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Under the Hood of the Verse Novel: A Consideration of Variation in Form and Technique in the Contemporary Verse Novel for Young Adults

Tia Fisher

Abstract
The verse novel form is on the rise and holds particular appeal for young people, but there has not been much analysis to date of the technical choices available to verse novelists; technical choices not necessarily available to writers of prose or conventional poetry.
As a verse novelist myself, I wanted to understand more about how contemporary US and UK writers experiment with their craft to evoke responses in their readers. In this article, I look broadly at the development of the form and the critical reaction to it, analysing what constitutes a verse novel and why it isn't just 'chopped up prose'.
I go on to examine five recently-published verse novels from 2018 to 2021 and consider the effects of technical choices made by the authors, and the degree to which they work for the reader.

Keyword: *writing processes*, *novels in verse*, *literary form*, *verse novel*, *narrative verse*, *YA*

*

Introduction

The verse novel emerged as a powerful trend in Young Adult literature in the US and Australia at the turn of the century (Cadden, 2011; Mallan and McGillis, 2003), but in the UK only gathered momentum with the publication of Sarah Crossan's *The Weight of Water* (Crossan, 2011), which was shortlisted for the CILIP Carnegie Medal in 2013. Verse novels are definitely still a niche form but are garnering accolades in disproportion to the numbers published. For example, in the past five years, eight verse novels have been shortlisted for the CILIP Carnegie Medal, and young people have picked a verse novel as winner of the Shadow Carnegie Award three times.

As a verse novelist myself, I have developed my craft by examining the common elements and researching the particular techniques we have at our disposal, and I share those insights here. In so doing, I also identify some of the pitfalls verse novelists should beware of.

I focus on areas which concern verse novelists rather than matters of poetry or story in general. Although I refer to a variety of verse novels, I pay particular attention to four titles which have received Carnegie honours: *The Poet X* (Acevedo, 2018), Elizabeth Acevedo's story of a girl finding strength through slam poetry; Manjeet Mann's tale of a refugee and activist, *The Crossing* (Mann, 2021); Jason Reynolds' story of gang vengeance, *Long Way Down* (Reynolds and Priestley, 2018) and Dean Atta's LGBTQ+ coming-of-age, graphic-heavy novel, *The Black Flamingo* (Atta and Khullar, 2019). I will additionally refer to Lucy Cuthew's brave exploration of period shame, *Blood Moon* (Cuthew, 2020) and my own verse novel about a boy involved with a county lines drugs gang, *Crossing the Line* (Fisher, 2023).

What *is* a Verse Novel?

Is it more than simply 'chopped-up prose' (Faey, 2020) or a collection of poems? A useful broad definition is offered by literary scholar, Mike Cadden, who places the verse novel into a nexus between drama, poetry and prose (Cadden, 2011, p.26). In her Master's dissertation (van Sickle, 2006), Vikki van Sickle argues for subcategories of the verse novel: texts divided between the 'Singular Poetic Voice' (verse novels which embrace traditional poetic devices); the 'Dramatic Monologue' (featuring a single narrator speaking in a way that reveals much about their character) and the 'Multiple Voice' (a textual equivalent of an ethnodrama, essentially a mockumentary which presents contrasting points of view from 'sources' such as media reports, dramatic monologues and scripts). Whilst practitioners working creatively with the form perhaps defy easy critical classification, I agree with van Sickle on the need for sub categorisation, and her analysis does provide a useful yardstick, a handy nomenclature, to be updated as the form evolves.

Van Sickle allows that novels may contain elements of different types, rather than belonging to a single subcategory, and my chosen texts certainly all contain differently-weighted elements of each. For example, *The Black Flamingo* mixes 'Multiple Voice' (differing text types) with 'Dramatic Monologue' (character revealing monologue) and also has an additional element of graphic illustration which didn't form part of van Sickle's analysis. Some recent titles – such as *The Bones of Us* (Duckhouse, 2022) and *Where the Light Goes* (Barnard, 2023) – slip smoothly between verse and prose in an as-yet-unnamed new form of verse novel.

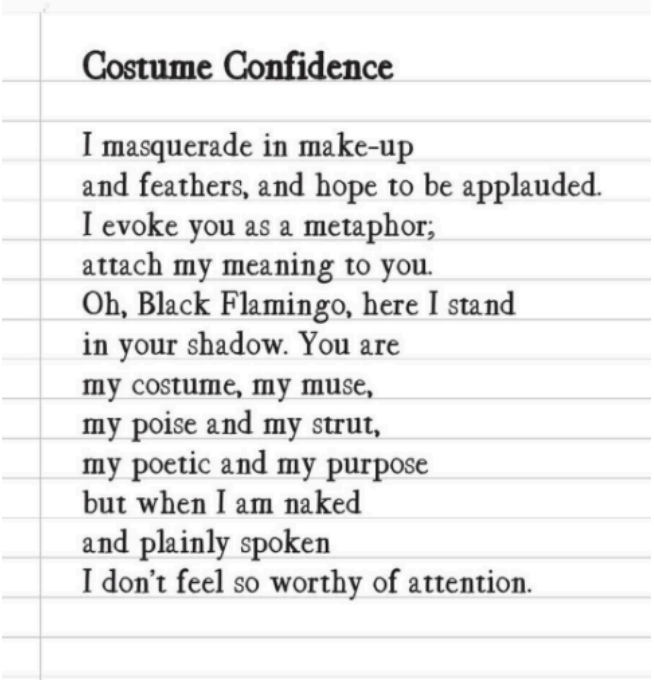
Poetry Within the Text

Many earlier verse novels were told in recognised poetic forms (see Friesner, 2017, p.74), and belong to van Sickle's 'Singular Poetic Voice' type. For example, *Keesha's House* (Frost, 2003) is written entirely in sestinas and sonnets, and *The Voyage of the Arctic Tern* (Montgomery, 2002) in alternate end rhymes. However, by 2005, Joy Alexander wrote that the typical verse novel 'house-style' emerging was a story told in non-rhyming free verse, divided into short 'sections' or 'pieces' (Alexander, 2005 p.270), and so it remains.

The plot of many early verse novels included poetry penned by the protagonist at the urging of a teacher (Curtis, E., 2019 p.54; Howard, K., 2018, p.218) – for example, the boy given poetry assignments by his teacher in *Love that Dog* (Creech, 2001) – and Friesner believes these were created purely to explain the use of verse (Friesner, 2017, p.xviii).

This metafictional device of narrator-as-poet persists in two of my selected verse novels, *The Poet X* and *The Black Flamingo*. However, they differ in that one quotes the narrator's poetry within the text and the other does not, and this highlights the first technical choice that I want to make verse novelists aware of.

In *The Poet X*, Xiomara's poems are 'off the page'. This effectively side-steps the reader judging her poetry for themselves. Xiomara says she 'didn't suck' at the poetry slam (p.286), and with no evidence to the contrary, we can take her at her word. This is not the case in *The Black Flamingo*, where we read Michael's poems on the page, distinguished from the narrative not only by the graphic style but also by the less assured voice. The reader may feel that Michael's poetry *does* perhaps suck just a little. In the example below, it feels very *teenage*: self-obsessed, self-conscious, somewhat repetitive and clumsy; the final over-long line limply tailing off.



Costume Confidence

I masquerade in make-up
and feathers, and hope to be applauded.
I evoke you as a metaphor;
attach my meaning to you.
Oh, Black Flamingo, here I stand
in your shadow. You are
my costume, my muse,
my poise and my strut,
my poetic and my purpose
but when I am naked
and plainly spoken
I don't feel so worthy of attention.

figure 1: Atta & Khullar (2019) p289 (alt text supplied)

What if we don't agree with the character Mzz B that Michael's "poetry is wonderful!" (p292)? Does this make the reader lose faith with the story? The decision to share a young protagonist's 'juvenilia' may sacrifice credibility for the sake of realism and authenticity.

