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Joy Alexander

The Verse-novel: A New Genre

This article examines the verse-novel, a genre that has gained some prominence in children's fiction in the last ten years. Reasons why this may be so are suggested and the chief evolving characteristics of the genre in both content and style are discussed. Notable examples of the verse-novel from Australia, the USA and the UK are analysed. Criteria are proposed by which the form can be evaluated. It appears to be a genre whose time has come.

KEY WORDS: Genre; verse-novel; orality; voice.

Hollindale, 'Novels in Verse, for Better or Worse'

Sones, *Stop Pretending - What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy*

Seabrooke, *Judy Scuppernong*

Rylant, *Soda Jerk*

A new phenomenon in the world of children's literature is becoming increasingly apparent - the verse-novel. Peter Hollindale has described it as "a fairly recent but fast-growing addition to the repertoire of children's literature" (2004, p. 12). Sonya Sones, who has herself written several verse-novels, beginning in 1999 with *Stop Pretending - What Happened When My Big Sister Went Crazy*, provides a list of forty verse-novels on her web-site. Almost two-thirds of them have been published since 2000. The earliest examples she gives are from 1990 - *Judy Scuppernong* by Brenda Seabrooke (1990) and *Soda Jerk* by Cynthia Rylant (1990). She lists three titles from 1993, 1995 and 1996, and then in 1997 titles begin to proliferate. Even though her list is not exhaustive, the evidence it provides is probably accurate - that this is a genre which has only become prominent within the last ten years.

Although it might seem to be a challenging and constraining form for a writer, and one with limited appeal for young readers, verse-novels are now regularly found on publishers' lists, aimed especially at the teenage market. The genre has arisen apparently spontaneously in both Australia and the United States, with the UK beginning to produce some examples too. There is quite a number of authors who have written several verse-novels and there are instances of verse-novels being awarded major children's literature awards.¹

The term itself is problematic, but I am adopting the name which the form most commonly applies to itself. Definitions of the verse-novel are necessarily elastic, since as a genre it is still evolving. There is the vexed question of distinguishing between a novel told in verse and a series of poems linked in a narrative sequence. Both poets and novelists have been drawn to the genre from their respective directions. However an emergent typical verse-novel 'house-style' can be identified. The entire story is told in the form of non-rhyming free verse. Very often each section is less than a page in length and only rarely more than two or three pages. Usually each of these sections is given a title to orientate the reader, which may indicate the speaker, or contextualise the content, or point to the core theme. The form lends itself to building each section around a single perspective or thought or voice or incident.

Before considering the typical content of the verse-novel, I want to discuss reasons why it may be a form whose time has come, because it should then be more obvious why certain story-lines predominate. Plausible explanations are to be found in contemporary culture. We are living through a digital revolution, the profound effect of which was recognised by Marshall McLuhan: "our age translates itself back into the oral and auditory modes because of the electronic pressure of simultaneity" (McLuhan, 1962, p. 72). Walter J Ong has been a leading chronicler of the 'technologising of the word' (Ong, 1982) from orality through manuscript and print and electronic technologies. He argues that a resulting feature of modern society is what he calls 'secondary orality' as opposed to the 'primary orality' of a culture with no knowledge of writing or print, stating that in the present electronic age "a new oralism served by technology reigns" (Ong, 1967, p. 286). A new order has arrived in which the visual and aural imaginations are both active, with the future promising richer methods of 'eye and ear' communication as the likely outcome of more affordable technologies, and with books reflecting these shifts.

