

Sydney Writers' Festival

Secondary Schools Day 2025

Authors included:

Neal Shusterman

Hayley Lawrence

Mike Lucas

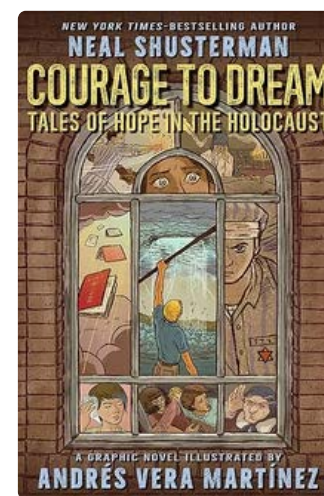
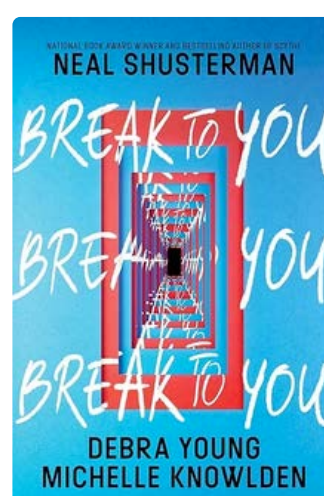
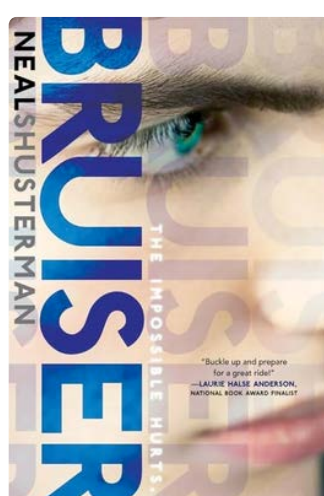
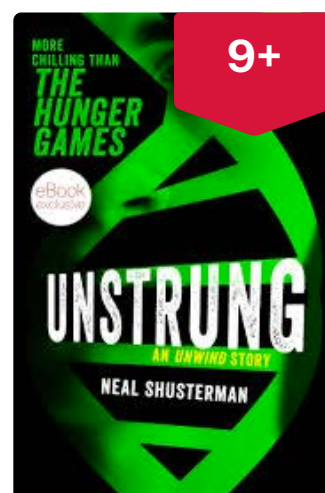
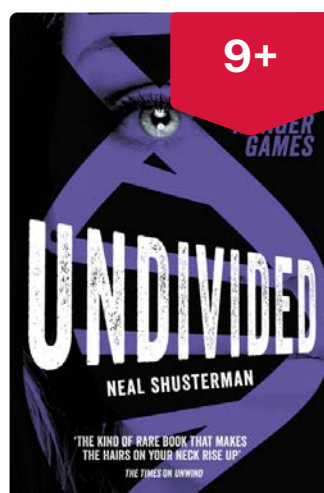
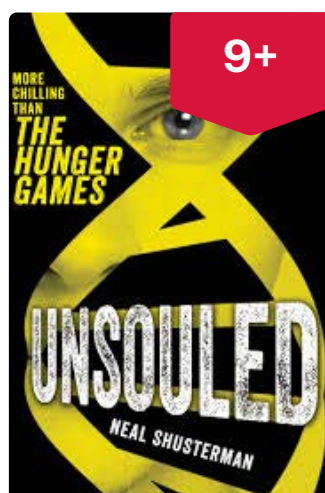
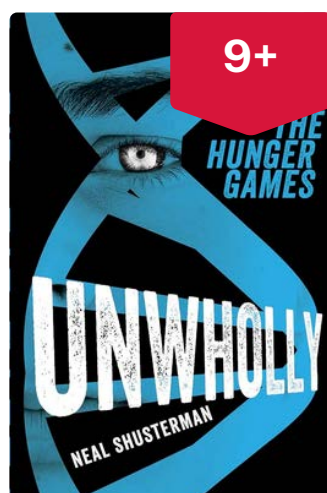
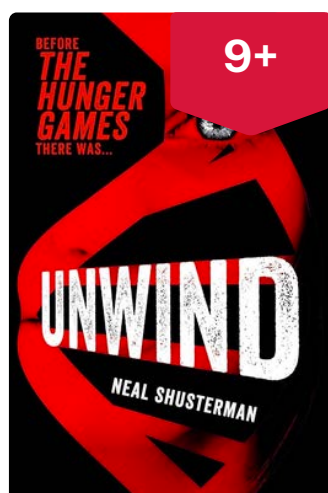
Demet Divaroren



The NSW Premier's Reading Challenge is proudly supported by

Sydney Writers' Festival Secondary Schools Day 2025

Interview with Neal Shusterman



Neal Shusterman

Learning activities



Bhavya from Glenwood High School interviews Neal Shusterman at the SWF Secondary Schools Day 2025

Reflecting

1. Neal Shusterman describes his own reading tastes as very eclectic. Reflect on your own reading tastes and habits. How would you describe it?
2. Is there a book you've read that has made you think "wow, I wish I had written that"? What was it about that book that made you think that?
3. Neal Shusterman aims to write books that ask questions with difficult answers. Reflect on some of the books you've read recently. What questions were these books asking?
4. Neal Shusterman often writes dystopian books set in world unlike our own. How do you think the prequel to the Scythe series, *Rising Thunder*, reflects the real world?
5. Look through the resource page with Shusterman's books and blurbs. What would you most prefer to read and why?

Creating

1. Imagine you were selected to interview Neal Shusterman. Create 5-7 questions you'd like to ask him that differ from Bhavya's.
2. If you have read *Scythe*, imagine you're the casting director for the T.V. adaptation. Select the actors you'd choose to play the main characters, and write a short explanation of why you've chosen them.
3. Write a persuasive piece of writing to convince:
 - a. Your teacher librarian to add one of Neal Shusterman's books to your school's collection
 - b. Your English teacher to study one of Neal Shusterman's texts in class
4. Create a book trailer between 30 seconds and 2 minutes to spark interest in your favourite Neal Shusterman title.



Scythe series

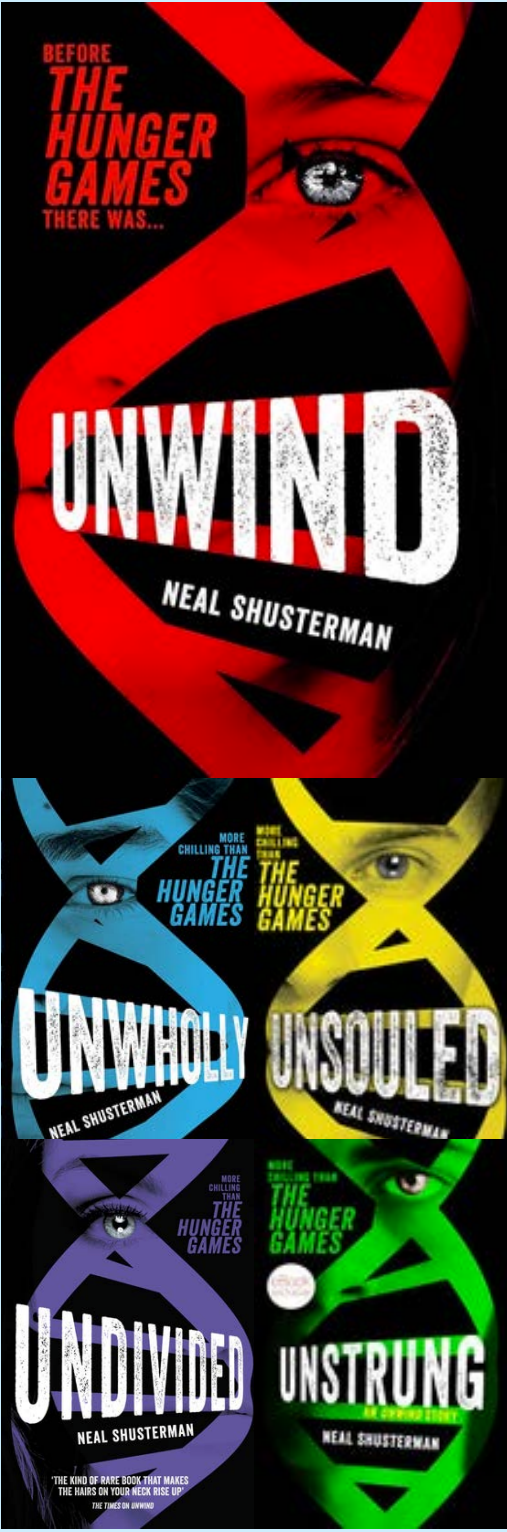
Genre/s: Science fiction, dystopia, mystery, thriller
Themes: *Morality, corruption, justice*