Building Readers

Verse novels are, in the main, a quicker read than either a prose novel or a collection of poetry. The positive impact of being able to finish a book, for those who find reading difficult or have limited attention spans, cannot be overstated. Interestingly, this is the reason the verse novel form was first devised; Virginia Euwer Wolff , the author of what is widely considered to be the first Young Adult verse novel, *Make Lemonade* (Wolff, 1993), says she developed this style deliberately to encourage struggling teen mothers with reading (cited in Sutton, May/Jun2001, p.282).

One reason for the speed is that verse novels have far fewer words than their prose counterparts. Children's librarian Brenna Friesner analysed 185 Young Adult verse novels and found a median count of 20,000 words per novel and only 87 words per page (Friesner, 2017, p.xvii). In contrast, 80,000 words is a typical guideline for the length of a Young Adult prose novel (Sambuchino, 2021). But the ease and speed of reading is not only about word count; it's also how those words are placed on the page. Big blocks of text can be intimidating for reluctant readers. Verse novelist Sarah Crossan writes that the white space on the page offers 'moments of rest, breath, where a reader can discover herself' (Crossan, 2020b); Jason Reynolds says that offering the "palm-sized pup" of a verse novel instead of the "pit bull" of prose could get the "rush of comprehension and completion lapping at [reluctant readers']

psyches" perhaps for the very first time (Reynolds, 2017). Dyslexic verse novelist Serena Molloy is not alone in claiming that a verse novel can be easier to read for those with dyslexia (Hearne, 2023), and Barrington Stoke, the experts in publishing books with high interest and low reading difficulty, are currently exploring the research into this question (MacLean, 2023).

However, if it were only a matter of reduced word count and white space, lapsed or emergent readers would be devouring slim volumes of poetry. Which they're not. What also pulls a reader through is *story*, and a story compellingly told. As US educational practitioner Lisa Krok observes in *Novels in Verse for Teens* (Krok, 2020), readers will find themselves 'hooked' into a verse novel's story by the immediacy of the voice, the simplicity of construction and pace of the read. Writers of verse novels offer an easier reading experience when they deliver low-word counts and white space – but it means nothing without story.

Building Empathy

Easier to read it might be, but a verse novel demands the skill of inference. The best verse novels suggest and imply; leave space for imagination. There is no skipping over the boring descriptive passages in a verse novel because there *are* no boring descriptive passages. Every word counts.

'Sparsity is what lends these novels their magic ' says Sarah Crossan (Crossan, 2020a). Readers need to think beyond the text, read between the lines and reflect on what they have read. Crossan claims that she writes only half the novel – the reader must interpret the rest (Crossan, 2020b). This need for inference, according to narratologist Dr Vera Nünning, can intensify the reader's experience and development of empathy as they insert their own lived experiences into the 'gaps' left in the text (Nünning, 2017) .

Narrative verse can be a powerful means for young people to see their lived experience reflected, their cultural references truly represented and to come to a greater understanding of each other's worlds. Empathy is learned, and helping a young reader to build their empathic skills is perhaps one of the greatest responsibilities of writing for children.

Creating Voice and Immediacy

Literary theorist Joy Alexander notes that most verse novels use first-person point of view and present tense to achieve immediacy. Even though *Long Way Down* uses the past tense to relate his story of what happened to Will in the lift, the first poem still uses the present tense to frame his tale and pull the reader in:

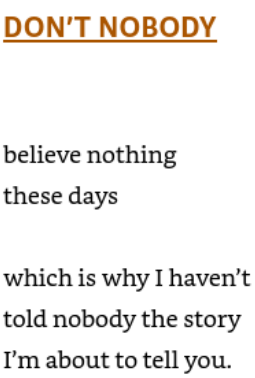


figure 2: Reynolds & Priestley (2018) p5 (alt text supplied)

Dramatic voice, creating character through the way they express themselves, is an essential part of the verse novel. Of the five writers I have chosen, three are performance poets and another has a background in drama. The verse novel is a performance between end papers, with, as the critic Joy Alexander says, the immediacy and dramatic impact of soliloquy; the voice of the angst-ridden teen talking straight from the page (Alexander, 2005 p.271). Speech rhythms are woven into the narration, in what Mike Cadden describes as 'enjambed prose written to emphasise a preferred pace and rhythm of speaking to the self' (Cadden, 2011, p.22). Carnegie judge Alison Brumwell, speaking to *The Guardian*, praises the strong 'sense of identity', 'musicality' and 'unique cadence' in free verse narratives (Flood, 2019). Winship goes further and says that reading a novel in verse is 'much like dipping into a stranger's diary' (quoted in Napoli and Ritholz, 2009 p.31) and in fact, *The Black Flamingo* includes facsimiles of extracts from Michael's journal.

Stepping closer still to the point-of-view of the protagonist, the writer of a verse novel has the option of writing each poem as a stream of consciousness, allowing readers to experience a character's fragmented thoughts and emotions as truly as though we are inside their head. Moreover, this stream of consciousness can be sustained through the text in a way which is not possible in a collection of poems.

In contrast to a prose novel, voice is communicated not only through the words the writer chooses, but also the typography. The font, the choice of upper or lower case, the sizing and placement on the page all act as stage directions. Text can be slooooooowed, *speeded up* or SHOUTED! Through the joystick of typography and layout, a verse novelist can control how their text is read, either aloud or silently.

A particularly powerful example of typography can be seen in Yasmin Rahman's *All The Things We Never Said* (Rahman, 2019), where the contributions of Olivia are written in narrative verse. Here, her internalised rage and fear of her mother's sexually abusive boyfriend sprays out over the page like vomit through fingers; the upper case and increased kerning of 'shatters' making the word itself explode like broken glass:

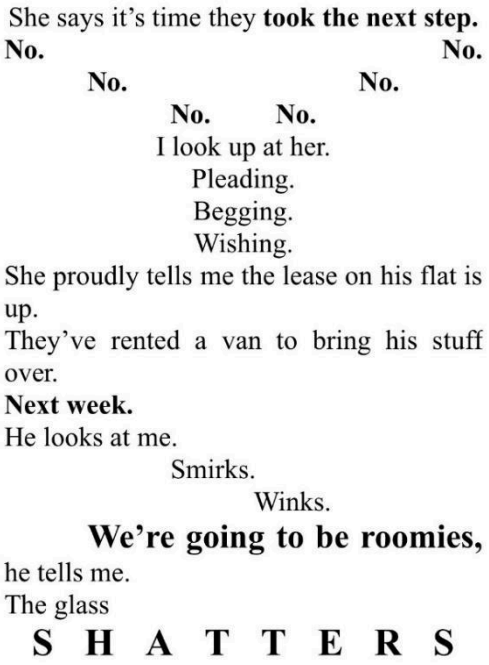


figure 3: Rahman (2019) p20 (alt text supplied)

In *Blood Moon*, Cuthew also portrays *quietness*, the greyed text reducing the coy euphemism 'down below' to a stage whisper as Frankie confesses the effect her crush has on her:

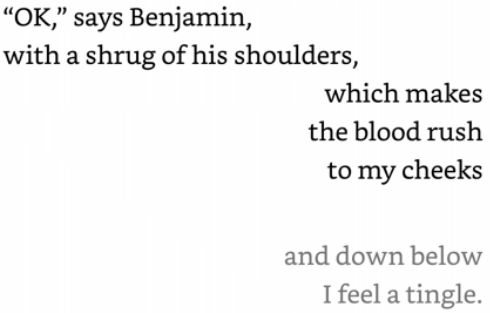


figure 4: Cuthew (2020) p135 (alt text supplied)

