

## 1. DETAILS

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<b>Thesis title</b>	'Representations of Death in Contemporary Australian Adolescent Literature and Film'
<b>Thesis type</b>	Conventional
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<b>Ethics</b>	The project does not require ethics clearance

## 2. OBJECTIVE

The aim of this project is to identify themes and/or representations of death in a number of contemporary Australian adolescent texts, and then to analyse, from different theoretical perspectives, the various treatments of death in this selection. In short, the study will attempt to ascertain how representations of death in Australian adolescent literature and film produced between 1990 and 2003 function discursively and narratively, and how they operate ideologically via their relation to gender, race, class, and other states of being—essentially to 'life'.

## 3. RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE

### 3.1 Background

As 'infants have no concept of death, and learn of it as they learn of most things: through experience and observation' (Walter 1994, p.188), fictive texts for children represent one of the mediums through which a child's knowledge of death is negotiated.<sup>1</sup> When books published expressly for children first appeared in English in the late seventeenth century, the subject of death and dying featured frequently. High infant and child mortality rates, and religious orthodoxy are held to be the causes: death was a common occurrence, and as products of an era heavily governed by Christian values, these books not only stressed the importance of salvation, but also operated to provide spiritual role models to the child (Gibson & Zaidman 1991; Kimmel 1980; Reynolds & Yates 1998). Concomitant with the decrease in infant mortality rates (and other social and religious changes), 'socialization rather than salvation' became the emphasis in the following centuries. Literary representations of deaths then began to decline in number so that by the time that death had moved out of the realm of the home and into the hospital, the presence of death in children's books was largely absent (Gibson & Zaidman 1991, p.232).

It is only fairly recently that death has undergone something of a 'revival'; during the last three or four decades talking about and studying death has become 'fashionable', to quote the words of Walter (1994). Therefore, despite Mellor and Shilling's claim that 'as a society we remain ... reluctant to acquaint children with the facts of death' (1993, p.7), representations of death in children's literature—and within adolescent fiction in particular—are now quite common.<sup>2</sup>

### **3.2 Significance**

The frequency of these accounts is not reflected in the number of academic analyses devoted to the subject, however. Moreover, existing studies do not examine death in a socio-cultural context, but are instead dedicated solely to explaining how children's fiction can help children cope with grief, or to illustrating which books are suitable for introducing children to the concept of death. Criticism is thus descriptive rather than analytic, primarily dealing with death in a bibliographic or thematic sense, while simultaneously arguing the value of such books as bibliotherapy (Apseoff 1991; Bailis 1974; Chaston 1991; Gibson & Zaidman 1991; Hunt 1991; Pyles 1988; Sadler 1991). Overall, this means that there is little discussion of the social and cultural meanings of death, and limited examination of its function in discursive, ideological and rhetorical forms with McCarron (2000), Mallan (2002a; 2002b) and Wilson (2001) perhaps the few exceptions.

As death is universal, academic discussion of the topic is often over-generalised too (Charmaz, Howarth & Kellehear 1997). Since Ariès *Western Attitudes to Death* (1974), for instance, the cultural meanings derived from responses to death have been located within the broader frame of the Western world, rather than at a nation-specific site.<sup>3</sup> Reynolds and Yates (1998) analysis and Avery and Reynolds (2000) edited collection clearly illustrate this point. These studies also demonstrate that there has been little methodologically and theoretically innovative work carried out in a contemporary context as the focus has tended to be on the Victorian era with McCarron (2000), Mallan (2002a; 2002b) and Wilson (2001) once again the exceptions. To date, critical analyses of death in contemporary Australian children's literature in particular are quite narrow in scope being grounded in either a specific theory (Mallan 2002a, 2002b), or treated as part of a larger study (Scutter 1999; Wilson 2001).

### **3.3 Rationale**

The project's significance is demonstrated by its capacity to highlight and address these methodological and contextual gaps which exist specifically in the field of death studies in children's literature. However, it is also innovative in its ability to contribute to a wider body of knowledge which has chiefly neglected to recognise the value and insights that children's literature may provide in exploring culture and death. Representations of death in children's literature and film may provide an unusually clear opportunity to understand some of the ways in which meaning is created and shared within a society, an argument which is based on two separate but, in this case, interrelated ideas. These are, firstly, that any critical study of a

culture's approaches and responses to death can expose some of the most fundamental features of its social life (Seale 1998, p.211). As Ariés' (1974; 1985; 1991) studies illustrate, a culture's representations of death may be read collectively as a text to give insights into its social systems, death ethos, conceptions of selfhood, temporal orientation, and religious and secular attitudes. Secondly, children's literature may reflect these values with special clarity, primarily because of the vigilance with which it is monitored (Niall 1984, p.5), but also because it is intimately engaged in the socialisation of children. As Stephens argues, childhood is viewed as 'the crucial formative period in the life of a human being, the time for basic education about the nature of the world, how to live in it ... what to believe, what and how to think ...' (1992, p.8). And the usual purpose of children's fiction, he adds, is to assist in this process, meaning that children are offered a network of ideological positions pertaining to 'life' and how to 'live it', all of which are constructed within social practices. Gibson and Zaidman's appraisal of the articles submitted to the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* Winter 1991-92 issue on death essentially illustrates this point: 'when a character dies, another learns a little more about how to live ... The dying instruct the living about true priorities and the worth of each individual's life' (1991, p.233).

#### **4. APPROACH**

While this statement fails to take into account that 'true priorities' and 'worth' are not universal but subjective and culturally specific, it does highlight the instructional aspect common to representations of death in children's literature and, in turn, generates a number of questions that may be asked in order to frame this discussion: What are the discursive practices involved in the selected texts' constructions of death?, In what ways do these representations of death instruct the living?, What are the 'true priorities' inscribed within the text?, How are readers positioned to respond to these ideologies?, How do these representations (as a group) coalesce to produce particular patterns or themes?, and How do the answers to these questions relate specifically to Australian schemas? These questions are wholly guided by the various analytical tools and research procedures employed in the study. Outlined below, they incorporate: comprehensive discussions regarding the project's conceptual and theoretical/methodological framework (4.1 – 4.2); the methods and timeframe for collecting, organising and analysing the data (4.3); a detailed outline of the thesis (4.4); and a schedule incorporating both work to date and future work up until submission (4.5).