One consequence for reading of this revival of orality is that the voices of the text have greater prominence:

There's no question that voice had fallen absolutely out of the textual equation by our own time...It's returned. We're not going to have text that is not in some way voiced or voiceable. (Lanham, 1996, p. 8)

This increased awareness of the narrative voice in turn raises the potential for personalised subjective narration and for reading constructed as intimate conversation or even as eavesdropping. The verse-novel is an appropriate vehicle for these covert emphases. Free verse accentuates the oral dimension. The writer is able to craft the

McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*

Ong, *Orality and Literacy*

Ong, *The Presence of the Word*

Lanham, Interview

verse as though orchestrating it for reading aloud. She can shape the rhythm, position the line-break so as to add emphasis, vary the pace through the line-length, or borrow and exploit poetic devices such as repetition, caesura and enjambment. Equally, readers are more likely to experience the words as sound as they read. The great majority of verse-novels are first-person narratives; they are a modern means of rendering soliloquy or dramatic monologue. In particular, writers seem to find this genre to be a suitable medium for portraying a teenage character experiencing the angst of adolescence; for the reader, the narrator seems literally to be 'telling it like it is,' with immediacy and reality. Writers who select the genre of the verse-novel rather than plain prose re-conceive their narrative more explicitly as spoken text and oral rhythms assume greater significance.

Another consequence of secondary orality and of experimentation with narrative forms is that there has been a loosening of styles and a blurring of genres; for example, novels related entirely in letters, or fact blended with fiction, or biography imagined in fictional form. Such innovation can be seen in the verse-novel which may, for example, be cinematic in style, as a succession of scenes are presented to the visual imagination with the 'voice-over' heard simultaneously in the mind.

The exploration in this article is that of a surveyor making a first sweep over new terrain, mapping out some parameters. I will look first at some examples of the verse-novel in Australia, which will serve to show the scope of the genre, its strengths and weaknesses. I will then turn in more detail to several notable examples from the USA. I will finish with mention of a true verse-novel from the UK, a book-length story told in narrative verse which rhymes throughout, for which reason it may well prove to be unique.

The Verse-novel in Australia

Herrick, *Love, Ghosts and facial hair*

Steven Herrick has claimed in an interview that his 1996 book *Love, Ghosts, and facial hair* is the "first verse novel written for young people in Australia." Herrick describes himself on his web-site as a poet; he has written collections of poetry as well as several verse-novels. We are taken inside the mind of Jack:

I'm a normal guy.
An average sixteen-year old.
I think about sex, sport, & nose hair.
Sex mostly. (p. 8)

He relates his thoughts and feelings on coming to terms with his mother's death from cancer, on his relationship with his father and

older sister, on school, and on his girlfriend Annabel. The book is lightened by humour and has genuine and affecting moments, but its effectiveness is at best patchy, weakened by fake emotion and banal insights. The style is that of written-down speech and favours clipped sentences and a lack of punctuation. Herrick exhibits the possibilities, but also the difficulties, of the verse-novel genre. First-person narrators can 'speak their thoughts' in a real-life, close-up manner, which, when it works, can be powerful and moving. However it is all too easy for the plot to be superficially handled and for the language to be trite and slick.

Wild, *Jinx*

Margaret Wild's verse-novel *Jinx* (2001) covers similar territory, but more effectively. Wild had previously written a large number of picture books, and her verse-novel resembles a picture-strip in words in its sequence of 'verses.' The immediacy of the world that is depicted can be raw; there is teen slang, teen sex, teen suicide. This is insistently contemporary life, "where babies' first words are 'car' and 'plane'" (p.2). The central character is Jen, who thinks of herself as 'Jinx', and whose father left home as a consequence of the arrival of her handicapped sister Grace. There is a mix of first-person and third-person narrative, with other family members and friends providing their perspectives. We get a post-modern 'fix' on reality, a collage of fragments without a meta-narrative. Yet Wild is able to incorporate a range of outlooks, within and between the verses, and to provide layers of understanding. Phrases and images are used to unify the story; for example, people are compared to different gemstones. She can shape the line to enhance the sense, making occasional use of refrains or rhyme. There is suppleness in the crafting; Wild can be prosaic, lyrical, colloquial as the story-line demands, using the form to support the telling.