In a perfect world, what is there left to fear? In a world where disease, war and crime have been eliminated, the only way to die is to be randomly gleaned (killed) by professional scythes. Citra and Rowan are 16 year old teenagers who have been selected to be scythes' apprentices, and despite wanting nothing to do with the vocation, they must learn the art of gleaning and understand the necessity of what they do. Only one of them will be chosen as a scythe's apprentice and as Citra and Rowan come up against a terrifyingly corrupt Scythedom, it becomes clear that the winning apprentice's first task will be to glean the loser.

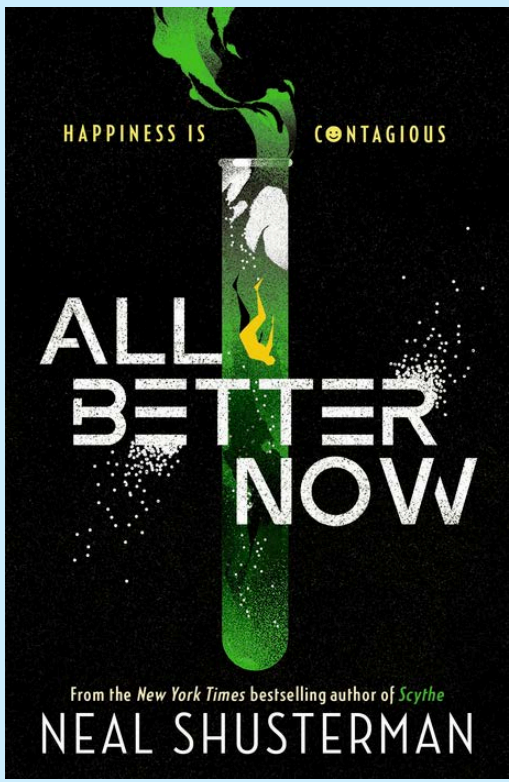
Unwind series

Genre/s: Science fiction, dystopia, mystery, thriller
Themes: *Morality, identity, autonomy, activism, resistance*

Connor, Risa and Lev are running for their lives. Unwinding: the process by which a child is both terminated and yet kept alive. Unwinding is now a common, and accepted, practice in society. Connor's parents want to be rid of him because he's a troublemaker. Risa has no parents and is being unwound to cut orphanage costs. Lev's unwinding has been planned since his birth as part of his family's strict religion. Brought together by chance, and kept together by desperation, these unlikely companions make a harrowing cross-country journey, knowing their lives hang in the balance. If they can survive until their 18th birthday, they can't be harmed - but when every piece of them, from their hands to their hearts, is wanted by a world gone mad, eighteen seems far, far away.



Titles to explore by
Neal Shusterman



All Better Now

Genre/s: Science fiction, dystopia, mystery, thriller

Themes: *Social dynamics, human nature, government control*

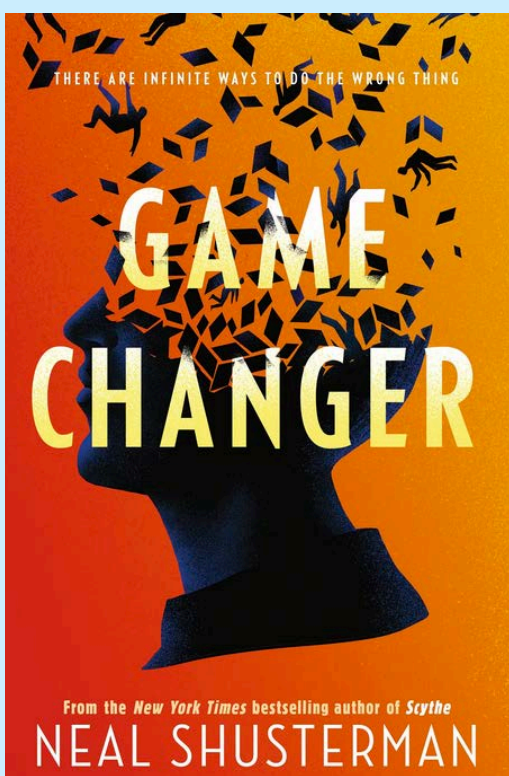
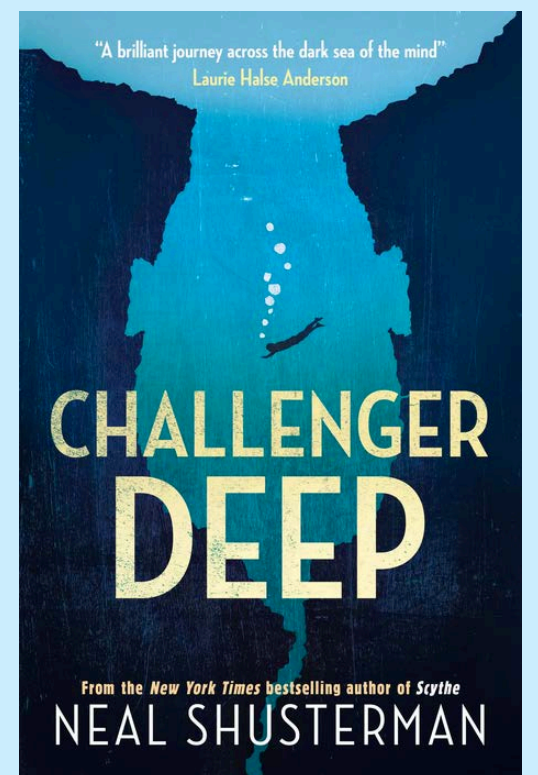
A new virus is spreading through a world still weary from the last pandemic. This virus is different. For the survivors of this deadly new virus, a new way of seeing the world and a soul unburdened by jealousies and selfishness. Survivors are treated with contempt or worse because happiness is bad for big business. Three characters from very different backgrounds find themselves on a collision course as the world is split between those aggressively seeking a cure and those willing to stop a cure at all cost.

Challenger Deep

Genre/s: Contemporary fiction, realistic fiction

Themes: *Mental illness, friendship, healing*

Caden is both a high school student finding it harder and harder to fit in at school and keep friendships, and a member of an unusual crew aboard a ship headed to the Mariana Trench under the command of a captain who may or may not be trying to destroy them all. As these two narratives come together, Caden must make decisions with very real and substantial consequences.

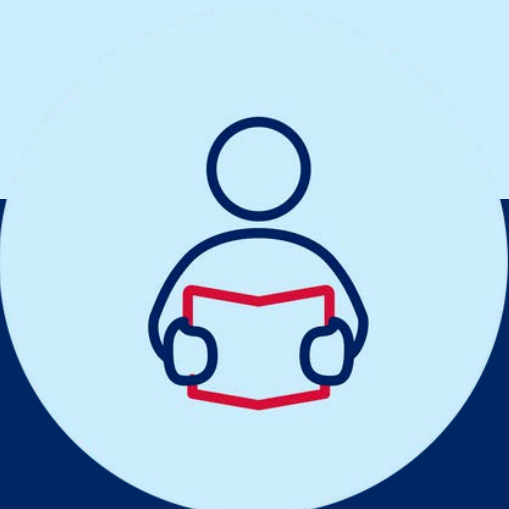


Game Changer

Genre/s: Contemporary fiction, realistic fiction

Themes: *Bias, privilege, the power of empathy*

Ash is used to taking hits on the field for his high school football team -until he takes one that doesn't just impact his body, but his whole reality. It starts with one small shift, but with every game, every hit, Ash finds himself pushed through a succession of universes almost-but-not-really like his own, until the small shifts in reality become significant shifts in Ash's own identity. As Ash experiences life from other perspectives, he starts to question the world he thought he knew, as well as the ones he finds himself catapulted into. For better or worse, the one thing Ash knows is that he's got to find a way to put things back.