##### **4.1 Conceptual Framework**

Death is a physical event, but it is also an abstract notion—abstract in the 'truest' sense of the word since death is ultimately unknowable. As Bauman argues, the concept does not just defy imagination, it is the archetypal contradiction in terms (1992, p.15). However, there is nothing more certain at the moment of our birth than the inevitability of our death, and as human beings we are possibly the only creatures able to reflect on this knowledge about our mortality. Death is one of the

few subjects to truly claim universal interest; throughout human history, it has been an enduring theme of religion, art, myth, science and philosophy. Schopenhauer argues, for instance, that death is *the* [my emphasis] muse of philosophy, because without it 'there would hardly have been any philosophizing' (quoted in Bauman 1992, p.13), while Kearsley claims that '[i]n the sense of gestalt, the foreground of life is only possible with the background of death' (1989, p.3). Death, says Kearsley is omnipresent, it lies 'within our fantasies and dreams, language and metaphor, jests and news, sports and music ...[is central] to our thought systems and activities'. It figures abundantly in art and literature—from Dürer's allegoric representation of the four horsemen of the apocalypse to the contemporary murder-mystery novels of popular culture—and also in theoretical discourse.<sup>4</sup> Amongst the many who have made death a study are Baudrillard, Foucault, Freud, and Merleau-Ponty. Ariès has historicised death and its images in the Western world (Ariès 1974, 1985, 1991), Kearsley has provided a sociology of death and dying (1989), and Kübler-Ross has documented the subjective experiences of the dying (1969).

Bronfen and Goodwin, in fact, claim that 'much of what we call culture comes together around the collective response to death' (1993, p.3). Yet perhaps the most obvious thing about death is that it is ultimately *unknowable*. It is 'always only represented. There is no knowing death, no experiencing it and then returning to write about it, no intrinsic grounds for authority in the discourse surrounding it' (Bronfen & Goodwin 1993, p.4). As Derrida argues, '[l]ess than for any other noun, save "God" ... is it possible to attribute to the noun "death", and above all to the expression "my death", a concept or a reality that would constitute the object of an indisputably determining experience' (1993, p.22). Death is an absolute nothing (no thing)—impossible to define, perceive, visualise.

This inability to imagine nothingness—not just no matter, but no thought, nonentity—means that the knowledge we do have of death is mediated through symbolic activity, providing us with a vast cache of signs, images and ideas to define that thing which can never be defined.<sup>5</sup> Representations of death, say Bronfen and Goodwin, thus often serve as metatropes for the process of representation itself, with their 'ungraspable signified, always pointing to other signifiers, other means of representing what finally is just absent' (1993, p.4). Death, it emerges, is a site of paradox, repeatedly referring to more than one state, or one meaning. The definitions for 'death' provided by *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*, for instance, cover meanings which are corporeal, theological, representational, mythological:

**death** n. **1** *the final cessation of vital functions in an organism; the ending of life.* **2** *the event that terminates life.* **3** **a** *the fact or process of being killed or killing (stone to death; fight to the death).* **b** *the fact or state of being dead (eyes closed in death; their deaths caused rioting).* **4** **a** *the destruction or permanent cessation of something (was the death of our hopes).* **b** *colloq. something terrible or appalling.* **5** (*usu. Death*) *a personification of death, esp. as a destructive power, usu. represented by a skeleton.* **6** *a lack of religious faith or spiritual life.*  
(1992, p.284)

Death can be represented by a: coffin; cross; crow; devil; grave; grim reaper; hourglass; journey; river; scythe; skeleton; skull; tombstone; weeping willow; the colour black; or the colour white. And death figures prominently in everyday language—there are: death-rattles, death-rolls, death rows, death seats, death squads, death-tolls, death-traps, death-warrants, death-watches, and death-wishes; we can: cark it, catch our death, or have a dead heat (*draw*); be: at death's door, dead-and-alive (*slow*), dead and buried (*past; over*), a dead beat (*loser*), dead on our feet, deadpan, dead tired, dead to the world, a dead weight, or like death warmed up. *Dead* can be added to: boring, broke, and cold; it can mean: defunct, exhausted, extinct, flat, or tedious; while *die* can also mean: disappear, fail, fizzle, founder, rot, sink, stall, or subside.

Death's meaning/s exist in 'a kind of perpetual vacillation' to use Bronfen and Goodwin's term, and reading death therefore becomes a complex process of negotiation between multiply encoded signs, symbols and terms which are at the same time repressed, manifest, concealing, revealing, stable, unstable, collective, individual. The instability and elusiveness of our sense of death's meanings is perhaps best summed up by Bronfen and Goodwin when they argue that '[t]o speak of reading death is already to have shifted the referent, since we read texts, representations of the real' (1993, p.10). So how then *can* we read death? Semantics would suggest that there can be no discussion of death without a reference to life—'death exists in a relationship to life ... "death" both is and is not a "part" of life; it is a "stage" of life (a part) and the negation of life altogether (is "other")' (Schleifer 1990, pp.5-6). Thus, how a culture defines and orientates itself towards death not only has ramifications for the meanings which that culture assigns to life (Bauman 1992; Bronfen 1992; Kears 1989, 1997; Seale 1998), but also dictates to a large extent 'how their social institutions, symbolic systems and cognitive schema coalesce into distinctive, meaningful cultural wholes' (Kears 1997, p.184). Death, Kears argues, is a socially constructed idea which is not instinctive, but rather channelled to us, formed by, and learned through the social structures, images, symbols and rituals of our culture (1989, p.22). The issue of death can reveal the most significant values by which an individual lives their life and evaluates and orders their experiences (Huntington & Metcalf in Kears 1989) making the meanings a culture creates for death very much 'a sociological problem' (Kears 1989, p.58).