In the same book, the motion of the verb 'slip' is demonstrated by a simple calligram:

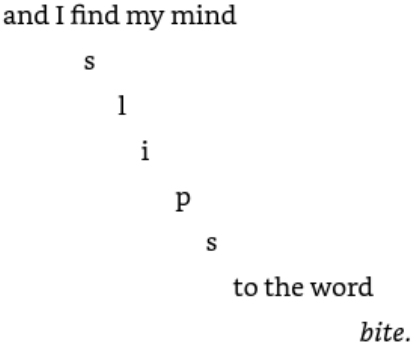


figure 5: Cuthew (2020) p135 (alt text supplied)

Layout

Poetry, says Rachel DuPLessis, is all about the negotiation of the gap of line break, stanza break, and page space (DuPlessis, 1996, p.51). Friesner agrees, adding that, 'Free verse [reflects] the cadence of speech, and line breaks occur where a thought is paused or a breath is taken.' (Friesner, 2017, p.xviii). In contrast, Liz Rosenberg says the poetry in many verse novels is "simply prose hacked into lines . . . [that] would not pass muster as poetry in an undergraduate creative writing class" (Rosenberg, 2005 p.377). American poet Ron Koertge says it's easy to be lazy writing novel-in-verse; he is careful to create poetry, not merely 'chopped-up prose' (Alberts, 2013). A lack of metaphor or imagery – insufficient 'Singular Poetic Voice' (van Sickle, 2006) – can render a verse novel pedestrian, however emotive and insightful the theme.

It is true that occasionally lineation might be 'reduced to prose hacked into pieces like kindling'. (Koertge quoted in Alberts, 2013) and enjambment may not align with breath or rhythm or meaning, as in Manjeet Mann's first verse novel (*Run*, *Rebel*, 2020 p.52): 'Tara is always coming/out with gems like that' Here, running the line on adds an unintended emphasis to 'coming' and 'out'; splitting the phrasal verb and robbing it of meaning. Sometimes also, a chance is missed where enjambment and typographical isolation would add meaning, as in this example from *The Black Flamingo:*

Sometimes
I think Mum loves Daisy as much as us.
Sometimes maybe more than me.

figure 6: Atta & Khullar (2019) p127 (alt text supplied)

What are we intended to understand? That Mum loves Michael's friend Daisy more than her own children, or that she loves Michael less than his sister? Breaking the line after 'maybe' or 'me' could have added clarity and poignancy.

In 'I am no Ant' from *The Poet X*, Acevedo uses the line breaks to demonstrate how her mother is pulling her up from the floor by her hair: the whole poem is a long column of agonized stretch:

I Am No Ant

My
mother
yanks
my
hair,
pulling
my
face
up
from
the
tiles,
constructing
a
church
arch
of
my
spine
until
Mary's
face
is
an
inch
from
mine;

I
am
no
ant.

Only
sharply
torn.
Something
broken.
In
my
mother's
hand.

figure 7: Acevedo (2018) pp202-3 (alt text supplied)

White space focuses a reader's attention, and when entire poems are very short, the white space surrounding them acts like a frame, a focal lens, in perhaps the same way as a half-page chapter in a prose novel might. In *Long Way Down*, Reynolds plays with the white space above and below the poems. The effect of this to create an echo of the elevator's motion, as in the double page spread below:

BUT THERE WAS A GHOST IN THE ELEVATOR

so,
no-
go.

SHE BRUSHED HER HAND AGAINST MINE

to get my attention,
which on any other
occasion would've
been the perfect
open for me to flirt
or at least try to do
my best impression of Shawn,

which was
his best impression of Buck.

figure 8: Reynolds & Priestley (2018) p127-7 (alt text supplied)

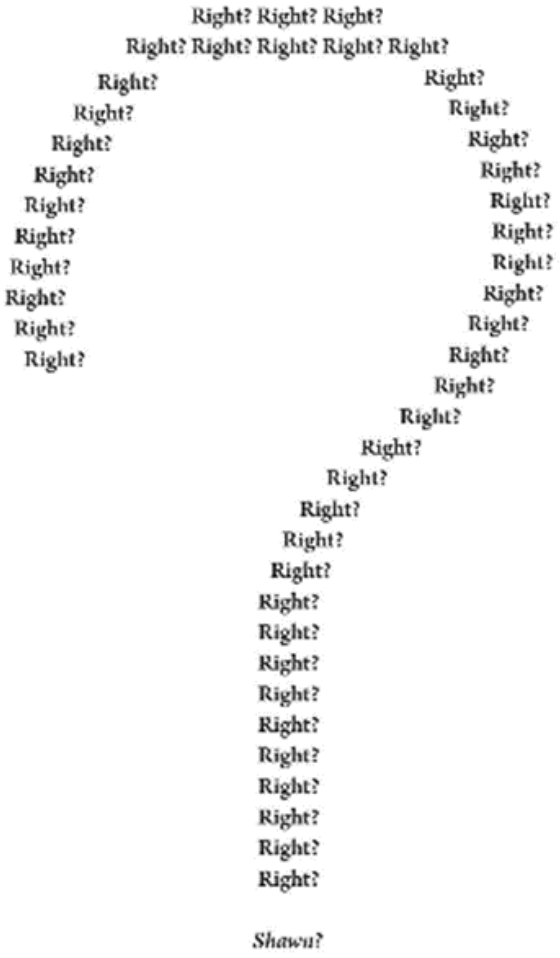
What is *not* said in the air surrounding the text can have as much significance as the words themselves. What is it? Isolation? Awkwardness? Emphasis? The verse novelist can paint a variety of pictures with white space – but should always wield the brush with intention.

Concrete Poems

Concrete poetry is, of course, not limited to verse novels, but there is so much a verse novelist can play with visually which will increase impact, convey themes and clarify meaning. In *Toffee* (Crossan, 2019), the Christmas tree (p365), the hot cross bun (p.32) and the crossword (p.88) are inventive and engaging. This has value of course, but concrete poems are at their most effective when they reach beyond gimmick.

Ingeniously, in *Long Way Down*, the italicised '*Shawn?*' at the bottom of the question mark is the *point* of the poem (pun intentional). It undercuts Will's confidence and reveals his uncertainty about the rules his brother taught him. The

careful reader who spots that last word is rewarded by fully understanding Will’s growing doubt.



Right? Right? Right?
Right? Right? Right? Right? Right?
Right? Right?
Right? Right?
Right? Right?
Right? Right?
Right? Right?
Right? Right?
Right? Right?
Right? Right?
Right? Right?
Right? Right?
Right?
Right?
Right?
Right?
Right?
Right?
Right?
Right?
Right?
Right?
Right?
Right?
Right?
Right?
Right?
Right?
Right?

Shawn?

figure 9: Reynolds & Priestley (2018) p312 (alt text supplied)

The shapes of concrete poetry can further increase the accessibility of verse novels by emphasising a theme (figure 10), adding impact and decoding the poem (figure 11), or – because they are entertaining – to add engagement.

