



A Made-Up Place: New Zealand in Young Adult Fiction
 by Anna Jackson, Geoffrey Miles, Harry Ricketts, Tatjana Schaefer, Kathryn Walls. Wellington: VUP (2011). RRP \$40.00. Pb, 189pp. ISBN: 9780864736970.
 Reviewed by Susan Kornfeld.

Among the many joys of young adult (YA) fiction is the tangibility of setting. Who can forget the great dining hall and Quidditch field of Hogwarts, Scout's small Alabama town in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or the uninhabited island of *Lord of the Flies*? Such settings not only provide context for conflict and character development but suffice meaning as both protagonist and reader negotiate plot. Even a faceless suburb or neglected scrap of bush asserts not only the author's imagination but the culture that shaped it. Sometimes, as in Golding's 1954 *Lord of the Flies*, the setting is removed from the culture that helped shape the story. The marooned boys' reversion to primitive brutality reflects the author's bleak assessment of human nature (sardonically summed up in the rescuing officer's comment that he would have expected better from British boys) – and that reflects at least some current of the post-war British mood.

Because of this cultural harmonic, literature is fertile ground for national identity studies both in New Zealand and abroad. But while international critics have increasingly mined YA fiction in this regard, *A Made-Up Place: New Zealand in Young Adult Fiction* is a first for New Zealand. Authors Anna Jackson, Geoffrey Miles, Harry Ricketts, Tatjana Schaefer, and Kathryn Walls – all members of the English Programme at Victoria University – here present nine essays that explore “New Zealandness” through a variety of topics. An introductory chapter provides a theoretical framework and overview.

More than twenty-five books are discussed at some length. While works by prolific YA authors Maurice Gee and Margaret Mahy receive their fair lion's share of attention, some thought-provoking and fresh analyses are performed on works by Patricia Grace (*Mutuwhenua: The Moon Sleeps*), Joanna Orwin (*Guardian of the Land*), Elizabeth Knox (*Dreamhunter*

duet and *The High Jump* trilogy), and Jack Lasenby (*The Conjurer* – a book discussed in four chapters and castigated in some of them as a “denunciation of biculturalism”; a “pessimistic, stereotypical [...] representation of contemporary Māori”; a “brutal” book “so rooted in the physical that one can just about smell the blood and sweat and mud and rot rising off the page”; and as “obviously misogynous”).

While engaging overall, the chapters vary in depth and quality. Geoffrey Miles provides two rewarding essays, one a rich exploration of books that have been suggested to comprise a new subgenre of Māori Gothic (Miles ultimately demurs), and the other a thoughtful analysis of utopian/dystopian YA fiction. The prevalent darkness in these, Miles suggests, “springs from specifically New Zealand anxieties,” while “the predominance of dystopias shows how much we as a nation are still possessed by the dream of utopia.”

On the other end of the spectrum, Harry Ricketts struggles gamely through his chapter on “Sport,” ruefully noting that “sport in YA fiction [...] still remains something of a blank.” Ricketts' other chapter, “History,” has more meat, discussing the entanglement of present issues with past and how YA authors have used such devices as time travel to offer a sometimes revisionist view. In “Māori and Pākehā,” Kathryn Walls uses three case studies as exemplars of YA approaches to the assimilation–biculturalism spectrum. I would have been interested to know how representative the three works are and on what basis they were chosen, other than for their focus “on the predicament of Māori in New Zealand,” but we are told only that the books are “very different” and that their authors were born in the 1930s.

“Money” presents an extended and convincing argument by Kathryn Walls that Margaret Mahy's YA works offer a “socialist critique of New Zealand.” I had recently read Walls' primary example, *The Changeover* (1984) without noticing this aspect, but the analysis left me nodding my head. Walls notes that Mahy's “socioeconomic preoccupations have failed to attract any critical attention to date” and attributes this to Mahy's “lightness of touch” as well as her often more central and overt focus on psychological issues.

Anna Jackson discusses six books in her chapter on “Englishness” finding, among other things, that an English “colonial sublime” – the romance of landscape – still pulls New Zealand YA fiction away from “an engagement with historical reality.” English witches and other Old World supernatural traditions sometimes make an odd overlay on what Jackson

considers New Zealand “everyday realism” (which seems to have beat a startled retreat in some recent books Miles reviewed in “Māori Gothic,” such as *Guardian of the Dead* – which is all about a Pākehā girl’s experiences with the Maori supernatural).

Perhaps in some resonance with the thread of New Zealand realism identified by Jackson, Tatyana Schaefer notes in “Religion” that spirituality and religious feelings play little or no role in our national YA fiction. The religion portrayed in such books as Gee’s *The Priests of Ferris* and Lasenby’s *The Conjurer* is an oppressive “type of medieval Catholicism (albeit a non-Christian one),” and for both authors “an abomination.” Oppression plays a role in futuristic books as well, Schaefer finds (“Futures”), this time because of New Zealand’s physical isolation

from the rest of the world. While in two novels this isolation serves as a protection from annihilation and chaos, it also “prevents the possibility of help from outside.” Citizens are at the mercy of a version of repression.

While some of the chapters and particularly the Introduction may appeal primarily to the academic, there is plenty here to interest YA fans. Anna Jackson starts off by observing that in many of the books, New Zealand adolescents seem “culturally impoverished” – they are not engaged with reading or even a shared media culture. Instead, “the particular purposes they make of the landscape can be understood as constituting their culture.” One hopes they are at least reading some of the very engaging books presented in this volume.