Titles to explore by
Neal Shusterman



Dry

Genre/s: Dystopian, science fiction, survival

Themes: *Climate change, community vs individualism*

The drought—or the Tap-Out, as everyone calls it—has been going on for a while now. Everyone’s lives have become an endless list of don’ts: don’t water the lawn, don’t fill up your pool, don’t take long showers. Until the taps run dry.

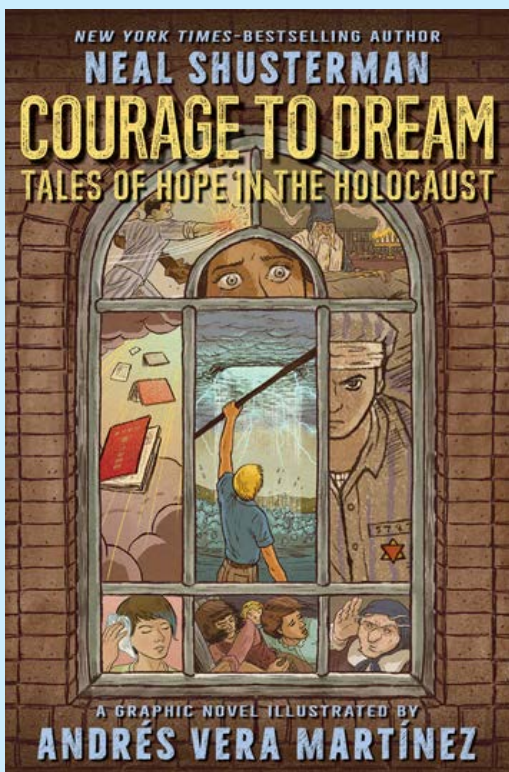
Suddenly, Alyssa’s quiet suburban street spirals into a warzone of desperation; neighbors and families turned against each other on the hunt for water. And when her parents don’t return and her life—and the life of her brother—is threatened, Alyssa has to make impossible choices if she’s going to survive.

Roxy

Genre/s: Fantasy, science fiction, contemporary fiction

Themes: *Addiction*

Isaac and Ivy are siblings and close in age yet seem to be on very different paths. Ivy is often in trouble and struggles to focus while Isaac is motivated and responsible and in control. A series of events bring both siblings to the attention of Addi and Roxy, pharmaceuticals become gods meddling in the affairs of humans. Both drugs offer so much to the brother and sister, but they will also demand something in return.

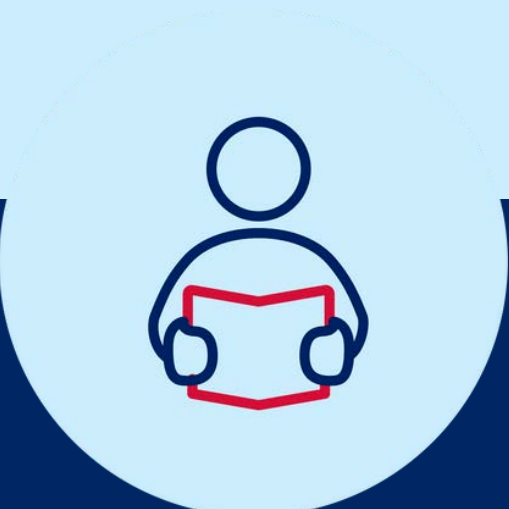


Courage to Dream: Tales of hope in the Holocaust

Genre/s: Historical fiction, graphic novel

Themes: *Resistance, survival, hope during crisis*

This graphic novel plunges readers into the darkest time of human history—the Holocaust. This graphic novel explores one of the greatest atrocities in modern memory, delving into the core of what it means to face the extinction of everything and everyone you hold dear. This gripping, multifaceted tapestry is woven from Jewish folklore and cultural history. Five interlocking narratives explore one common story—the tradition of resistance.



Titles to explore by
Neal Shusterman



Bruiser

Genre/s: Paranormal, contemporary fiction

Themes: *Empathy, pain, dependence*

Twin siblings, Tennyson and Bronte, are very different in how they approach the world. This is best seen by the different reactions both have to the large, brooding and mysterious Brewster “Bruiser” Rawlins - the guy coted “most likely to get the death penalty”. While many in the school believe he is a dark and dangerous menace, Bronte befriends him and they begin dating. This is how both siblings notice the horrible scars on Brewster and suspect he is being abused at home. But then, strange things begin to happen - Tennyson and Bronte’s scrapes heal unnaturally fast, and cuts disappear before their eyes. What at first seems like good fortune turns out to be more than they bargained for...

Break to you

Cowritten with Debra Young & Michelle Knowlden

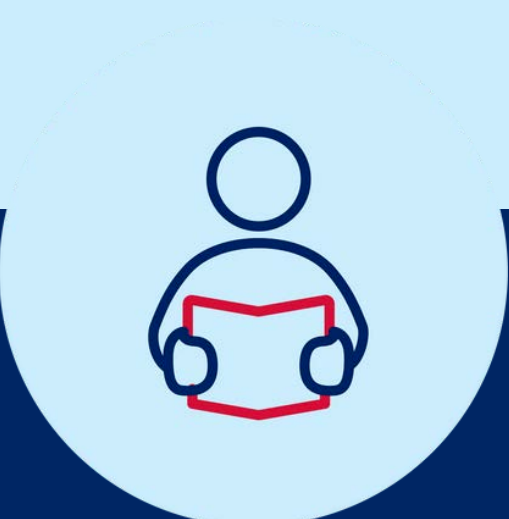
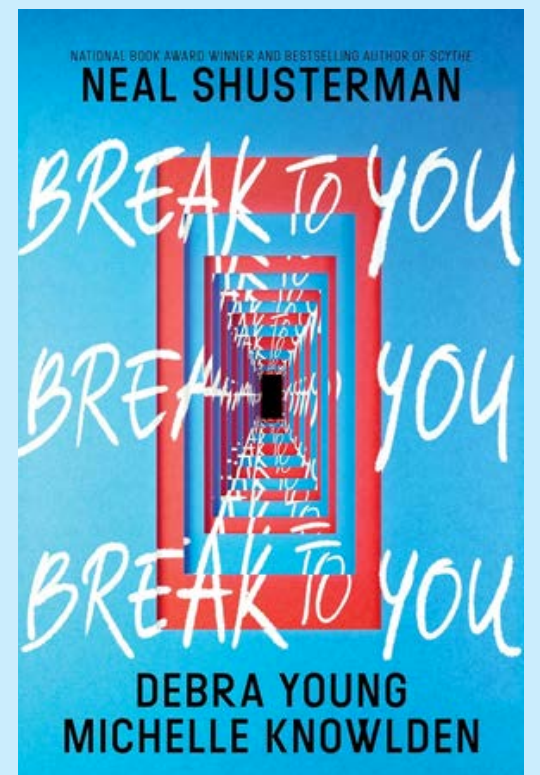
Genre/s: Contemporary fiction, romance

Themes: *Juvenile incarceration, isolation, resilience*

Adriana knows that if she can manage to keep her head down for the next seven months, she might be able to get through her sentence in the Compass juvenile detention center. Thankfully, she’s allowed to keep her journal, where she writes down her most private thoughts when her feelings get too big.

Until the day she opens her journal and discovers that her thoughts are no longer so private. Someone has read her writings — and has written back. A boy who lives on the other side of the gender-divided detention center. A boy who sparks a fire in her to write back.