At the back

of every
form room, the
lockers are like a wall
of upright coffins: such a
dumb idea because they're
just tall enough for
a Year Seven boy to
be squashed into, but
only if he bends both
his knees a bit, just a tiny
(agonising) five degrees
or so. They are in fact
so thin that a boy my
size can only just
expand his ribs
enough to suck
thin sips of air
& maybe it's
a design fault
they should
really have
considered:
that lockers
are only *un*
locked from
the outside:
& then only
if somebody cares
you're still there.

figure 10: Fisher (2023) p15 (alt text supplied)

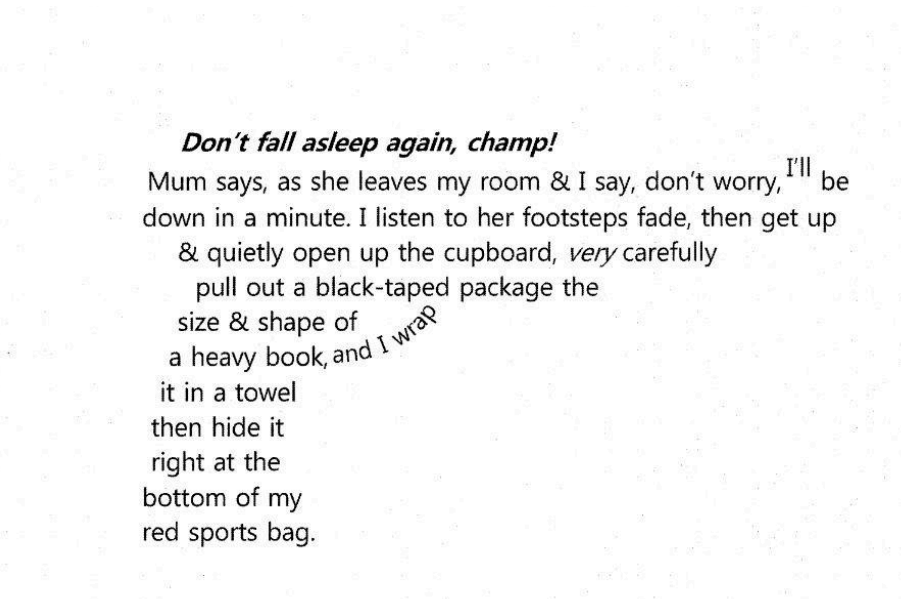


figure 11: Fisher (2023) p295 (alt text supplied)

Writers should note though, that as engaging and clever as they are, these textual tricks should be used judiciously: less is more. On edit, I removed some of the calligrams from *Crossing the Line* because they felt inappropriate and distracting at some moments of pathos, high drama or tension.

Graphic Illustrations and Blended Forms

'Studying the verse novel' says Cadden, 'will build in students an appreciation for other blends and crossovers so common in contemporary literature' (Cadden, 2011, p.26). More than the nexus of drama, prose and poetry, verse novels offer an interplay of textual and graphic forms. Poems, journal extracts, scripts, social media posts, web pages, graphics, illustrations, music scores, lyrics – even lists and other such ephemera – may be included in the mix. Such mash-ups are bound to appeal to a generation accustomed to multimodal interaction.

We know young adults like pictures. It's evidenced by the recent exponential sales growth of graphic novels (Nielsen BookScan Online, 2023), and that's why textbooks break up text with pictures, sidebars and pop-outs (Friesner, 2017, p.xvii). This style of presentation has now migrated to verse novels: *The Black Flamingo*, for example, uses a potpourri of multimodal forms drawn from the character's lived experience to recreate his life on the page.

figure 12: Atta & Khullar (2019) p82 (alt text supplied)

Graphics can also add impact. In *Blood Moon*, Frankie's T-shirt slogan is adapted from the social media meme which taunted her. Displaying it as an image leaves the reader to work the message out for themselves and appreciate Frankie's defiance:

figure 13: Cuthew (2020) p365 (alt text supplied)

Verse novel illustrations can be used in the same way as a picturebook, to augment or comment upon specific parts of the text. In the example below from *Black Flamingo*, the isolation above a broken shell adds pathos to the word 'love'.

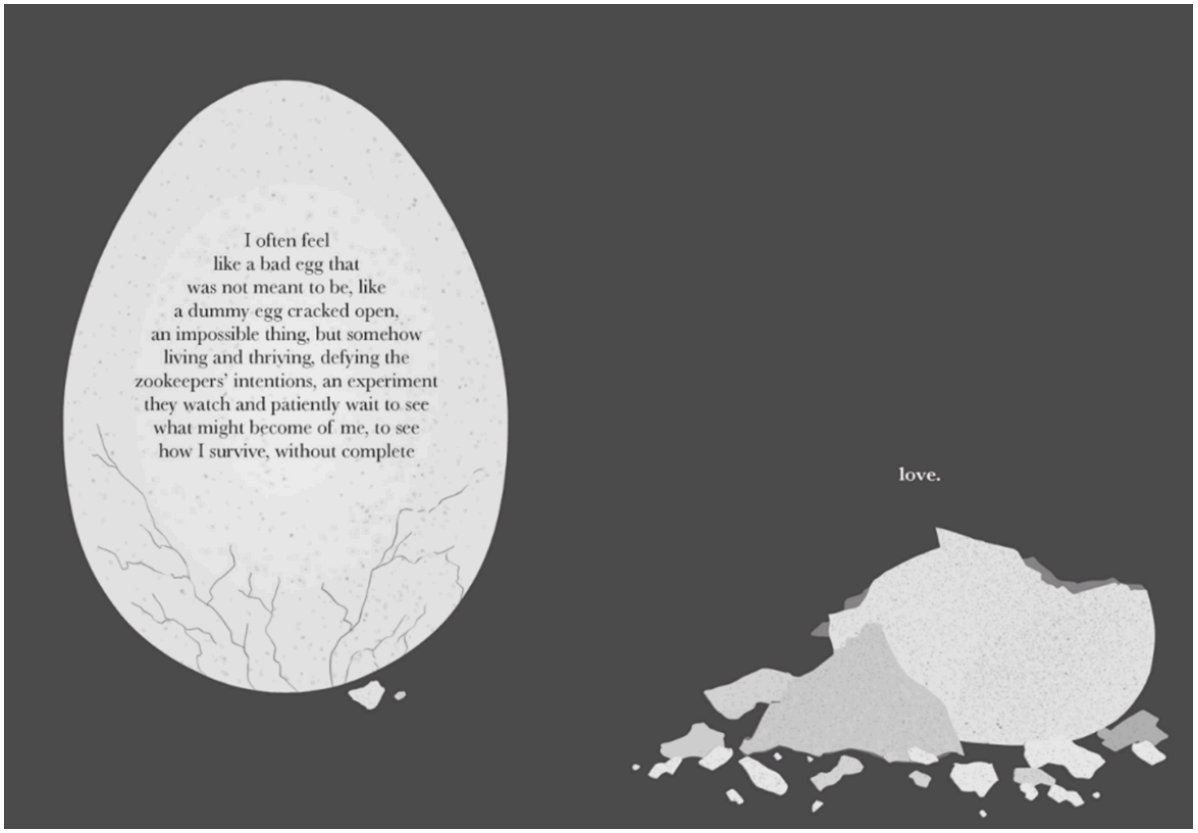


figure 14: Atta & Khullar (2019) p10-11 (alt text supplied)

An occasional time stamp positioned above the titles of *Long Way Down* serves to underline the impossibility of the lift meetings which could not in reality fit inside the short time frame of a lift descending.

09:08:20 a.m

MY FACE

tightened
hardened.

They killed Shawn last night.

figure 15: Reynolds & Priestley (2018) p150 (alt text supplied)

In *The Black Flamingo*, the white-out-of-black pages, ripped notes, cartoon bubble speech, illustrations and representations of other text forms provide interest, amusement and visual clues for the reader. However – and in contrast to the *Long Way*

Down's gritty charcoal illustrations, which match the tone of the book perfectly – *The Black Flamingo*'s graphic style seems more *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* than tale of adolescent sexual development. Atta and his publishers missed the potential of maturing the graphics along with the protagonist, an opportunity which isn't possible with standalone illustrated poems.