## **4.2 Theoretical/Methodological Framework**

For much of the twentieth century, analyses of death and inquiries into the nature of mortality have been defined by demography and pathology (Prior 1989; Walter 1993)—'visible only through an objective and scientific language which speaks of mortality, disease and causation' (Prior 1989, p.11). The reduction of death to merely a physical or statistical event reveals much about the epistemological and ontological precepts of this period, as does the very different (and varied) emphases placed on the study of death today. What we 'know' about death in contemporary society is generated within a framework which is entirely multifaceted.

As some of the theoretically sophisticated literary criticism produced in the last decade or so illustrates, the topic is often approached via theories concerned with language, representation, body politics, history, power, gender, and sexuality (Avery & Reynolds 2000; Barreca 1990; Bassein 1984; Bronfen 1992; Doherty 1994; Goodwin & Bronfen 1993; Mallan 2002a, 2002b; Martin 1997; McCarron 2000; Reynolds & Yates 1998; Schleifer 1990; Stewart 1984; Tanner 1996). Doherty, Schleifer and Bassein, for example, all focus on narrative, rhetoric and death: Doherty and Schleifer in the context of rhetoric and discourse theory; and Bassein by calling on literary tradition to demonstrate how women's transgression of accepted codes of behaviour has often resulted in their literal or symbolic death. This bond between story and mortality is Stewart's angle too; death, he argues is 'signatory to the very charter of fiction' (1984, p.51). Bronfen and Mallan show that death is inexorably linked with femininity in Western culture: eroticised, sexualised and subject to close inspection. They, like Tanner also, examine the relationship between literary representations of death and the power dynamics of the gaze.

A number of diverse essays in Goodwin and Bronfen's edited collection *Death and Representation* (1993) are grouped together in a way which reveals similar resonances. In an examination of the social meanings of death, the introduction to this text summarises some of these key points by noting that: since death is not knowable it is always represented; death is the constructed Other; death is gendered; and death is physical (p.20). The term *representation*, for example, 'comes to current critical usage from essentially two sources: politics and psychoanalysis', meanings which relate to each other chiefly through issues of power (Bronfen & Goodwin 1993, p.4). To speak of power in a discursive sense—and particularly in relation to bodies—is unavoidably to also speak of Foucault. Much of Foucault's theory is instrumental in revealing how power is installed into discourse, how it operates in relation to other discourses, and how it produces real material effects (McHoul & Grace 1993, pp.19,21). For Foucault, 'death is at once the locus and the instrument of power: that is, an independent power inheres in death itself, but other forms of power rely on death to disclose and enforce themselves' (Bronfen & Goodwin 1993, p.5).

Foucault's most valuable arguments to a study of death and culture are those associated with normative judgements, power-knowledge and biopolitics. The concept of 'biopower', for example, begins with the view that populations have an economic value—they are a resource which aids in the production of strength, wealth and power for the state: 'biological existence [is] reflected in political existence' (1978, p.142). Concomitant with this idea of state as 'an end in itself', Foucault explains, is the necessity of a body of knowledge and an administrative apparatus (social/human sciences, and the 'policing' institutions which are concerned with such things as criminal activity, health, and welfare) to watch, regulate and control populations—to aid in 'the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life' (1978, p.140). The mechanisms of power are thus 'addressed to the body, to life', says Foucault (1978, p.147), and the way that individuals and populations come to understand themselves, their behaviours, values and aspirations are all produced by, and subject to, the forces of the apparatuses and technologies of this power (*biopower*). Our perception of what constitutes 'healthy' and 'normal', for instance, is created discursively through

these institutions, making notions of normality powerful ideological tools. Thus, as Baudrillard (1993) hypothesises, our social survival depends on prohibiting, manipulating and legislating death: the ultimate example of that which is abnormal and unhealthy. 'It is necessary to ward off death', he argues, '... in order to evade the unbearable moment when flesh becomes nothing but flesh, and ceases to be a sign' (1993, p.180). It is at this boundary, where the dissolution of unity between life and death—or the disruption of exchange—occurs that power is established, Baudrillard claims, meaning that death 'ought never to be understood as the real event that effects a subject or a body, but as a form in which the determinancy of the subject and of value is lost' (1993, p.5).

It is this indeterminacy which Bronfen and Goodwin see as the crux in any representation of death. The corpse, they argue, is a destabilising force: inherently double, it occupies two places simultaneously—it is both the here and the nowhere; resembling itself (its own double) it disrupts 'stable categories of reference and position in time and space'; it is 'a signifier with an incessantly receding, ungraspable signified'; it is the site where both the collective and the individual body locates meaning; it is both revealing and concealing (1993, pp.4,12,19). If any representation of death is, in fact, a misrepresentation, an analysis of it needs to determine not only how it claims to represent death, but also—however suppressed—what else it in fact represents (p.20). Representations of death in western culture with their destabilising, enigmatic nature, for example, are inexorably associated with those of the (similarly) multiply coded feminine body. Death and Woman have been linked together in art and literature for centuries, perhaps simply because our culture sees both as radically other to the norm, Bronfen and Goodwin explain; death and femininity have been discursively constructed as 'the point of impossibility' (1993, p.13). 'Over representations of the dead feminine body', Bronfen argues, 'culture can repress and articulate its unconscious knowledge of death which it fails to foreclose even as it cannot express it directly' (1992, p.xi).