Jon’s story is different than Adriana’s; he’s already been at Compass for years and will be in the system for years to come. Still, when he reads the words Adriana writes to him, it makes him feel like the walls that hold them in have melted away.

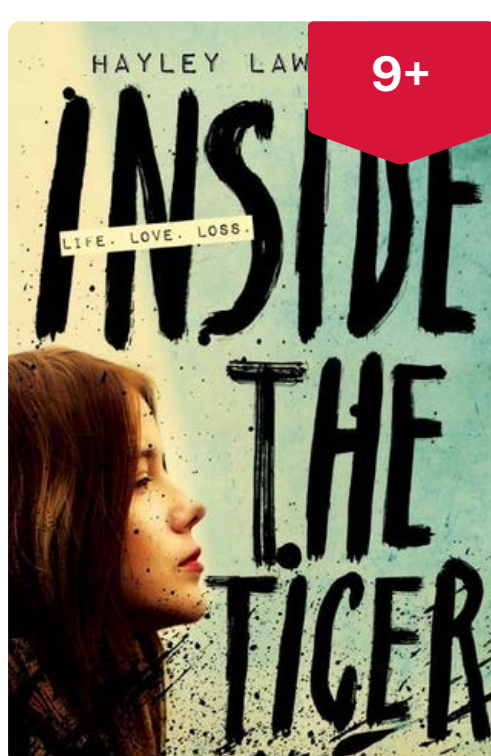
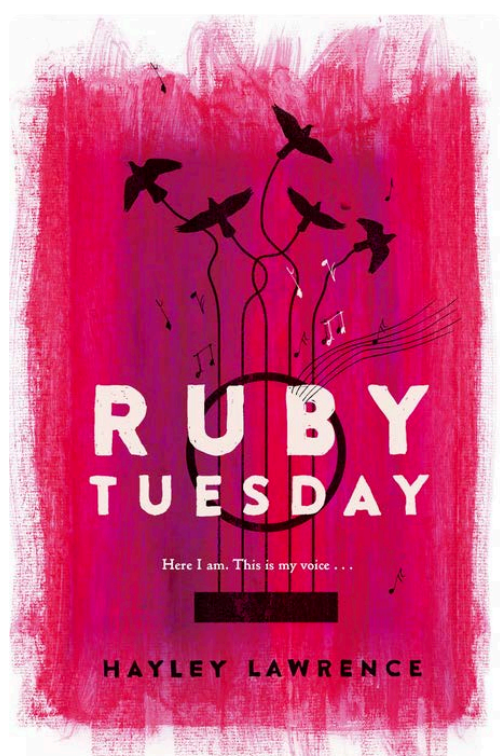
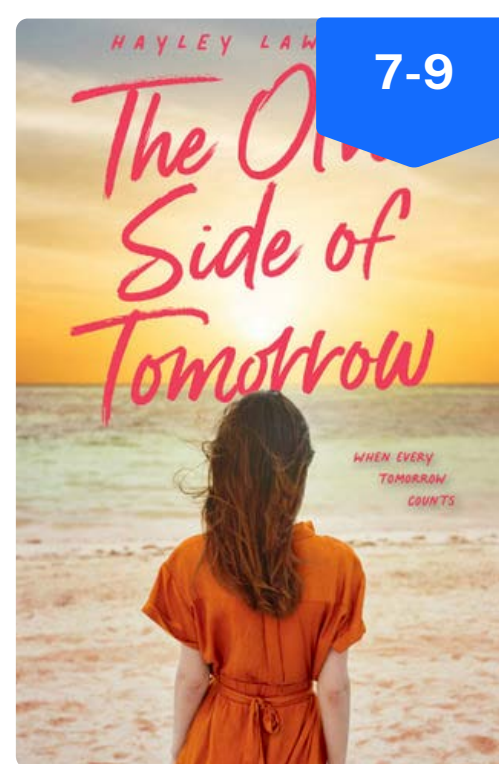
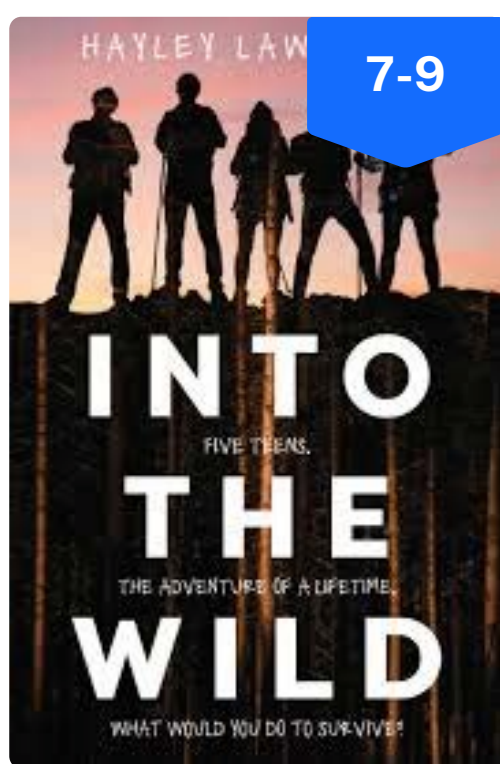


Titles to explore by
Neal Shusterman

Sydney Writers' Festival Secondary Schools Day 2025

I n t e r v i e w w i t h

Hayley Lawrence



Hayley Lawrence

Learning activities



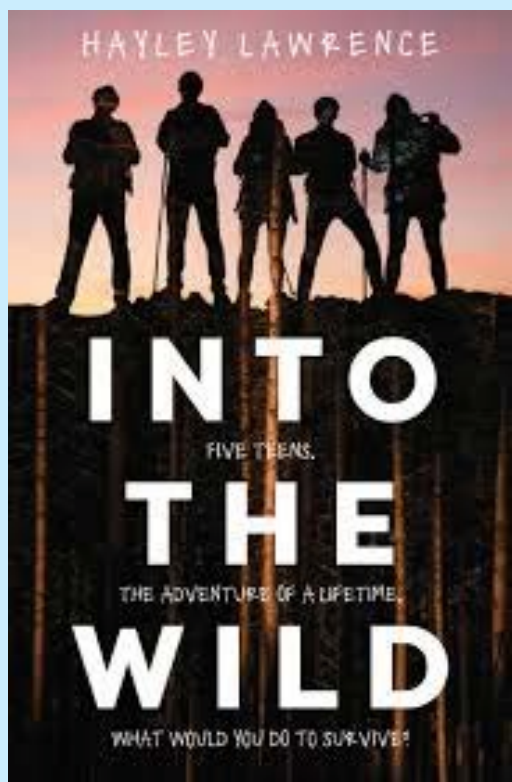
Sehajleen from Glenwood High School interviews Hayley Lawrence at the SWF Secondary Schools Day 2025

Reflecting

1. Hayley Lawrence discusses researching and creating realistic settings by focusing on textures, smells, and climate. Think of a place that is special to you. What does it smell like, sound like, feel like? Why is it important to you?
2. Hayley mentions that many YA books are set overseas. What kinds of stories would you like to see set in Australia? How might an Australian setting change the story or its characters?
3. Hayley discusses developing distinct voices for each character. Have you read any books with multiple points of view? How did each character's voice or perspective feel different?
4. Do you prefer books that focus on fast-paced action, deep character development or a mix of both? Why? Give examples of books where this stood out to you.
5. Sehajleen states that "disaster reveals character" - can you think of a book where a character faced a disaster or major challenge? What did it reveal about who they truly are?
6. Choose a character from one of your favourite books. What advice would you give them? Do you think they would take it?
7. Look through the resource page with Hayley Lawrence's books and blurbs. What would you most prefer to read and why?