Hathorn, *Volcano Boy*

The one other Australian verse-novel to which I want to refer raises the genre to a new plane. It is Libby Hathorn's *Volcano Boy* (2001), subtitled "A Novel in Verse." It is an extraordinary, strange and powerful story. The book begins with a preface, purportedly from a writer to a publisher, explaining that, when travelling in Papua New Guinea, s/he was given a "leather-covered, closely written book" (p. 6). S/he assumes it will be "some raving adolescent angst." (Is this already the stereotype of a verse-novel?) Impressed by the contents, the writer investigates further about the "diary, poem, confession (call it what you will)" but never manages to establish if it is "a real account or entirely imagined" (p. 8). The signature at the end of the book "in a somewhat childish hand" simply says "Volcano Boy September 1994" (p. 190). Between the preface and the supposedly reproduced diary-poem-confession, there is an italicised foreword written in the same

style as the book it introduces and seemingly by Libby Hathorn herself. She says that:

*I know the title,
I know the setting,
at least four characters,
and I can write in
an innovative style –
I'm not shy of a damn
good plot*

However what bores her is “*The prison of the plot, the weight/of sentencing myself/to so many words.*” She longs to be able to bring the Volcano Boy vividly to life in his own voice; she wants him to “*speak to me ... frankly, freshly,*” to “*erupt /gory and gutsy /with truthfulness*” (p. 12). Presumably a verse-novel is the form she chooses to allow her to fulfil these desires.

The book tells of a troubled youth, Alex, living in Brisbane, who is eventually put in the care of his uncle. He accompanies him to Papua New Guinea and recounts his experiences there – chiefly his growing love for a local girl, Alice, interwoven with exploration of the landscape, dominated by a volcano which erupts:

The harbour boiled –
well-done fish and crabs,
hot rocks,
thick mud,
parades of pumice,
hot turds bobbing
in a boiling cistern.
Showering mud and pumice,
explosive dust clouds,
then the quick
and suffocating darkening
of the day (p. 147).

The character of the boy suits his style of narration; he admits himself that he is “attracted to excesses” (p. 95). The verse-novel genre foregrounds page lay-out and *Volcano Boy* enhances that by including a number of marginal quotations, the majority from Shakespeare. This is believable because Alex tells us how he learned passages by rote and competed with his sister to repeat them word perfect. The lyrical style uses repetition and word-play, well matched to the unusual but memorable subject-matter.

These three Australian verse-novels exemplify the range of the genre with its potential but also its pitfalls. In turning next to the USA, children’s writers with established reputations as novelists are

considered, who have found their own ways of employing the genre to good effect.

Virginia Euwer Wolff

Wolff, *Make Lemonade*

Wolff, *True Believer*

Eight years after the appearance of *Make Lemonade* (1993), Wolff's first-person account of the experiences of LaVaughn, a teenage baby-sitter, a sequel, *True Believer*, continues her story, now aged fifteen, through a further year. Wolff has described the process of composition:

In the 3 years that I worked on the book, I probably read every line out loud hundreds of times. That was how I decided where to put the line breaks ...I divided the lines 'aurally,' for the ear, as much as I could. And I kept worrying that I'd got the line breaks wrong. I rewrote them a lot and kept reading them aloud... Trying to feel the rhythm, and at the same time getting to know the characters and their lives...(Can you imagine living with me, always hearing this woman muttering to herself? Especially reading her own writing out loud?...) I just hope it sounds like LaVaughn's voice speaking, with the breathing pauses and the hesitations that I believe are part of natural speech. (Webster, 2001, p. 12)

Webster, 'Making Lemonade, Digging Holes and Dicing with Death'

Wolff consciously writes for the ear, doing so in order to recreate the voice of the narrator, to bring the reader up close to the speaker and to add life to the central character. Her careful artistry underpins the present-tense narrative, which is unsentimental and immediate. Her verse-novels are more like conventional stories than any of the other writers discussed in this article, resembling much more a sequence of chapters than a collection of poems. *Make Lemonade* consists of sixty-six sections – numbered, not titled – divided into four parts, with the sections ranging in length from one to seven pages. Wolff works with the longer lines and sections to highlight the rhythm of the prose line. The arrangement is rhythmical, accentuating the colloquial and the vernacular. Closer inspection generally reveals the deliberate patterning behind what at first seems casual:

"You know what they do, Welfare gets hold of you?"
Jolly is telling me.
"They take your babies, the state takes your *babies*-
I seen it happen – They find out you got no job,"
her voice is raising,
"no fathers for your babies,
they see you live in a poor house, they say you-
AIN'T A ADEQUATE PARENT."
She huffs & looks at me for my answer.
I don't say any. I don't have any.
Jolly says she saw it happen, I believe her. (Wolff, 2000, pp. 59–60)

In these lines, besides the obvious features where italics and capital letters are used for emphasis, the line-length and line-breaks, pauses

and repetition, shape the pace so that the rise and fall of the lines reflects the emotion and supports the meaning. The craft can be seen by comparing the sentences relating LaVaughn's mother's feelings for her new boyfriend set out as prose: "My mom appreciates Lester appreciating her. It's been a long time anybody looked at her with value that way" - with the way Wolff actually wrote it:

My mom appreciates Lester appreciating her.
It's been a long time
anybody looked at her with value
that way. (Wolff, 2001, p. 111)

The slight pause supporting "long time", the end-of-line lingering on "with value", and the accentuating of "that way" are subtleties made possible by the generic form.

Wolff also manages to have a credible story-line, with the strong voice of the speaker carrying the reader through occasional improbabilities. Facilitated perhaps by the longer line, there is more of a story in these books than in other examples of the genre. Wolff captures a teenager's attitudes, language and perspective, expressing LaVaughn's determination, aspirations, sensitivity and anxieties. While Wolff is typical of the many writers who have used the verse-novel to give voice to a teenager, she does so with greater originality and skill than other practitioners of the genre.

Karen Hesse

Hesse, *Out of the Dust*
Hesse, *Witness*

Karen Hesse won the 1998 Newbery medal for her verse-novel *Out of the Dust* and she has since written two more verse-novels: *Witness* (2001) and *Aleutian Sparrow* (2003). The recognition that she has achieved and her commitment to the genre make her perhaps its foremost exponent. Her books, according to Hollindale, are "the product of an extraordinary poetic imagination, acts of historical empathy based in careful research and moral commitment" (Hollindale, 2004, p. 12).

Hesse, *Aleutian Sparrow*

Her use of the genre is typical in that narration is through generally fairly short 'verses' with titles. The titles are essential parts of the whole; in the following example from *Aleutian Sparrow*, the 'verse' does not make complete sense without the title:

NORTHERN LIGHTS

The crowded cabin sighs and snores and moans with sleep sounds.
Restlessness brings me outside,
To the steps.
I sit alone in wonder. (Hesse, 2003, p.111)

In two respects Hesse expands the genre in new directions. Her fiction is based on historical events, so that personal narrative is carefully anchored in place and time and moves towards documentary. *Out of the Dust* describes life in the Oklahoma dust bowl during the Depression; *Witness* tells of the activities of the Klu Klux Klan in Vermont in 1924; *Aleutian Sparrow* recounts the Japanese invasion of the Aleutian Islands off Alaska in the wake of their attack on Pearl Harbour and the consequent evacuation of the Aleuts to the Alaskan mainland. Furthermore, Hesse's interest in presentation extends more widely than the visual lay-out of the lines to include photos (*Witness*), maps (*Aleutian Sparrow*), font and illustrations.

Out of the Dust purports to be the diary of Billie Jo Kelly, from January 1934 (aged 13) until December 1935. Hesse's style is lyrical and poetic. Billie Jo's inner landscape is revealed, often counterpointing the harshness and desolation, relieved by glimpses of beauty, of the environment of the "little Panhandle shack we call home" (p. 4). The words "out of the dust" are often repeated (Hesse, 1997, pp. 9, 149, 181, 197-198, 205, 209, 222), tracing Billie Jo's longing to escape: "I just want to go, /away, /out of the dust" (p. 149); then her success in eventually slipping away in the boxcar of a train in a 'verse' titled "Out of the Dust"; and finally her deepening understanding, first as she talks to her father: "I tell him about getting out of the dust /and how I can't get out of something/that's inside me" (p. 205), and then her ultimate realisation: "And I know now that all the time I was trying to get /out of the dust, /the fact is, /what I am, /I am because of the dust. /And what I am is good enough. /Even for me" (p. 222). Similarly lines of imagery are developed through the story, until they have symbolic force: "Ma had been tumbleweed.... My father was more like the sod" (p. 202).