It is here—at the site of the body—that sexuality and death most clearly intersect. More often than not, representations of the female body are imbued with patriarchal ideologies which turn the woman into a spectacle or an object of sight, a practice which clearly engages with notions of sexuality and desire. The dead female body has been similarly encoded, which means that, in Mallan's words, we have come to see the deaths of women as 'fatal attractions calling a crowd of onlookers and inviting close inspection' (2002a, p.175). So how then does culture characterise or define the relationship between death and masculinity? Representations of masculinity are typically constructed in Western patriarchal cultures to reflect heroic states of being, even in death. Death in war and the young man's corpse, for instance, contribute to definitions of manhood and virility, particularly as Buchbinder points out, because such images are frozen at a point in time when youth ensures the male body is in peak physical condition (2002, p.19), effectively suggesting that even in death, the (idealised) masculine body is more closely aligned with life. Located at the other end of this orthodox scale is the pejorative representation of masculinity, the homosexual male, who is consistently linked with pathology and death. Most recently this is in connection with AIDS, a link which Dollimore explains, is often imagined to include both suicidal and

murderous impulses in which homosexuals court death, contract the virus, and then knowing of their impending death, willingly infect others through sexual contact (1998, p.x).

Although pervasive in Western culture (particularly in art), the connection between death and sexuality is both manifest and concealed, allowing us to recognise and register it at the same time we do not 'see' it (Dollimore 1998, p.xii). According to Bronfen, in psychoanalytic terms, representations of death function like a symptom (a repression that fails): the knowledge of death (a threat to the health of the psyche) is repressed at the same time as the strong desire for its articulation will not allow it to be, meaning that narrative or aesthetic representations of death let us 'repress our knowledge of the reality of death precisely because here death occurs *at* someone else's body and *as* an image' (1992, p.x). It is the death of the/an other, and as death is always outside our own personal experience, representations of death are forever Other—not mine. Philosophies relating to otherness have stimulated much discussion in contemporary critical theory and are particularly useful when applied to analyses concerned with representations of death, because death and Other are so often conflated. Kristeva, for instance, sees the dead body as the definitive border, that which 'encroaches upon everything'. It does not signify death, but instead all that is thrust aside to live. Death is the Other that we define ourselves against, and through which our subjective and group identity are constituted by excluding that which 'does not respect borders, positions, rules' (1982, pp.3,4). Representations of death, Bronfen and Goodwin explain, therefore reveal 'how not only individuals but also groups have defined themselves against what they are not but wish to control' (1993, p.20).

Studying death in broader sociological terms (i.e. at a group or society level) has led to some valuable insights and interesting theories about the concept. Walter's *The Revival of Death* (1994), for instance, uses theories of modernity and postmodernity to examine the resurgence of interest in death. A sociological approach to death and dying in Western society, it places this 'revival' in an historical context, identifying some themes and tensions characteristic to the death culture of the modern era. By examining the ways in which public discourses shape our attitudes towards death and dying, Walter demonstrates how our experiences of the dying process are intrinsically linked with cultures and social institutions. Walter places cultural responses to death (proceeding from approximately the fifteenth century) into three categories or ideal types.<sup>6</sup> Beginning with traditional responses to death and moving on to modern and then to 'neo-modern', he organises death in such a way that identifies consistencies within each type that relate to: bodily context; social context; authority; coping; the journey; and values. The traditional language of death he sees as chiefly religious, communal, and quick and frequent, while modern experiences of death, he argues, are hidden and are typified by the domination of the public sphere over the private—authority in this era is assigned to the doctor and the hospital, and the patient is objectified as a case or a site of disease. The neo-modern strand (neo meaning 'new, young, revived in a new form') came into existence, Walter explains, because of the suppression of private experiences of death by medical discourse and bureaucratic practices; the revival of death challenges modern notions and 'attempts to intertwine public discourse and private experience' rather than viewing them as

separate to each other (pp.39,46). Neo-modern responses to death are thus classified by two disparate themes: postmodern and late-modern. '[I]n the "postmodern" strand, private experience invades and fragments public discourse, while in [the] "late-modern" strand, expert discourse manipulates private experience' (p.39). The two exist together in tension and in a reflexive state which feeds back into the experiences of death and the practices our society have associated with it (which in turn generate new—or revived—ways of approaching death).

Although Walter's social structure of death sees the private and the public intertwined, he nevertheless concludes that the authority associated with death rests with the self and that the meaning of death is created interpersonally. Like Mellor (1993), he argues that meaning in contemporary society is becoming increasingly privatised—constructed within an individual rather than a community context. Consequently, 'any attempts to construct meaning around death are inherently fragile' (Mellor 1993, p.21). Walter's idea of the revivalist's modern death also exposes this fragility—it is one in which meaning is *taken* from tradition, ritual, and religion, but is not *rooted* in them, reflecting the fragmented, disconnected and disposable aspects of postmodern society (1994, p.188). Hawkins (1990-91) identifies similar trends in 'Constructing death: Three pathographies about dying' (pathographies being personal narratives of illness and death told by a parent, spouse, relative etc.). In each of these instances, death generates a plurality of meanings and, despite the similarities in each author's background and circumstances, all evolve markedly different formulations of the experience; '... we seem to have replaced the tendency to ignore death with the tendency to generate a plurality of concepts about it', Hawkins says (1990-91, p.303). Furthermore, all models invariably construct notions of a 'good death', an ideology which Hawkins argues is prevalent in the pathographies of contemporary society: 'Today's popular books describing the illness and death of a loved one suggest not that a new *ars moriendi* shaped by the death and dying movement is underway, but that we are still very much in search of a model for the "good death"' (p.303).

'In the age of social sciences, surveys [are] conducted into how people die and grieve which ... identify those styles that have greater and lesser personal costs, and these results [are] fed back into popular consciousness', Walter argues (1994, p.199). Such constructions inevitably contribute to ideas of good or right deaths, says Hawkins—ideas which ultimately become mythic expectations. As medicine continues to contribute to longer life spans, a typical death today is prolonged, and signified by old age, cancer or heart disease. Untypical deaths (and thus distressing or 'bad') are those that are sudden, involve children or young people, or are construed as senseless. Using Walter's theory, a neo-modern construction of the good death is an aware and pain-free death which is characterised by an ability to finish personal psychological business, and a death which does not carry culturally negative values (e.g. suicide, drugs, car accidents from speed or DUI, murder), while a 'bad' death would constitute one in which the dying person was isolated, in denial, and unable to exercise control over both the manner in which they die and the arrangements for disposal of their body after death. 'The catch phrases of the neo-modern death are expression of emotion, personal growth,

sharing, autonomy, and informed choice, while the most heinous sins are social isolation and psychological denial' (Walter 1994, p.59).