Creating

1. Write a few paragraphs about a character (or yourself) interacting with a setting that's important to you, using sensory details (sight, sound, smell, taste, feel) like Hayley does in her writing.
2. Take a dramatic moment from a book you love (a disaster, conflict or major turning point). Rewrite it by having the character take your advice. What changes in the story? What stays the same?
3. Write a persuasive piece of writing to convince:
 - a. Your teacher librarian to add one of Hayley Lawrence's books to your school's collection OR
 - b. Your English teacher to study one of Hayley Lawrence's texts in class
4. Create a book trailer between 30 seconds and 2 minutes to spark interest in your favourite Hayley Lawrence title



Into the Wild

Genre/s: Adventure, survival

Themes: *Passion and obsession, responsibility*

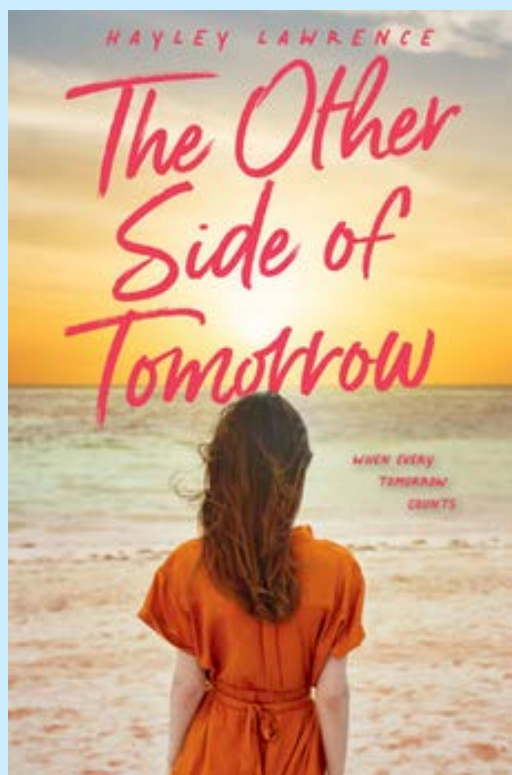
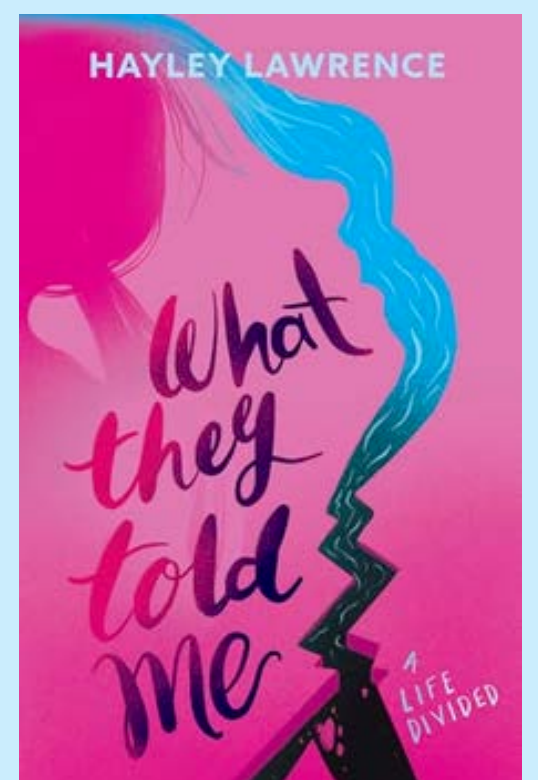
In the remote Blue Mountains, five teens—Olive, Ted, Knox, Birdie, and Silas—take on a survival challenge without technology. Battling freezing temperatures and treacherous terrain, they must rely on teamwork to make it through. But a split decision to climb a dangerous rock leads to disaster, and one of them makes a choice with devastating consequences. As blame and betrayal surface, survival may come at the cost of forgiveness — and not everyone will make it home.

What They Told Me

Genre/s: Contemporary fiction

Themes: *Loss, heartbreak, change*

Elliott always believed her dad when he said they were the luckiest. Living by Crooked River with her family and best friend Drake, life felt secure—until one evening shatters everything. Faced with heartbreaking news, Elliott risks losing the people and places she loves most. But she refuses to let go — because if she loses them, she might lose herself too.

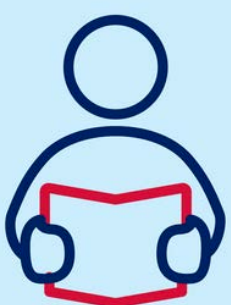


The Other Side of Tomorrow

Genre/s: Contemporary fiction, romance

Themes: *Friendship, grief, mortality*

What if you thought you had forever... To live your life. To tell your story. But what if forever was taken from you? When your tomorrows are counted, all you have is this moment. And this story you wish was never yours to tell. When Abby traded her life in the city for a wholesome new life on the coast, it was meant to be a fresh start for her family. Behind them was the sickness and sadness of the past. But sickness doesn't always play by the rules. And as Abby's past threatens to swallow her future, she is forced to decide what is most important. What she will fight for. And she will fight. For however many days she has left.



Titles to explore by
Hayley Lawrence



Skin Deep

Genre/s: Contemporary fiction

Themes: *Family, friendship, grief, self-acceptance*

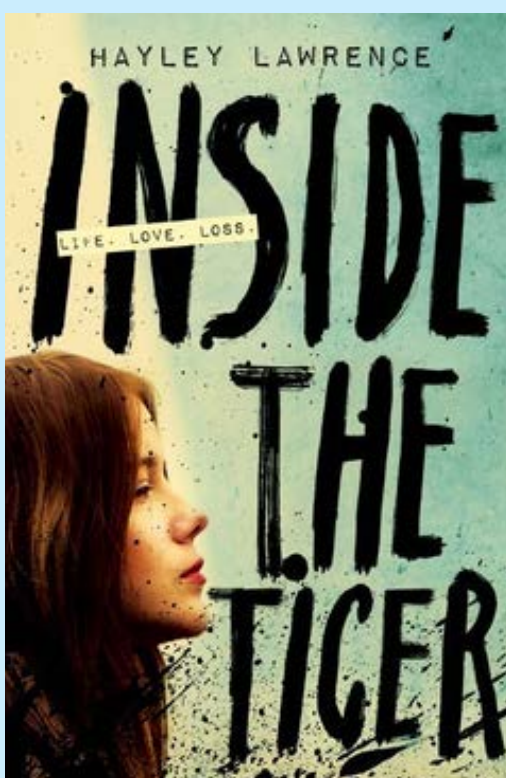
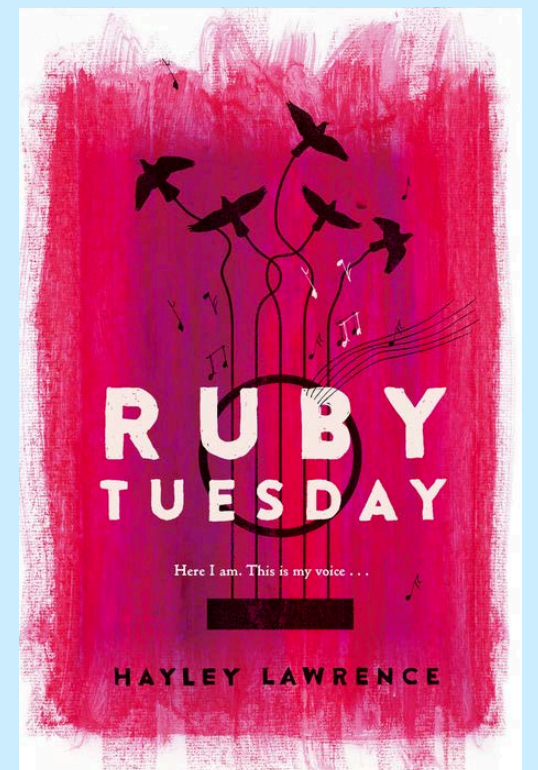
Scarlett was gifted with beauty. But beauty can be taken in a day, in a single moment, by one car fire. Now permanently disfigured, Scarlett has become a smudge in her perfect world. She can see only one acceptable solution: to escape the modern world for Matilda Mountain, which is desolate, isolated, forlorn. Perfect. But mountains are not always as lonely as they appear. And unexpected friendships can be found in the wilderness. Friendships that challenge her ideas about perfection and her place in the world. Can Scarlett break free from the confines of her beauty-obsessed culture to discover who she is beyond the layers of her skin?

