other community groups, as a useful resource to encourage dialogue around cyberbullying and other related issues. To support *The Rock's* marketability into schools, it will be necessary to write a teachers' resource pack and make it available for free download. Marketing-wise it would also be advantageous to speak to various groups including parents and teachers about my research. To date I am currently working with a team of beta readers and have had several opportunities to read the book aloud and workshop it with children in Years 5-8.

Market considerations have certainly influenced my approach to the project. From the outset I was aware that if I wrote a straight YA novel, there would be no need to worry about how the book would be accepted/categorised in terms of its content. I was acutely aware that school and library support of a title can help catapult it to success. However, because it was important to me that *The Rock* had the ability to reach down into as young an audience as possible, I carefully negotiated through all of this audience's other constraints and acceptable standards of practice such as no profanity, graphic violence, drugs or sexuality, to create a novel that I hope will be accepted.

Just End It

I set out to write a Young YA/Upper Middle Grade novel that could also be read or read aloud to a younger Middle Grade audience. To do so required multiple layering and revision as well as a lot of research in the field. At the beginning of my research I became

quite dispirited. It seemed as if the lines were drawn, you were either writing for Middle Grade and would conform to the rules or your novel would be deemed YA.

As much as I tried to soften the suggestion of suicide in *The Rock*, mentioning it through messaging in an online game ("Just End It") became unavoidable. Throughout the year and through my research it became increasingly evident that cyberbullying was leading to anxiety, depression and in some cases self harm and suicide in our youth. It was clear that it is necessary to bring this subject out of the closet. With children signing up for social media and playing age restricted online games well before the recommended age limit of 13 years, literature written in a New Zealand context for a younger audience is required.

So I make no apology for trying to reach these children. I cried when I read the account of Kyana Vergara, whose family discovered the troubling social media messages she'd received after she died in March of this year (2016). For the bravery of 12-year-old Tayla (Newshub, Sept 2016), who spoke out about the relentless name-calling and urging her to drown herself, that made her feel so desperate she felt the only option was to take her own life. The behaviours that led to these dreadful situations has to stop.

My research in the field has taken me down health science and technology pathways I never imagined I'd be taking when I embarked on this project. My findings have led me to believe that by building empathy and awareness through literature written in our own place, from our own unique perspective, we can help children to better understand the modern-day issues they are going through. What better way is there to help them do this than through fiction?

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