Creating narratives from the experiences of death and paying more attention to the emotional and psychological aspects of dying and grieving, Walter argues, is part of the humanising of death, dying and bereavement in the last 40 years (1993, p.285). Hawkins suggests that these narratives about death organise the experience into a coherent pattern which gives the event a specific meaning. By identifying different paradigms of these experiences, she, like Walter, formulates several ideal types, such as ritual death, victorious death, one's own death, easy death, meaningful death, graceful death and heroic death, all of which contribute to notions of the 'good' or 'right' death. Above all, this study suggests that in the absence of the universal 'art of dying' (*ars moriendi*) common to Western culture in past times and in a society which values individuality and emphasises pluralism, death is consistently constructed in terms of the personal and the individual—as an 'experience that can be possessed by or assimilated into the personality' (1990-91, p.317). It seems then that the impetus behind the structuring, ritualising, ordering and narrativising of the experience of death—paradoxically—is to come to *know* it, to create sense and meaning out of something which is ultimately unknowable and, as Hawkins states, quite simply the end of life (p.317).

Much of the sociology of death (particularly in an age where the typical death is a prolonged one) is concerned with the dying process *per se*—the hospice environment, palliative care, psychological profiling and counselling etc, asking such questions as: How does an individual cope with dying, or define their own death?, and How does an institution control suffering, or facilitate a person to 'die their own way'? Dying, death rituals, and mourning have become very much an individual process—the logical conclusion of Western individualism whereby living 'my own way' has become extended to 'dying/mourning my own way' too (Walter 1994). While Walter has demonstrated that death and dying are now popular subjects of discussion, nevertheless, for the most part, the ideology associated with contemporary death implies that all deaths are, in theory, preventable. In this sense, death is often constructed in terms of failure, a 'morality tale' which is, moreover, medically endorsed (Kellehear & Anderson 1997, pp.8,9) as death becomes no more than 'an extreme example of disease' (Seale 1998, p.77). As Baudrillard succinctly argues, today '*it is not normal to be dead*' (1993, p.126). Death then becomes a product of risk—with an accompanying ideal of the risk avoiding individual who is 'subject to exhortations to prolong life and avoid death by engaging with [a] widespread social value of healthy, safe behaviour' (Seale 1998, p.82). In a society where bodies are the responsibility of the individual or the supervising adult, death as a result of risk-taking behaviour or irresponsible regimes of health and fitness, is a shameful event (Reynolds & Yates 1998, p.157). The political implications of these statements are vast, particularly if we consider Singer's argument that '[c]oncerns about health can be used to justify any number of interventions into the lives of bodies and the forms of exchange in which they move' (1993, p.30). Death in contemporary western societies can at the same time—conversely—engage with a rhetoric characterised by blame and responsibility, where fault rests with social agencies. Ironically, at a time when death is constructed more and more as an individual experience, and bodies the

province of our own self, there is a social tendency to release individuals from responsibility for their actions; the blame for death can then be laid elsewhere—the system, society as a collective whole, the situation, the institution, or even another person.

Death is also systematically represented in the western world as something to be feared, particularly in images which reach us through popular consciousness, where death is often associated with—or as a result of—violence and pain. Thus Veatch sees death as ‘an enemy to be conquered’, an attitude which he claims results from society’s ‘activist approach’ to life (quoted in Hawkins 1990-91, p.302), and, Hawkins adds, ‘our recent technological ability to control biological processes’. The obsession with youth, coupled with popular culture’s frequent images of death and its ‘immortalist’ themes (where death is often only temporary), additionally means that we may not need to take its occurrence seriously (Kearl 1997, p.192; Kellehear 2000, p.9). Furthermore, the notion of death’s permanence is openly exploited by New Age and postmodern constructions, particularly in the motion picture industry as films such as *E.T.*, *Ghost*, *The Matrix* and *Vanilla Sky* demonstrate. Rather than being presented as the predictable outcome of historical or biographical events, death in these instances engages with the political economy of immortalism prevalent in popular culture today (Kearl 1997; Kellehear 2000). For example, McCarron suggests that in one particular type of adolescent horror fiction, ‘however graphically depicted, however mangled the corpse ... [the] narratives ceaselessly work to deny the actuality of death’ (2000, p.190).

Contemporary Australian representations of death owe much to systems of meaning adopted from both the Western world and the global arena. Kellehear (2000), for instance, notes that many of our death-related social practices are inherited, concluding that:

*Australian ways of grieving, Australian ideas of death and some Australian ways of thinking about [body] disposal are not logical or natural outcomes of our local experience but are rather socially constructed ways of understanding inherited from a variety of dominant foreign influences.*

(2000, p.9)

Are there typically Australian styles of dying then? In ‘Death in the Country of Matilda’, Kellehear and Anderson (1997) argue that the Australian ‘way of death’, like the Australian way of life, exists as an ‘officially endorsed set of cultural images’ all of which are patriarchal, gentrified and medicalised (p.1). Citing the Bushman, the Soldier and *Homo suburbia* (the suburban dweller) as key characters in the myth-making process, they demonstrate how experiences of death in Australia are expressed via celebrated images of national identity, noting how these dominating images—the deaths which figure in a political and historical schema as important—act to marginalise or silence other representations of death which do not conform to these systems of meaning: ‘dominating images of death reflect dominating influences in life itself ... [f]or national history and identity, the politics of death reflect the politics of everyday life’ (p.12). There is an assumption in modern Australia, they add, that ‘same *causes* of death means same *experiences* of death for everyone ... differences included’ (p.9).