Ruby Tuesday

Genre/s: Contemporary fiction

Themes: *Assault, disability, healing*

Ruby was named after a song about freedom, but she's far from free. She's trapped by her mum's accident, her past as a famous pianist a distant memory. This was never the plan – both of them invisible and voiceless in a dusty small town. And Ruby wants to be heard. But that was before Joey Milano. Before that awful party. Now the only thing Ruby's sure of is that she'll never ever trust anyone again. When the opportunity of a lifetime comes knocking, and a boy from her past reaches out, Ruby's not fooled. Some things are broken beyond repair. Or are they?



Inside the Tiger

Genre/s: Young adult, contemporary

Themes: Themes italicised, separated by comma

When she is asked to get involved in a social issue of her own choice, as part of a school project, Bel chooses to write to an Australian boy who is a prisoner on death row in Thailand. When he writes back, she learns more about the controversial issue of capital punishment but her involvement puts her at odds with her politician father and everyone else who loves her.

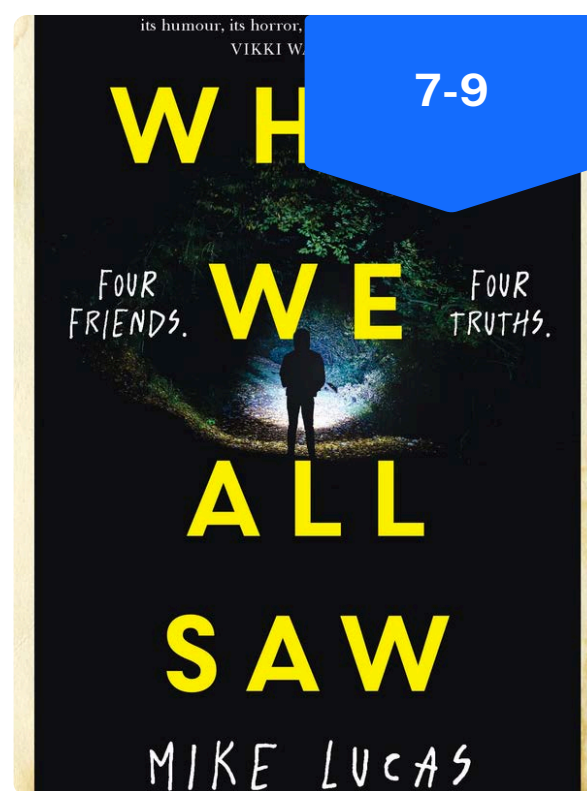
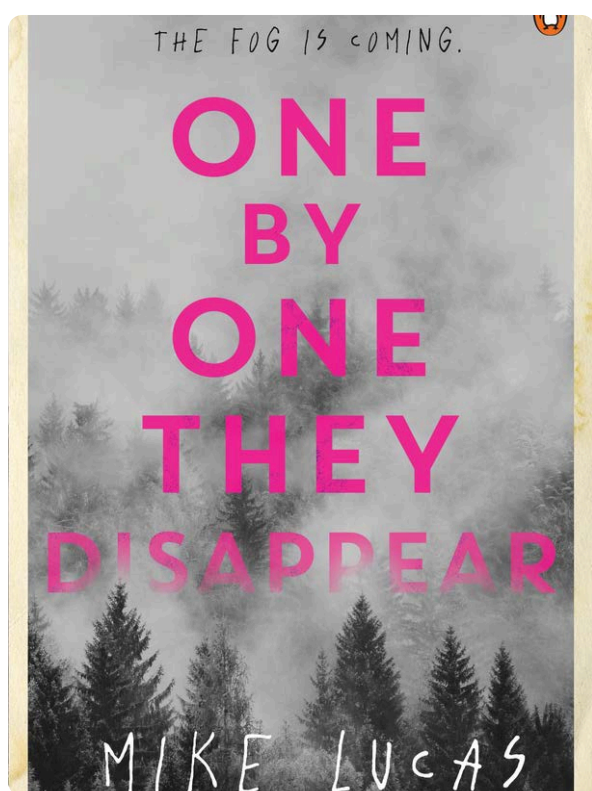


Titles to explore by
Hayley Lawrence

Sydney Writers' Festival

Secondary Schools Day 2025

Interview with
Mike Lucas



Mike Lucas

Learning activities



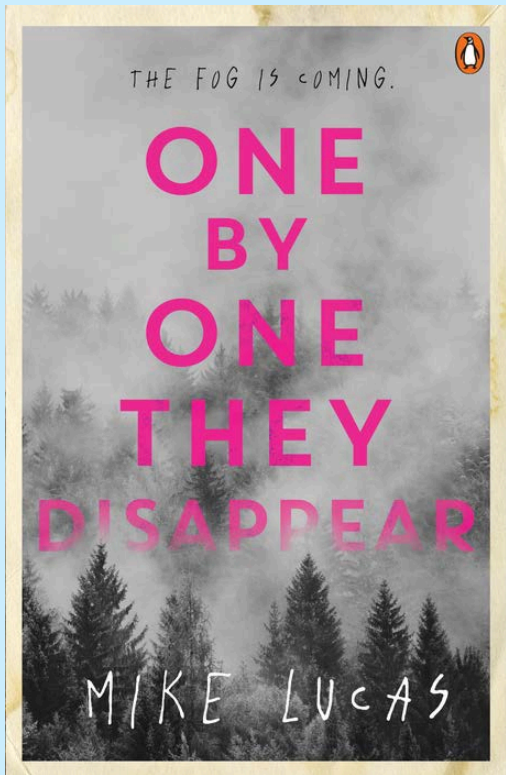
Sehajleen from Glenwood High School interviews Mike Lucas at the SWF Secondary Schools Day 2025

Reflecting

1. Mike Lucas discusses being a “pantser” - someone who flies by the seat of their pants when writing instead of planning out their writing. Reflect on the creative writing you’ve done - are you a plotter or a “pantser”? How do you think this impacts your writing?
2. Mike Lucas enjoys writing stories with plot twists that readers don’t expect. Can you think of a book you’ve read that had a surprise or twist in the story? What made that twist so surprising or interesting for you?
3. One of the main pieces of writing advice in this interview is to “write what you know”. Reflect on some of your own experiences from childhood or stories your family members have told you that might make for a great story?
4. Look through the resource page with Mike Lucas’s books and blurbs. What would you most prefer to read and why?

Creating

1. **15-minute writing session:** Imagine a fictional village in a fantasy world where, on one day each year, a strange rule applies: If a child leaves their footprints in the snow, they vanish from the world forever. Use this idea to write a short piece of creative writing. You can choose to write from the perspective of a child, parent, villager, or an outsider to the village.
2. **Write a persuasive piece of writing to convince:**
 - a. Your teacher librarian to add one of Mike Lucas’s books to your school’s collection OR
 - b. Your English teacher to study one of Mike Lucas’s texts in class
3. **Create a book trailer** between 30 seconds and 2 minutes to spark interest in one of Mark Lucas’s titles.



One by One They Disappear

Genre/s: Historical fiction, supernatural, mystery

Themes: *War, injustice, determination*

One girl. Two identities. Three friends. One disappears. One forgets. One remembers. There is truth in every tale . . . Find it! Beginning with the Brothers Grimm and following a young girl through Nazi Germany, this is a frighteningly creepy supernatural YA thriller that chills to the bone with imagined and real horrors.

What We All Saw

Genre/s: Horror, mystery

Themes: *Class, power, persecution of women*

Witches only exist in stories. Everyone knows that. But what if the stories are real?