Verse novelists not only incorporate illustrations, but also experiment with blended forms. Inspired by the movie script poems in *Long Way Down*:

CASTING OF THE WORST, STUPIDEST MOVIE EVER

BOY: Mickey
to be played by Uncle Mark's little brother,
my father,
Mikey.
GIRL: Jesse
to be played by the younger sister of a girl
Uncle Mark used to date,
Shari,
my mother.

figure 16: Reynolds & Priestley (2018) p173 (alt text supplied)

I took the formatting further in *Crossing the Line*, where Erik imagines scenarios he and his mother enact as they go into hiding from a drugs gang:

SIT-COM

MOTHER
You had a gun! In our house!

SON
I'm sorry, Mum. I thought it was
just . . . you know . . . drugs.

MOTHER
(rolls her eyes)
Just . . . you know . . . drugs.

figure 17: Fisher (2023) p 324 (alt text supplied)

Dialogue

Although Elizabeth Acevedo feels that using a lot of dialogue makes it 'too easy to lose track of what's being said' and writing speech as poetry would render it inauthentic

(quoted in Jones, 2021), other verse novelists use dialogue freely, and vary in their approaches to formatting.

Some writers use italics rather than speech marks to separate speech from narrative, but this has a small potential for confusion if italics are also used for emphasis. Reynolds uses italics in *Long Way Down*, but surrounds the text with white space, sometimes creating small blocks of dialogue akin to a speech bubble, in another parallel with the graphic novel.

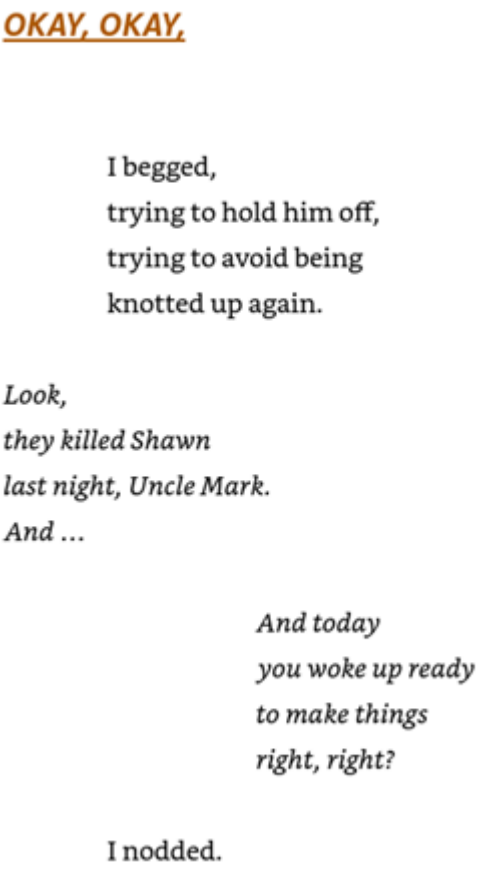


figure 18: Reynolds & Priestley (2018) p 183 (alt text supplied)

In *Blood Moon*, the placement of the dialogue on the page provides clues about who is speaking. Cuthew attributes her speech only when absolutely necessary. Following the protocol of internet messaging (aligning the narrator's voice to the right and other speakers on the left) creates both an intuitive attribution of the dialogue and the 'tennis match' eyeball movement of watching people converse.

"Hey," I say,
over the bass.
"How are you?"

"Good, thanks,"
he says,
sliding closer.
"You?"

"Good," I say.

figure 19: Cuthew (2020) p 30 (alt text supplied)

In the example from *Blood Moon* below, Cuthew is able to distinguish Frankie's interiority (the sarcastic 'yeah right') from the narrative not only with parentheses but also by placement on the page.

Then he tells us how
he ended up
shagging
them both
as a birthday present.

(Yeah, right.)

figure 20: Cuthew (2020) p18 (alt text supplied)

There is no doubt that verse novelists face additional challenges when trying to reproduce dialogue. It must be curated and provide the same functionality as with prose, but the verse novelist must also decide how far it can be distilled into poetry and still remain credible as 'speech'. It is a difficult balance to achieve.

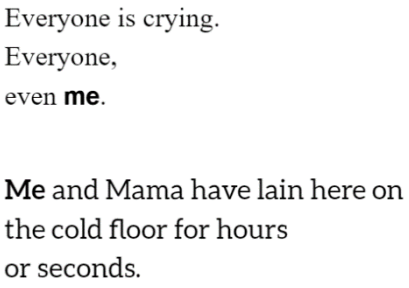
Multiple Narrators

The verse novel format, composed as it is of a series of individual poems, lends itself to the multiple first-person perspectives seen in some early works, notably *Shakespeare Bats Cleanup* (Koertge, 2001) and *The Realm of Possibility* (Levithan, 2006). Writing in *The English Journal*, Ann Angel thinks part of the appeal of polyphonic narration is how the different perspectives play off each other (Angel, 2004). This is taken to its furthest point in van Sickle's subcategory of 'Multiple Voices'.

Narrators' dramatic monologues may be distinguished from each other by use of a title, or only by character voice and/or typography. While writing in verse allows different character voices to weave in and out of each other with a frequency that

would render prose unreadable – although Acevedo notes that having *too many* characters in a verse novel can cause the reader to lose focus (Jones, 2021).

Of my chosen texts, only *The Crossing* has more than one narrator. Manjeet Mann could not have told her story of a refugee trying to enter the UK in a small boat otherwise: the two separate points of view are crucial to the story's jeopardy, immediacy and authenticity as refugee and activist move physically and mentally closer, until they almost – but fatally, don't *quite* – meet in the English channel.

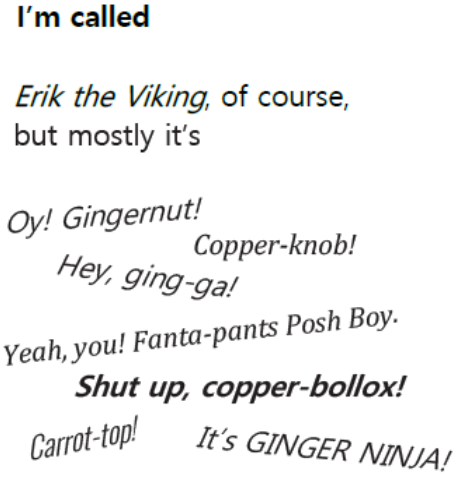

Everyone is crying.
Everyone,
even **me**.

Me and Mama have lain here on
the cold floor for hours
or seconds.

figure 21: Mann (2021) p2 Kindle edition (alt text supplied)

Mann aims for smooth transition between her two narrators by inserting only an extra line space between them and assigning each character a different font. In the print version those fonts are with and without serif. However, this is insufficient to distinguish between the voices, and in the Kindle version of the novel, *two* serif fonts have been used, adding to the potential for confusion.