For the Bushman or the Soldier, death was mythologised as exterior, working-class, white, public and thus to some extent, communal. Attributable to the harsh Australian landscape, infectious diseases, war, the fight against colonial authority or the Aborigine, these select representations of death were essential to the nation-building exercise. To this day, the swagman, the colonial settler, and the ANZAC (images expressed via war and territory) occupy a prominent place in the national consciousness, promoting an Australia which is gendered, masculinist, and racist. The 'gentrification' of Australia's population and the emergence of *Homo suburbia* have contributed to this iconography of death images significantly, however, so that today death is mostly presented as interior, private, middle-class, and medicalised. The deaths which Kellehear and Anderson suggest are the focus of *Homo suburbia*'s anxieties are those which come from within the home or threaten the home and the bourgeois dream of 'privacy, comfort, control, predictability, safety and financial and marital security': suicide, road accidents, AIDS, SIDS, and the top two killers of the Western world, cardiovascular disease and cancer (p.7).

Research concerned with Australian discourses of mortality nevertheless continues to suggest a close connection with the mythic and ideological function of landscapes in Australian culture. To quote Rayner, the landscape's varying characterisation in constructions of Australia represents it as 'a menacing wilderness, a site of racial conflict and an allegorical mirror to personal and societal turmoil' (2000, p.118). Colonial systems of meaning drawn from the nation's origins as a penal colony, combined with the inability of the Europeans to 'conquer' the land have created mythologies which emphasise failure, defeat and hopelessness, Hills argues (1991). The competitive relationship between land and self owes much to the ways in which the journey has been inscribed into the national ethos as the landscape has often operated narratively as a determinant of physical existence—a place to test the worthiness and stamina of the self—and this concept still finds expression in contemporary narratives for both adults and children (e.g. *Dirt Music* (Tim Winton 2001), *The Blue Feather* (Gary Crew & O'Hara 1997), *A New Kind of Dreaming* (Anthony Eaton 2002)). The idea of the intractability of the landscape has resulted in binary meanings, however, constructing it as both a place of spiritual possibility, but also of sterility and death, meaning that the shadow of death common to fictions which employ a distinctively Australian landscape—films such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, novels about the wreck of the *Batavia*, and myths surrounding the Azaria Chamberlain case, for instance—has, over time, become embedded in the Australian consciousness.

### 4.3 Data

The meanings which a culture creates for death thus have an intimate association with the meanings which are constructed for life, because there can be no discussion of 'death' without a reference to 'life'. In fact, a large proportion of the sociology of death illustrates that 'much of what we call culture comes together around the collective response to death' (Bronfen & Goodwin 1993, p.3). In a contemporary context, this response is chiefly characterised by tensions and complexities which possibly account for the wide variation in how we come to think

about death, and also the diversity of its representations. Death themes in contemporary Australian children's literature, for example, are not only explored in a variety of ways, and from a multitude of angles—appearing in numerous genres and types of narratives (including historical fiction, speculative fiction and contemporary realism)—they are also frequent. The current list of texts, drawn initially from a sampling of Australian fiction for adolescents produced between approximately 1990 and 2003, is therefore extensive (see 5). However, the final selections will be determined largely by their relevance to the theoretical perspectives chosen for the analyses.

Data analysis will be/has been undertaken in the following ways:

**Stage 1:** (completed [dd/mm/yy]) Compilation of a bibliography incorporating theoretical texts and the (preliminary) texts selected for analysis using EndNote software.

**Stage 2:** (ongoing) Creation of a database and accompanying notes for the texts selected for analysis. At this stage, specific focus texts will also be selected, narrowing the preliminary sample considerably.

**Stage 3:** (ongoing) Construction of a detailed matrix of the texts selected for analysis, recording information such as: title; author; date of publication; modes/genres (eg. supernatural); themes (eg. violence); keywords (eg. gender, history); narrative strategies (eg. postmodernist); death types (eg. illness); and values (eg. family, agency) in order to identify commonalities between the texts.

**Stage 4:** (completed [dd/mm/yy]) Organisation of the texts in a way which demonstrates the common themes, keywords and ideas between them. The end result of this stage is the thesis outline (see 4.5).

**Stage 5:** (begins [dd/mm/yy]) Detailed analysis of the sample texts. This stage is organised according to the thesis outline, with its outcome being completion of Sections One to Four of the thesis.

**Stage 6:** (begins [dd/mm/yy]) Writing the introductory chapters (which are drawn from the critical works, Sections One to Four and the Literature Review).

**Stage 7:** (begins [dd/mm/yy]) Collating the data as a whole. This stage results in the concluding chapter and involves: exploring the limitations of the study; drawing together the results from Sections One to Four to give an overview of patterns and themes which emerge from the study; looking at the implications these results have for the field of children's literature; offering potential directions for further research.

#### 4.4 Thesis Outline

The scope of the project has been narrowed since the proposal<sup>7</sup>, partly because of the large volume of books, but principally because so many of the selected works are aimed only at adolescents.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the frequency of death's appearance across a multitude of genres in this age category suggests that representations of death in contemporary fiction and film have a powerful appeal to adolescent audiences. Organising the selected texts in a systematic or logical manner (e.g. categorisation according to theme or subject matter) has thus proved difficult—a difficulty which has been compounded by the indeterminacy and instability that surrounds death, and the vacillation that exists between its many meanings.

Nevertheless, several trends have emerged from the examination of approximately forty of the sample texts. Firstly, every representation of death invariably engages with contemporary ideas about subjectivity, agency, identity and power. Secondly, each operates to signify transformation or change: thematically, symbolically and/or actually. And lastly—perhaps because death is both a physical event *and* an abstract concept—its treatment falls roughly into two categories: realistic, body or physical focused texts, and texts which possess an element of the fantastic or the paranormal (particularly supernatural).