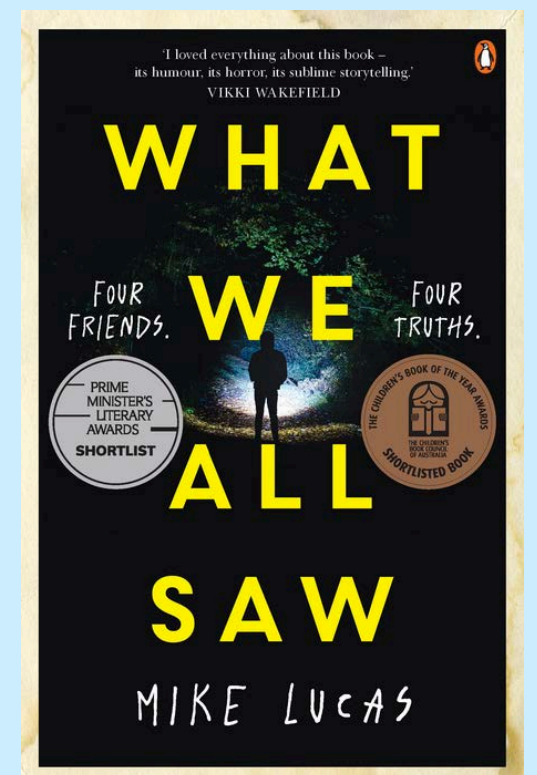
Four friends. Four truths. One nightmare.

If you wander into the wood ...

If you hear scratching sounds from the Old Quarry ...

If you go too close to the edge ...

WATCH. OUT.



Vanishing

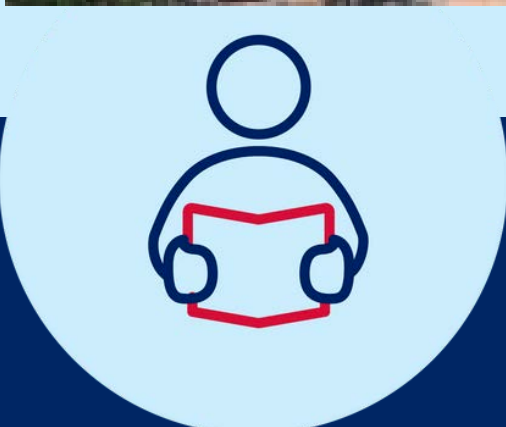
Genre/s: Picture book

Themes: Environmental destruction

Once, creatures of all shapes and sizes wandered this empty land. They had horns and wings, scales and feathers.

They lived in vibrant forests, desert plains and icy tundras.

But where are they now?



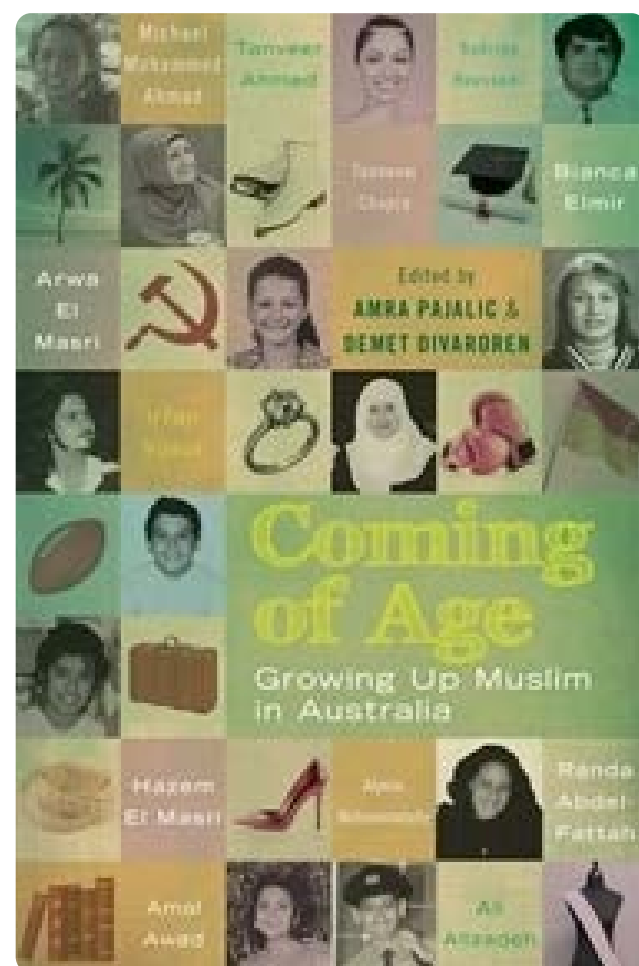
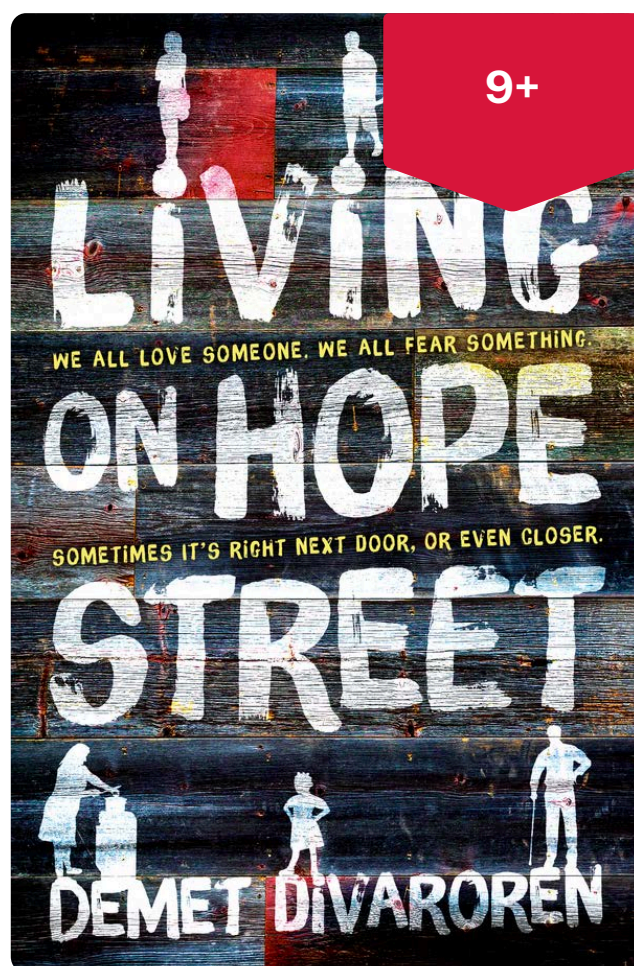
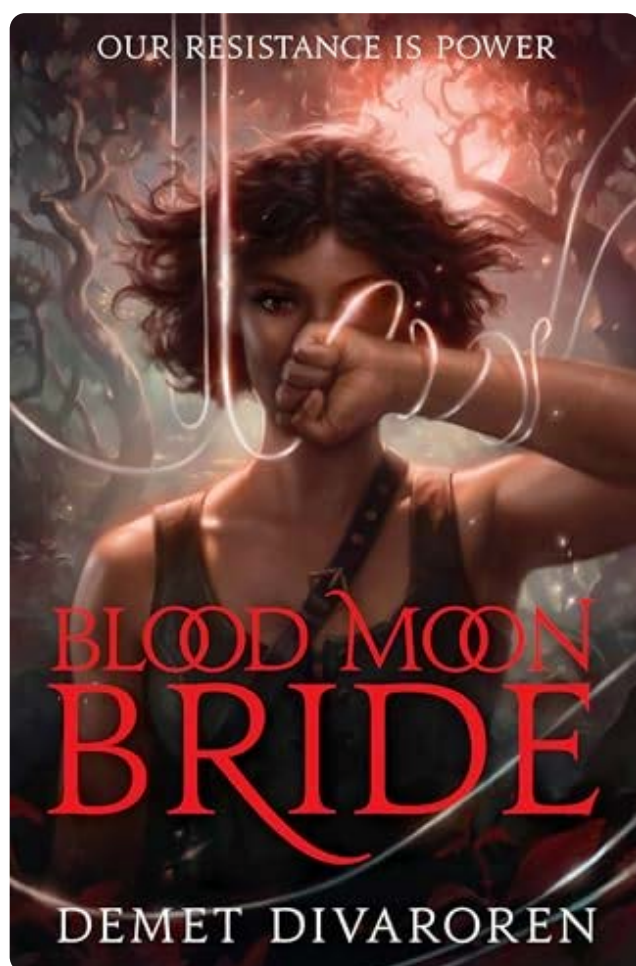
Titles to explore by
Mike Lucas