In *Crossing the Line*, I wanted to create the effect of a 'crowd scene', of unnamed school children bullying my protagonist for his red hair. I used font and layout to do this, hoping to create the impression that the voices were attacking from all directions:


I'm called

Erik the Viking, of course,
but mostly it's

Oy! Gingernut!
Copper-knob!
Hey, ging-ga!
Yeah, you! Fanta-pants Posh Boy.
Shut up, copper-bollox!
Carrot-top! *It's GINGER NINJA!*

figure 22: Fisher (2023) p14 (alt text supplied)

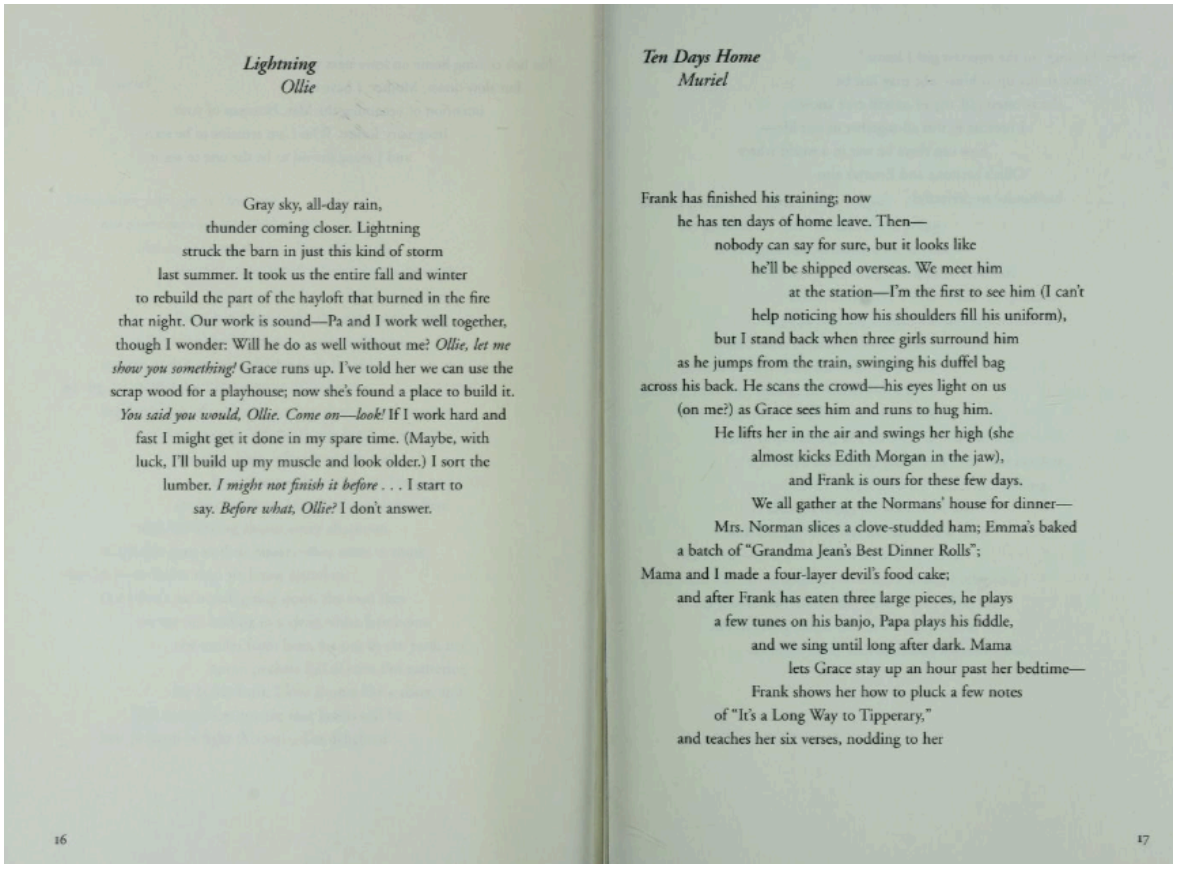
Links, Titles and Sections

By its very nature, a verse novel is episodic. One lyrical review of Sarah Crossan's *Toffee* described 'short pieces', each 'as satisfying as a smoothed piece of sea glass, strung together' (Russell Williams, 2019). This episodic nature offers the reader a choice of racing forwards or pausing for reflection between each poem, with an open invitation to return to re-read them at leisure to examine the text for more meaning and the author's intent.

The use of poems as episodes offers authors some freedoms – for example, in Sarah Crossan's *Toffee* (Crossan, 2019), Allison's frequent flashbacks of her father's abuse are told in the present tense, but because the flashbacks are separate poems, there is less potential for confusion with the main narrative.

How the poems are linked is a choice for each writer. As previously mentioned, in *The Crossing*, Mann does not separate hers with page breaks or titles; the two characters speak in turn and ingeniously pass a linking baton of repeated, bolded text between them. This lack of a 'break' – though occasionally confusing as I have said – has the effect of increasing both the fluency and the pace of the read, and strengthens the bond between the two narrators. On a practical level, it also reduces page extent, which keeps publishing costs down and doesn't overwhelm the reader with a thick book.

Using a similar device, Stephen Herrick (Herrick, 2009) bridges his polyphonic poems not with words but with overlapping *topics*. Helen Frost's poems in *Crossing Stones* (Frost, 2009), are linked thematically by their shape to 'give the sense of stepping from stone to stone across a flowing creek' (p.193) – see an example page below:



Lightning
Ollie

Gray sky, all-day rain,
thunder coming closer. Lightning
struck the barn in just this kind of storm
last summer. It took us the entire fall and winter
to rebuild the part of the hayloft that burned in the fire
that night. Our work is sound—Pa and I work well together,
though I wonder: Will he do as well without me? *Ollie, let me*
show you something! Grace runs up. I've told her we can use the
scrap wood for a playhouse; now she's found a place to build it.
You said you would, Ollie. Come on—look! If I work hard and
fast I might get it done in my spare time. (Maybe, with
luck, I'll build up my muscle and look older.) I sort the
lumber. *I might not finish it before . . .* I start to
say. *Before what, Ollie?* I don't answer.

16

Ten Days Home
Muriel

Frank has finished his training; now
he has ten days of home leave. Then—
nobody can say for sure, but it looks like
he'll be shipped overseas. We meet him
at the station—I'm the first to see him (I can't
help noticing how his shoulders fill his uniform),
but I stand back when three girls surround him
as he jumps from the train, swinging his duffel bag
across his back. He scans the crowd—his eyes light on us
(on me?) as Grace sees him and runs to hug him.
He lifts her in the air and swings her high (she
almost kicks Edith Morgan in the jaw),
and Frank is ours for these few days.
We all gather at the Normans' house for dinner—
Mrs. Norman slices a clove-studded ham; Emma's baked
a batch of "Grandma Jean's Best Dinner Rolls";
Mama and I made a four-layer devil's food cake;
and after Frank has eaten three large pieces, he plays
a few tunes on his banjo, Papa plays his fiddle,
and we sing until long after dark. Mama
lets Grace stay up an hour past her bedtime—
Frank shows her how to pluck a few notes
of "It's a Long Way to Tipperary,"
and teaches her six verses, nodding to her