The thesis will be arranged into four sections, each of which has been arranged according to the themes or areas of interest which they share—common themes and keywords appear below (4.4.2 – 4.4.6)—and also to the idea that each representation of death in the texts reflects a preoccupation with either the corporeal or the metaphysical realm. These groupings are also loosely based on ideas taken from the introduction to the collection *Death and Representation* (Bronfen & Goodwin 1993) which features a summary of some of the key points drawn from these essays' examinations of the social meanings of death (see 4.2). Representations of death also engage with questions of power, Bronfen and Goodwin argue (1993, pp.4-5), and it is power—coupled with ideology—which, critically speaking, provides the common thread that binds the sections together.

Given that there is a large number of texts which have yet to be studied, and that each of the categories and texts have overlaps in theory and content, the following structure is a guide only.<sup>9</sup> The organization of these analyses will also owe much to the writing period itself, when ideas are better developed and new themes emerge in response to this process.

#### **4.4.1 Introduction**

This section begins with a brief—and general—introduction to the topic of death and, in particular, death in children's literature. By examining why critical analyses of death in contemporary Australian adolescent literature are few in number and quite narrow in scope, it also provides the justification and specific aim for the project. Approaches to the research are then offered by summarising the content of each section and/or chapter.

#### **4.4.2 Points of Departure**

Drawing heavily on the Literature Review, this chapter provides a context for the study by: critically reviewing the literature; locating the literature in a cultural setting; outlining the relevant theoretical and methodological approaches; and exploring notions of death as they relate to philosophy, literature and social theory.

#### **4.4.3 Section 1: 'Reading Death: Sign, Psyche, Text'**

Like the initial group of essays in *Death and Representation*, Section One also looks at representations of death as texts asking such questions as: 'How does the psyche represent death? What forms does that representation take? How does the process take place? What are the purposes and meanings of such representations?' (Bronfen & Goodwin 1993, p.10). As the human psyche is the ultimate source of fantasy, in addition, many of the texts in this selection share a

preoccupation with literal transformations (metamorphoses, other selves), non-rational phenomena (ghosts, supernatural entities), and other elements of the fantastic. These types of narratives inevitably engage with notions of death (even if only figurative) because they are concerned with a change in form or a state of being, and because so many of them speculate on the possibilities of 'life' *after* death.

- **Keywords:** sign, psyche, text, subjectivity, metamorphosis, supernatural, rebirth, reincarnation, the 'undead', agency, body politics, gender, psychoanalytic theory, fantasy, representation, postmodernism, boundaries, otherness, symbol, transformation.
- **Texts:** *Black Ice; Del-Del; Flesh and Blood; Foxspell; Gothic Hospital; Homestrung; A New Kind of Dreaming; Outside Permission; Strange Objects.*

#### 4.4.4 Section 2: 'Situating Death: Space, Time, History'

Section Two takes as its theme the dimensions of space and time, both concrete and abstract, to examine how they intersect with notions of death. In this instance, representations of death are analysed in conjunction with landscapes (real and imagined), perceptions of time, and the discourse of historical fiction.

- **Keywords:** space, time, genealogy, history, landscape, environment, nature/culture, nation, borders, postcolonial theory, psychoanalytic theory.
- **Texts:** *Black Ice; Flesh and Blood; Foxspell; Gilbert's Ghost Train; Grandad's Gifts; Homestrung; A New Kind of Dreaming; Norton's Hut; Outfall; Outside Permission; Poison Under Their Lips; Settling Storms; Strange Objects; Wolf on the Fold.*

#### 4.4.5 Section 3: 'Embodying Death: Sex, Gender, Desire'

The connection between death and sexuality is pervasive in Western culture: representations of death 'bring into play the binary tensions of gender constructs, as life/death engages permutations with masculinity/femininity and with fantasies of power' (Bronfen & Goodwin 1993, p.20). Section Three seeks to analyse selected texts from a gender perspective by examining: the trope of woman/death; the ways that femininity and masculinity are constructed in association with these representations; and the eroticising and sexualising of death.

- **Keywords:** gender, suicide, eroticism, the gaze, masculinities, feminist perspectives, body politics, sexuality, dyads, gender theory, psychoanalytic theory, desire, otherness.
- **Texts:** *Angel's Gate; Dogs; Gilbert's Ghost Train; Killing Aurora; Love, Ghosts and Nose Hair; Sleeping Dogs.*

#### 4.4.6 Section 4: 'Socialising Death: Race, Religion, Family'

Generally, the texts in Section Four are concerned with representations of reality; they deal with death in a 'concrete' manner by locating it in the here and now (i.e. a contemporary and physical world) to explore its meanings and impacts, particularly in a social sense. Several aspects of identity (race, religion and family) act as frameworks for these discussions.

- **Keywords:** race, religion, family, ethnicity, spiritual and/or secular perspectives, postcolonial theory, nation, grief.
- **Texts:** *Black Ice; Deadly, Unna + Australian Rules; Flesh and Blood; Gilbert’s Ghost Train; Going Off; Hothouse Flowers; Killing Aurora; Looking for Alibrandi; The Memory Shell; Night Train; Outside Permission; Poison Under Their Lips; Settling Storms; Vigil; Water Colours; Wilful Blue; Winter; Wolf on the Fold; Yolgnu Boy.*

#### 4.4.7 Conclusions

The conclusion draws together the primary arguments of each section in a way which allows identification of particular patterns or themes within the texts as a group. It also examines the implications these results have for the field of children’s literature and offers some potential directions for further research.

#### 4.5 Schedule

The schedule outlines the proposed timing for progress reviews, material collection, analysis, writing, reporting, revising, and submission.