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I n t e r v i e w w i t h

Demet Divaroren



Demet Divaroren

Learning activities



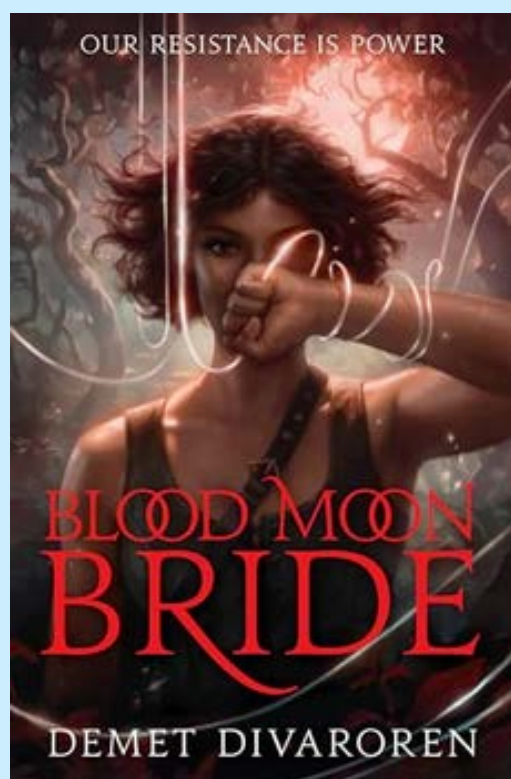
Renisha from Glenwood High School interviews Demet Divaroren at the SWF Secondary Schools Day 2025

Reflecting

1. Demet Divaroren discusses how she used fantasy in *Blood Moon Bride* to discuss serious topics in a way that felt less confronting for the reader. Can you think of other books that use fantasy, sci-fi or a made-up world to explore big or serious issues? Why do you think the author chose to tell the story that way?
2. Demet Divaroren reveals that *Blood Moon Bride* first had a male main character, but the story became more powerful when she changed to a girl. Can you think of a book where changing the main character's gender or identity would change the story in a big way? Why?
3. Have you ever read a book that helped you feel better about something, helped you understand something new, or made you see the world differently? What was the book, and how did it affect you?
4. Look through the resource page with Demet Divavoren's books and blurbs. What would you most prefer to read and why?

Creating

1. Choose a scene from a well-known book and rewrite it with the main character's gender or identity changed. Then share your rewrite with a partner, or reflect on how the change altered the power dynamics.
2. Choose a real-world issue that matters to you (e.g. climate change, racism, poverty, censorship) and invent a fantasy world that symbolises or reflects this issue. Include a key location or symbol in this world, a rule or tradition that reflects your issue, and a hero who is trying to challenge or change the system.
3. Write a persuasive piece of writing to convince:
 - a. Your teacher librarian to add one of Demet Divaroren's books to your school's collection OR
 - b. Your English teacher to study one of Demet Divavoren's texts in class
4. Create a book trailer between 30 seconds and 2 minutes to spark interest in one of Demet Divaroren's titles.



Blood Moon Bride

Genre/s: Fantasy

Themes: *Gender inequality, female empowerment*

Rehya is a hunter with uncanny magical abilities – and magic has long been outlawed in Mennama Valley. Every winter, on the night of the Blood Moon, young women enter forced marriages for the valley's advancement and prosperity. But this year Governor Kyra has decreed that girls of just fifteen must become Blood Moon Brides, making Rehya eligible.

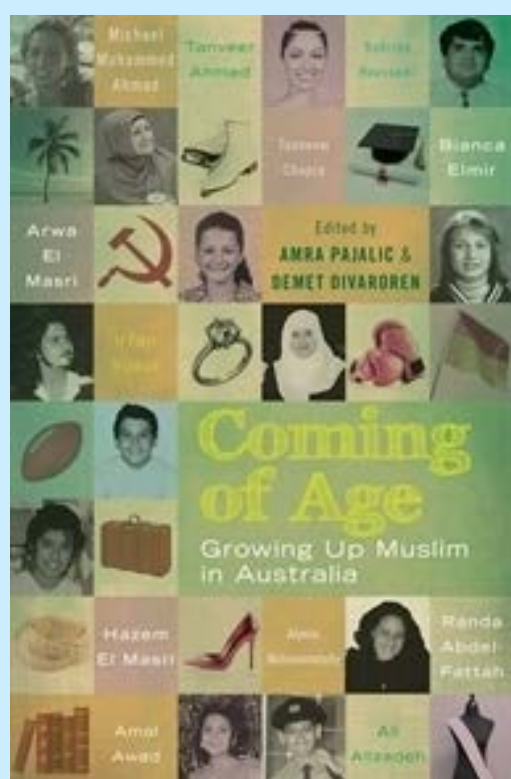
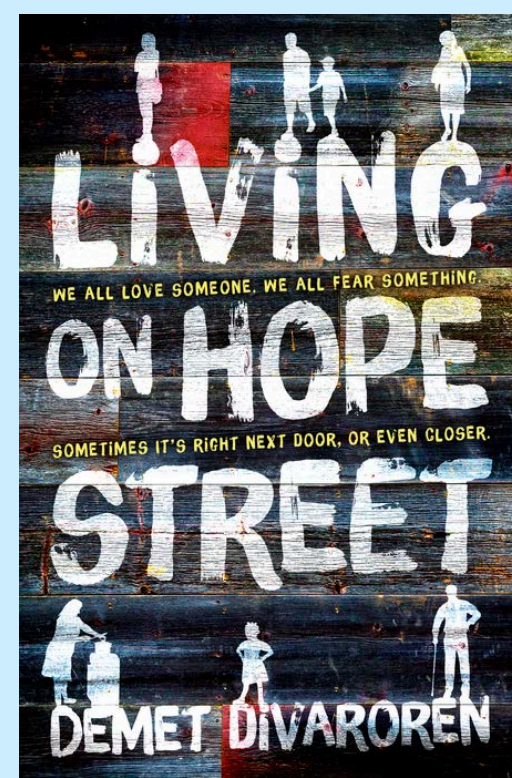
When her Pa dies, Rehya's plans of escape evaporate and she is paraded in front of suitors on Show Day. And when she is chosen to be a bride, she lashes out. As punishment, she is sent to the Nest. There Rehya must decide: should she submit to the life of a Blood Moon Bride, or rebel – and risk everything to fight for justice?

Living on Hope Street

Genre/s: Realistic fiction

Themes: *Family relationships, racism, identity*

Living on Hope Street offers a powerful snapshot of modern Australia through the lives of families on a single street. Kane is desperate to protect his mother and brother from their violent father, even at great personal cost. Mrs Aslan shields them while coping with her own struggles. Ada searches for belonging, Mr Bailey wrestles with fear and prejudice, and Gugulethu tries to rebuild her life far from past horrors. Though their backgrounds differ, each must confront what connects them. A raw, heartfelt portrait of suburban life and resilience.



Coming of Age: Growing up Muslim in Australia

Genre/s: Memoir

Coming of Age: Growing Up Muslim in Australia is a powerful collection of twelve candid, funny, and moving stories from Muslim-Australians – both well known and everyday voices – sharing what it's really like to live with a dual identity. From a young boxer to a boy questioning faith, and a woman navigating her sexuality and religion, these stories challenge stereotypes, celebrate diversity, and offer a rich, honest portrait of Muslim life in Australia today.



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