Hesse's writing is visually strong; many sections are sharp vignettes depicting an event or a place. Not surprisingly in such an eloquent verse-novel, the reader's aural imagination is also activated. Billie Jo loves above all playing the piano. When she makes a "Thanksgiving List" (pp. 220-221), many of the items on it are sounds: "Prairie birds, the whistle of gophers, the wind blowing", cattle splashing in the river, her father's laugh and his songs, "the sound of rain." What she likes best in her father's new girlfriend, Louise, is her sensitive ear: "I know she's heard everything I said, /and some things I didn't say too" (p. 218). In this respect Louise might qualify as Hesse's ideal reader.

Hesse's mastery of free verse is notably apparent in her descriptions of the natural elements of rain, snow, wind, dust. Here is one example from many that could be selected:

I hear the first drops.
 Like the tapping of a stranger
 at the door of a dream,
 the rain changes everything.
 It strokes the roof,
 streaking the dusty tin,
 ponging,
 a concert of rain notes,
 spilling from gutters,
 gushing through gullies,
 soaking into the thirsty earth outside. (pp. 104–105)

Such writing is poetic in its use of imagery, personification and alliteration. Hesse exploits the manner in which verse-style lends itself to a pointed final line; for example, the section titled “Christmas Dinner Without the Cranberry Sauce” ends with the simple lines:

My father loved Ma’s special cranberry sauce.
 But she never showed me how to make it. (p. 101)

Since this is the first Christmas since Ma’s death, the last line underscores the finality of her death, and it has all the poignancy of a lament. Despite the lyricism, when compared with Wolff, Hesse’s line divisions seem more arbitrary and her ubiquitous comma becomes intrusive:

I pushed her to the ground,
 desperate to save her,
 desperate to save the baby, I
 tried,
 beating out the flames with my hands.
 I did the best I could.
 But it was no good.
 Ma
 got
 burned
 bad. (p. 61)

These lines do not seem to me to be so arranged as to most effectively underpin the meaning.

In *Witness*, Hesse discovers new possibilities for the verse-novel. The book is divided into five Acts and each ‘verse’ has as its title the name of one of the eleven characters featured in the story, so that it is as though they take turns to speak. This is verse-novel becoming drama; it could be performed as a radio play. There are no capital letters throughout:

daddy, i say,
 the klan burns down a negro church in illinois,
 they rob a catholic church in burlington,
 they try killing a jew right here.

well, they're just giving white folks a bad name. (p. 126)

The effect of this use of punctuation is to equalise all names. The eye is deprived of the distinctions that capitalisation conventionally accords and readers are forced to place greater reliance on the ear if they are to understand and differentiate rightly. Since the entire story is 'carried' by eleven voices, they have to be distinctive. Esther, who is of German origin, is "that funny talking kid" (p. 3). The problem is that the voices can end up sounding like stereotypes or caricatures rather than real individuals. The eleven voices also have to recount the plot. It is at times clumsy for the story to have so many tellers and it is demanding on the reader to be drawn into so many different minds and emotions. Paradoxically the single voice of *Out of the Dust* allows for a greater sense of outer life along with a deep understanding of the narrator. Since the verse-novel privileges sound it is fitting that in the penultimate section of the book, in which Merlin Van Tornhout tells a parable in which his breaking free of KKK influence is mirrored in the description of a young buck escaping after being trapped in ice, it is with sound that we 'hear' his celebration and his moment of 'witness':

this time
 the buck stayed clear,
 beat it across the ice
 stopping on the far bank
 taking one last look
 before it bounded away through the woods.
 it snorted once.
 you could hear the echo all through the valley. (pp. 160-161)