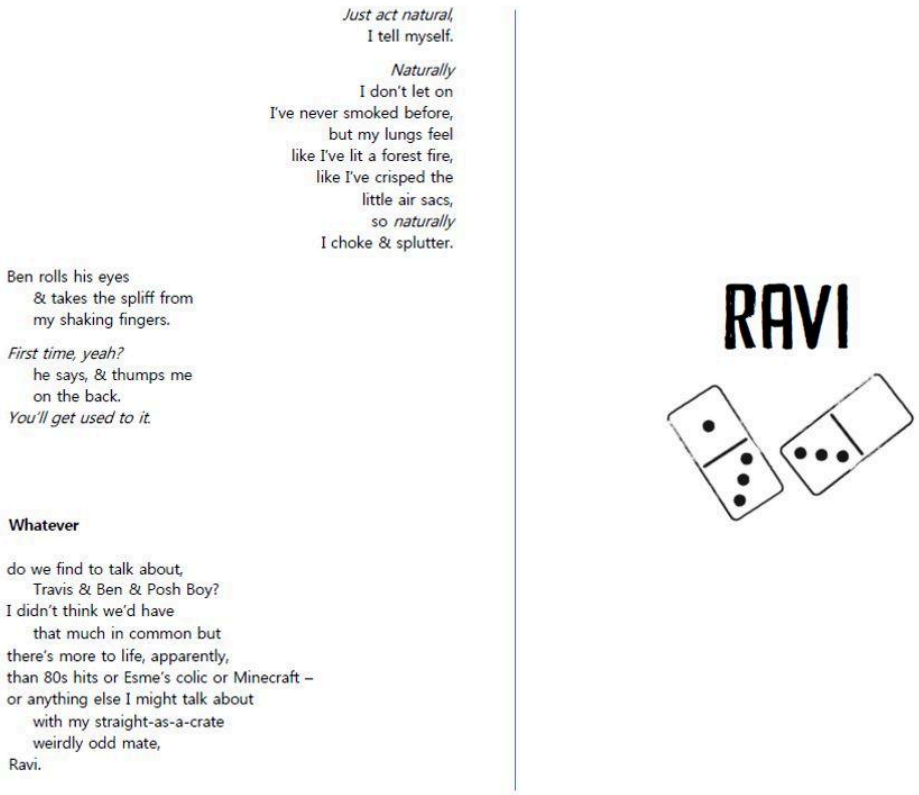
17

figure 23: Frost (2009) pp16-17 (alt text supplied)

In a poetry collection, the titles act as a barrier which divide one poem from another and also usually give some hint as to the poem's content or theme. A title may also work harder: foreshadowing; providing context; reflecting with irony on the poem or continuing a theme. And on a purely practical note, is it easier to discuss a poem with a title to refer to.

However, in a verse novel, titles can interrupt the narrative flow and impede reading aloud. Perhaps for that reason, some verse novelists don't use titles at all. How, then, do they distinguish between one poem and another? In *Long Way Down*, the titles are actually the first line of each poem in uppercase, which, when the poems are read aloud, smooths the transition from one to the next.

To create a seamless reading experience akin to swiping sideways on a phone, the poems in *Crossing the Line* use bolded first lines for titles and only a few line breaks of space between them to maximise the 'just one more poem' readability. This also increases the impact of the white space in the page break between chapters. Chapters were deliberately planned to begin on a right-hand page in order to draw attention to the domino-themed chapter numbering. These self-imposed strictures, plus those of publishing (the total extent must be divisible by 8,16 or 32 depending on the size of the book) and poetry (no stanza break across pages), resulted in a challenging copy-edit.



Just act natural,
I tell myself.

Naturally
I don't let on
I've never smoked before,
but my lungs feel
like I've lit a forest fire,
like I've crisped the
little air sacs,
so *naturally*
I choke & splutter.

Ben rolls his eyes
& takes the spliff from
my shaking fingers.

First time, yeah?
he says, & thumps me
on the back.
You'll get used to it.

Whatever

do we find to talk about,
Travis & Ben & Posh Boy?
I didn't think we'd have
that much in common but
there's more to life, apparently,
than 80s hits or Esme's colic or Minecraft –
or anything else I might talk about
with my straight-as-a-crate
weirdly odd mate,
Ravi.

RAVI

figure 24: Fisher (2023) pp74-75 (alt text supplied)

There are no titles in *The Black Flamingo*; stanzas flow from one to the next without much interruption, offering the reader a smooth yet visually exciting flow of narrative. However, *The Black Flamingo* has creative graphic illustrations and typographical changes such as alternating black or white backgrounds, illustrations, different fonts or formats (narration, journal, poetry notebook, text message), which break up the text into sections.

The Crossing is divided by the use of a countdown marking the days until the channel crossing, within which, as previously mentioned, the narrators' voices swap time and time again. It is not clear – and perhaps is of no significance – whether the change from one poem to the next is at each change of narrator or whether it is the next countdown 'title'.

272 days before

Day seven in the desert.
No sooner do I open my eyes,
I want to close them again.

Stay with me, Sammy. You have to keep fighting.
Tesfay slaps my cheeks.

Is this what it feels like to die, Tesfay?

It wouldn't be so bad, **I think**.

***I think** I should film all your training sessions*
so people can see the amount of hard work you're putting in.

Mel watches all my training
from the viewing gallery,
cheering me on.
Dad shouts from the side of the pool.
Four nights a week training and at weekends.
This is my life for the next nine months.

figure 25: Mann (2021) p 139 (alt text supplied)

None of my chosen texts has a contents page, but some – such as *The Black Flamingo* – have chapters, and others are sectioned thematically; for example, in a countdown of some kind. *The Poet X* is divided into three biblically-themed parts, with an occasional date entry in the titles to track progress towards the poetry slam, while *Long Way Down* is divided by a graphic of the descending elevator buttons:

figure 25: Reynolds & Priestley (2018) p205 (alt text supplied)

In *Crossing the Line*, when Erik considers the chain of events which bring him down, he likens them to a domino run. This domino motif is used to link the chapters – readers paying attention will notice that the numbers on the dominos add up to the chapter number.

Novel as Puzzle

Earlier verse novels sometimes contained ingenious puzzles – for example, the reader must work out the relationships between the narrators in *The Realm of Possibility* (Levithan, 2006). Frost's *Diamond Willow* (2008) and *Hidden* (2011) contain intricate word puzzles similar to Manjeet Mann's *Run*, *Rebel* (2020), where letters in bold encapsulate the meaning of the poem 'Just Friends' (p.21), spelling out the aporic 'S-E-C-R-E-T C-R-U-S-H'. It's my opinion that these puzzles are like 'easter eggs' (the secret features in video games): a meta-reference which should be familiar to most teens and add an extra dimension to reading. However, some authors, like Lucy Cuthew, prefer to avoid this kind of 'page play' because they feel it interferes with the emotional communication of the story. (Cuthew, L., 2021)

Repetition

Whilst discouraged in prose (a copy editor will often highlight what they consider to be over-used words), repetition is an essential part of a poet's toolkit, the visual pattern of the lines adding to the semantic and aural effect. Used by the verse novelist, the combination of repetition and pattern can be very effective at adding inference and drama. In *Blood Moon* (p.366), 'IT'SONLYBLOOD#NoShame' is repeated sixteen times, so the reader can *see* what Frankie sees: row upon row of girls assembled, validating her stance. Also in *Blood Moon*, the huge block of repeated 'me's increases the immediacy, makes the reader *feel* Frankie's shock about going 'viral':

I stroke the screen.
I tap red dots.
It sucks me in.
And all I see are images of me
me
me me me me me me me me me me me me me me me
me me me me me me me me me me me me me me me
me me me me me me me me me me me me me me me
me me me me me me me me me me me me me me me
me me me me me me me me me me me me me me me
me me me me me me me me me me me me me me me
me me me me me me me me me me me me me me me
me me me me me me me me me me me me me me me
me me me me me me me me me me me me me me me
me me me me me me me me me me me me me me me
me me me me me me me me me me me me me me me
me me me me me me me me me me me me me me me
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me me me me me me me me me me me me me me me
me me me me me me me me me me me me me me me
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me me me me me me me me me me me me me me me
me me me me me me me me me me me me me me me

figure 26: Cuthew (2020) p265-267 (alt text supplied)

Social Media

For all writing for young people set in the present day, it would feel inauthentic not to include social media. However, few adults can truly understand the ways in which young people interact with social media, and – as most writers for young people *are* adults – there is a very real danger of getting the language wrong, of a reference becoming quickly outdated. The addition of graphics only adds to this dilemma in verse novels. In *The Black Flamingo*, a series of text messages are reproduced as authentic-looking graphics, but unfortunately the narrator's speech bubbles are left-aligned, an error which will not go unnoticed by young readers. This is unfortunate, because the graphic otherwise conveys beautifully Michael's change of heart as he writes his text message.