ACTION	PROPOSED DATE	ACTUAL DATE
Compile a bibliography (of both theoretical texts and those for analysis) using EndNote	[dd/mm/yy]	ongoing
Create a database and accompanying notes for the texts selected for analysis	ongoing	ongoing
Construct a detailed matrix of texts selected for analysis	ongoing	ongoing
Submit proposal	[dd/mm/yy]	[dd/mm/yy]
Submit paper for presentation at [conference name and place]	[dd/mm/yy]	[dd/mm/yy] (Presented [dd/mm/yy])
Meet with [Supervisor’s name] for progress review and discussion (at: [conference name])	[dd/mm/yy]	[dd/mm/yy]
Submit literature review	[dd/mm/yy]	[dd/mm/yy]
Submit thesis outline (with chapter headings and summaries of chapter content)	[dd/mm/yy]	[dd/mm/yy]
Submit paper to refereed journal (‘Papers: Explorations into Children’s Literature’)	[dd/mm/yy]	[dd/mm/yy] (Published [dd/mm/yy])
Submit draft Section One	[dd/mm/yy]	
Revise and resubmit Section One	[dd/mm/yy]	
Submit draft Section Two	[dd/mm/yy]	
Revise and resubmit Section Two	[dd/mm/yy]	
Meet with [Supervisor’s name] for progress review and discussion (at: Deakin University)	[dd/mm/yy]	

Submit draft Section Three	[dd/mm/yy]	
Revise and resubmit Section Three	[dd/mm/yy]	
Submit paper extracted from work to date to refereed journal	[dd/mm/yy]	
Submit draft Section Four	[dd/mm/yy]	
Revise and resubmit Section Four	[dd/mm/yy]	
Submit draft introductory chapters	[dd/mm/yy]	
Revise and resubmit introductory chapters	[dd/mm/yy]	
Revise and resubmit sections as necessary	[dd/mm/yy]	
Meet with [Supervisor's name] for progress review and discussion (at: [conference name])	[dd/mm/yy]	
Submit draft Conclusion	[dd/mm/yy]	
Revise and resubmit Conclusion	[dd/mm/yy]	
Revise and resubmit sections as necessary (inc. editing, proofreading and final corrections)	[dd/mm/yy]	
Submit final thesis	[dd/mm/yy]	

## 5. BIBLIOGRAPHY

The list below provides an extensive sample of texts for possible analysis (5.1 and 5.2) and critical works (5.3).

### 5.1 Books

Aaron, Moses (2000) *Elijah Greenface*  
 Applegate, Cathy (1995) *Red Sand Blue Sky*  
 Barnes, Helen (1999) *Killing Aurora*  
 Bateson, Catherine (2002) *Painted Love Letters*  
 Bon, Vivienne (1994) *Flesh and Blood*  
 Bone, Ian (2002) *The Song of an Innocent Bystander*  
 Bowles, Colin (1999) *Going Off*  
 Brian, Janine and Harry Slaghekke (1997) *Rocky*  
 Brill, Sarah (2002) *Glory*  
 Brooks, Kevin (2002) *Martyn Pig*  
 Broome, Errol (2001) *Cry of the Karri*  
 Bunnay, Ron (1995) *Eye of the Eagle*  
 [add to text list as above]

### 5.2 Films

Bennett, Bill (1997) *Kiss or Kill*  
 Bogle, James (1998) *In the Winter Dark*  
 Hogan, P. J. (1994) *Muriel's Wedding*  
 Jordan, Gregor (1998) *Two Hands*  
 Griffiths, Rachel (1998) *Tulip*  
 Lang, Samantha (1997) *The Well*  
 Steve Vidler (1997) *Blackrock*

Woods, Kate (1999) *Looking for Alibrandi*  
White, Alan (1998) *Erskineville Kings*  
Johnson, Stephen (2000) *Yolngu Boy*  
Paul Goldman (2002) *Australian Rules*  
[add to text list as above]

### **5.3 Critical Works**

Adams, David W. and Eleanor J. Deveau (eds) (1995) *Beyond the Innocence of Childhood: Factors Influencing Children and Adolescents' Perceptions and Attitudes Towards Death*. New York: Baywood.

Anstey, Michèle and Geoff Bull (2000) *Reading the Visual: Written and Illustrated Children's Literature*. Sydney: Harcourt.

[add to text list as above—see references for examples]

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Walter has taken this argument about how children come to think of death from Anthony, S. (1971) *The Discovery of Death in Childhood*. London: Penguin.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in *Magpies* May 2002 (17:2) issue, of the total number of fiction books reviewed approximately 15% deal exclusively with death and dying or feature death as an integral part of the plot. Furthermore, pedagogical texts such as Oliver Leaman's *Death and Loss: Compassionate Approaches in the Classroom* (1995), and *Teaching Students About Death: A Comprehensive Resource for Educators and Parents* (1996) edited by Robert G. Stevenson and Eileen P. Stevenson would seem to suggest that communication between adults and children about death is not as limited as Mellor and Shilling claim.

<sup>3</sup> Avery and Reynolds' *Representations of Childhood Death* (2000) is more nation-specific than most, although the analyses are concerned (like most other non-literary sociological studies) with Britain and North America only.

<sup>4</sup> Durer's etching can be seen in the background of this document's cover.

<sup>5</sup> This idea originates from Wahl (quoted in Bauman), who 'insists that our thoughts of death, whether emotionally coloured or detached, are as a rule "once removed", mediated by the preceding symbolic activity' (1992, p.85).

<sup>6</sup> A ideal type, Walter takes care to explain, is a simplified idea 'about social life that [has] a logical coherence but that [does] not exist in pure form in reality ... The aim of the sociologist is not to force complex reality into sociological pigeon-holes, but to use ideal types to identify themes and tensions in (in this case) the revival of death' (1994, p.49).

<sup>7</sup> See the proposal 'Away the Crow Road: Representations of Death in Australian Children's Fiction and Film' submitted [Day Month Year] to [Supervisor's name and title] ([School], Deakin University) for further information.

<sup>8</sup> Biologically, the term 'adolescent' may be applied to a person aged between approximately ten and twenty years. However, for the purposes of this study an adolescent will be defined as a child or young adult of secondary school age (12-18 years). 'Adolescent texts' will refer to texts which feature protagonists of this age, or texts which it is reasonable to suppose would be read/viewed by those in this age group. The aim of using this term is purely to provide parameters for selection and analysis.

<sup>9</sup> The texts listed in each section are potentials only at this stage as they represent just a small portion of the total number selected for the project.