In *Aleutian Sparrow* Hesse reverts to the single viewpoint of Vera (truth?), though the interest has moved beyond characterisation to depicting a string of incidents which record the history of a people as lived experience. The verse-novel is an appropriate genre to express the story-telling culture of the Aleuts. Hesse explicitly links her story with this oral tradition, suggesting that it is in the cultural story/song of the sparrow that the spirit and survival of the Aleut people will be found:

TREES

The elders from Nikolski tell of the time before the white men came, when a single tree grew in the Aleutians and the Aleutian sparrow sang as it flew around the ascending trunk.
 The seasoned tree proudly wore its struggle for life, and it alone reached up through the fog into the heavens.
 ...
 Here in our Southeast camp there are a thousand trees, but where is the Aleutian sparrow? (p. 93)

Hesse's use of language and manipulation of the line, especially in *Aleutian Sparrow*, are figurative and lyrical:

KETCHIKAN CREEK

When Eva returns from Ketchikan, she says
The creek there is like a woman
Dressed in a filmy green gown,
Her lace pockets spilling with leaping salmon. (p. 74)

WORSHIP

One thousand miles away our churches stand empty.
But we are alive and we give thanks.
Five villages' worth of Aleuts gather in the field under a
steady rain.
The hem of God brushes our upturned faces. (p. 40)

The short 'verses' are muted against the silence of the white page and the book as a whole forms a moving lament. The capability of the verse-novel is compellingly on display in all that Hesse writes.

Sharon Creech

Creech, *Love That Dog*
Creech, *Heartbeat*

Where Wolff sets a standard for verse-novel as teen autobiography, and Hesse extends the genre's range both in the topics with which it can engage and in the lyricism of its language, Creech (2002) has affirmed the genre joyously and with originality. After the delightful *Love That Dog*, she returned to the verse-novel form in 2004 with *Heartbeat*.

On a Sharon Creech web-site, the poet Benjamin Zephaniah reviews *Love That Dog*:

Is it a diary? Is it poetry? Is it a novel? Who cares? It's simply the most original book I've read for years, and now I see it as my duty to tell the world that the book that cannot be pigeonholed has been written....This is a book that reminds us all that poetry is about exploring every corner of our language, and that storytelling is the first art.

We have seen that the blend of diary and verse-novel works well; what Creech succeeds in doing is to sustain a story-line through this form. *Love That Dog* turns out to have a connecting plot, though it takes some time for this to become apparent, which it does in the May 14 section, in which emotion and verbal expression come together as the narrator Jack describes the death of his dog Sky.

It is in some ways a book about poetry, though it ends up confounding Jack's initial premise that "any words /can be a poem. /You've just got to /make /short /lines" (p. 3). With eight poems in the appendix, all of which are referred to in Jack's diary, there is an element of intertextuality.

Some sections of the diary function more explicitly as poetry than others. Chiefly, however, there is reliance on the intimacy of spoken address allowed by the journal form. The reader is directly addressed or is asked questions. Frequently we hear one side (Jack's) of conversations with the teacher, Miss Stretchberry. Since, as we have seen, it is a feature of the verse-novel genre that it accentuates the sound of the speaking voice, Jack is depicted as developing his ability to read with the ear:

I did not really understand
the tiger tiger burning bright poem
but at least it sounded good
in my ears....
Some of the tiger sounds
are still in my ears
like drums
beat-beat-beating. (pp. 8-9)

Creech has said that she experienced her character Jack as voice:

Of all my books, this was probably the most fun to write, because I love love love that boy, Jack, and his voice seemed to just come tumbling out of me. (posted by Creech on 23/6/03 at <http://www.roselle.lib.il.us/YouthServices/BookClub/Archives/LoveThatDog.htm>)

Creech also displays a strong interest in all aspects of presentation – font, italics, brackets, spaces, capital letters. These qualities are evident again in *Heartbeat*, which takes the favoured verse-novel subject of a young person's autobiography. The rhythmic verse is a natural mirror of the heartbeat of Annie as she runs and of her brother who is still a foetus in their mother's womb. Creech's lines are more than rearranged prose, but use alliteration, pace, word order and line-breaks for poetic effect:

and *thump-thump, thump-thump*
down the hill we go
to the creek
one le-a-p over to the bank (p. 16)