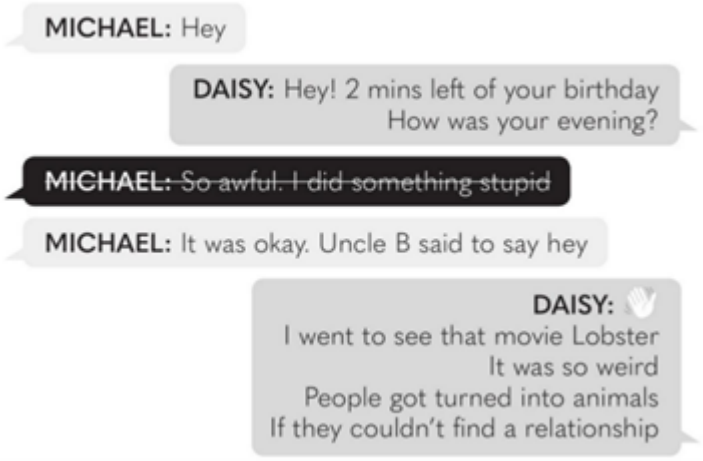

figure 27: Atta & Khullar (2019) p121 (alt text supplied)

Online shaming is central to the plot of *Blood Moon*, and Cuthew includes many typical elements from teenage social media, from the hashtags to acronyms and memes. These may date, but the large, bold lower case of the vicious trolling on p.286-7 conveys the brutality of a social media attack, intruding on the page, shouting through the sympathetic texts from her friends:

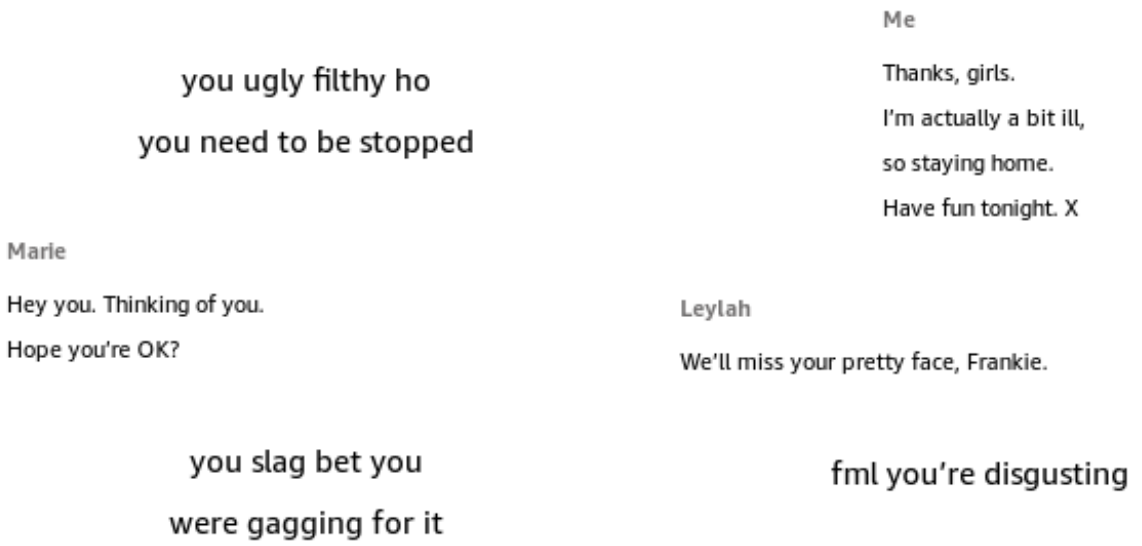

figure 28: Cuthew (2020) p299 (alt text supplied)

By contrast, in *The Crossing*, social media and text messages are tidily framed within textboxes. Here is a representation of an attack on a Facebook page:

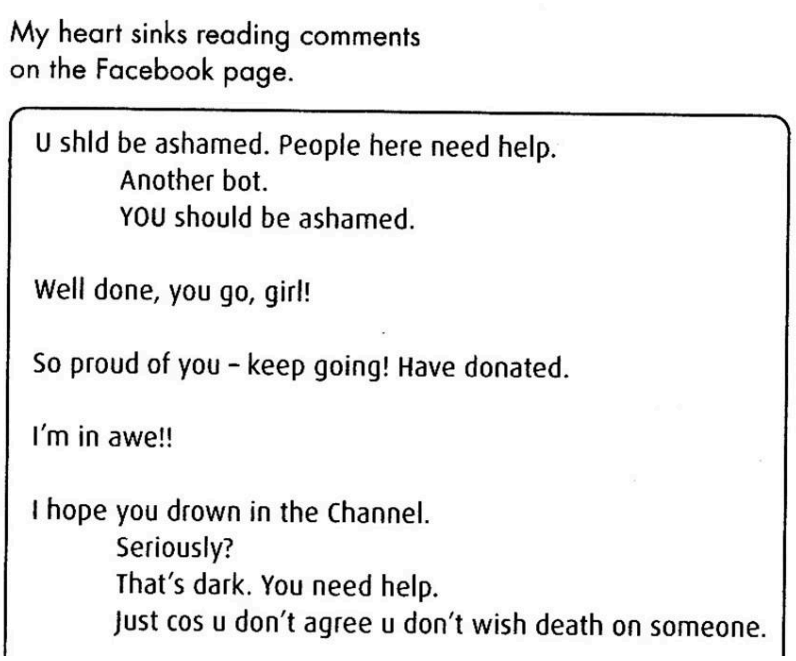

figure 29: Mann (2021) p 148 (alt text supplied)

The typographical border has the emotional effect of 'containing' the attack, rendering it more distant than Cuthew's explosion of hatred. In addition, while Cuthew's social media trolls use misspelled, ungrammatical expletives, the language used in Mann's Facebook comments feels too restrained and syntactically correct. As a consequence, the social media attacks in *The Crossing* have less credibility and lose some of their intended impact.

Conclusion

The contemporary verse novel format is a sandbox for experimental writing, allowing writers to develop fresh technical choices right through the story without being shackled by the weight of tradition of either the prose novel or poetry. This lack of boundary means the contemporary verse novel is a multifaceted, fluid, evolving form which embraces poetry, prose, drama, and graphic illustration. It is the perfect textual device to capture young people's attention and provide them with a read which is every bit as compelling – and not dissimilar to – scrolling through updates on their phones.

As I write this paper, I'm working on my next verse novel. What have I learned from this research and from reactions to *Crossing the Line* that will develop the format further? Before I even finish my first draft, what boundaries will the next verse-novelist have crossed? The speed of evolution is so fast, it's breathtaking. Pass the baton.

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Author Biography

When not writing, Tia Fisher works in a busy children's library in South London where matching a child with the right book makes her day. She's the proud new owner of an MA in Writing for Young People from Bath Spa University.

While at Bath Spa, she put the finishing touches to *Crossing the Line* (Hot Key Books 2023), a verse novel for teens about a boy who gets caught up with a county lines drug gang. *Crossing the Line* has been hailed as an 'outstanding and important novel that should be in every school library' (LoveReading4Kids) and 'the first book i have ever finished other than dinosaurs love underpants' (Mason, Yr9). At the time of going to press, *Crossing the Line* had been nominated for a number of awards including the Yoto Carnegie 2024 Medal.