Montgomery, *The Voyage of the Arctic Tern*

The UK example in this survey is likely to be a 'one-off', since it is my sole example of a rhyming verse-novel, *The Voyage of the Arctic Tern* (2002) by Hugh Montgomery. The demands of writing (and marketing) an entire story in rhyming verse are such that this may well remain a unique example. Akin to the ballads of the oral story-telling tradition, *The Voyage* is a tale of derring-do and of swash-buckling adventure on the high seas. As the blurb on the first edition says, it "demands to be read aloud." The story-telling moves at a leisurely pace so that the sense is easy to follow, but moments of drama are also economically conveyed:

From high up on the pirate mast
 Lord Morgan's lookout yelled; he'd seen
The Arctic Tern not far behind,
 And gaining with alarming speed!
 Lord Morgan twitched. His face went white.
 His body dripped with icy sweat.
 Deep down, he knew the game was lost
 But still he'd not give in just yet! (p. 129)

The Voyage is a story with a moral; it recounts a straight fight between good and evil. As for style, there is a variable rhythm and rhyme-scheme, but throughout this welcome variety what remains constant is the regular division into eight-line verses, with the second and fourth, and sixth and eighth, lines rhyming. There is elaborate division into 'books' and 'chapters', all titled. The interest in presentation is enhanced by black-and-white illustrations on virtually every page, sometimes framing the verse and sometimes more decorative. Recalling the epics and ballads of oral cultures, *The Voyage* is like them in spinning a good yarn.

Initially unable to find a publisher, Montgomery published *The Voyage of the Arctic Tern* himself, and only subsequently succeeded in finding a publisher prepared to take it onto their list. That is unlikely to be the case for the more loosely defined verse-novel. It has found both its form and subject-matter though, as has been shown, the best verse-novel writers have risen above type in their crafting of content and style. It is already possible to draw up a balance sheet of the prospects for this new genre in children's writing.

The verse-novel presents the writer with particular challenges, which may prove traps for the unwary. The handling of the verse may be sloppy, inadequate, uninteresting, arbitrary. The plot may be ineffectively realised through the medium. The verse-novel foregrounds the fact that the narration is voiced, which can give rise to difficulties. Usually there is a governing perspective with each section expressing the speaker's point of view, so there is little objective commentary, creating the problem of how to make things happen and to move the plot forward. The form lends itself to the confessional and to the expression of feelings, which raises the spectre of banality or melodrama. Already there is an over-representation in the genre of facile teenage outpourings on sex, trauma and death.

Fortunately, however, there is also an increasing number of verse-novels which stand out from the dross in their crafted language and memorable story-telling. There has to be quality in both the narrative and the poetry. It is a form capable of intensity as it takes the reader into the speaker's mind and emotions, but the voice and cadence have to be authentic. Karen Hesse in particular has set a standard for the

genre's potential. The most prominent feature of the verse-novel is *voice*; it is ideal for the audio-book. Both the audio-book and the verse-novel have their genesis in the secondary orality which is such a marked feature of contemporary culture. Writers in this genre are also using the possibilities of new technology as they experiment with structure and innovative presentation. The evidence suggests that the novel as a text-form is continuing to evolve, becoming more cinematic and kinaesthetic and manipulating language creatively and expressively. This is good news for literature and reason enough to celebrate the new genre of the verse-novel.

Notes

1. For example, Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust* was the 1998 Newbery Medal winner, Virginia Euwer Wolff's *True Believer* won the 2001 National Book Award for Young People's Literature, and *Love That Dog* by Sharon Creech was short-listed for the 2001 Carnegie Medal.

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Web-sites

Sharon Creech web-site: <http://sharoncreech.co.uk/>

Steven Herrick web-site: <http://www.acay.com.au/~sherrick/welcome.html>

Steven Herrick interview;

http://www.scholastic.com.au/classroom/class_main_item.asp?issueId=10&articleId=41

Sonya Sones web-site: <http://www.sonyasones.com/greatbooks.htm>

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