

Book Reviews

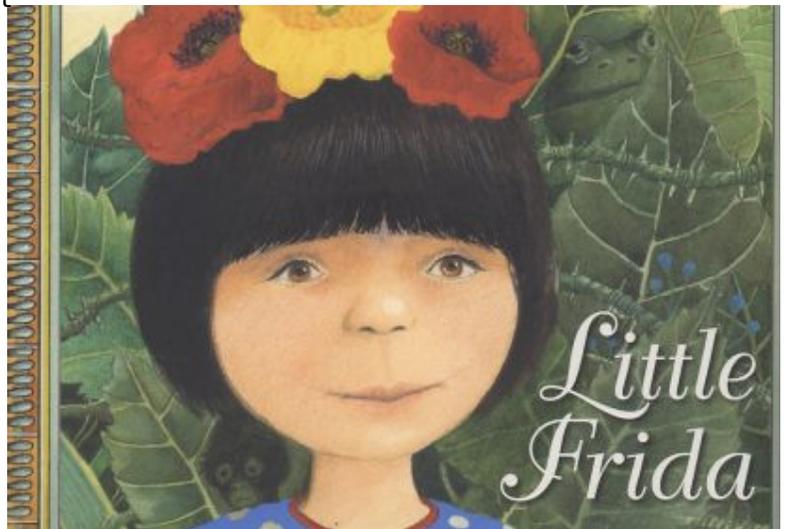
August 27, 2019

Little Frida

By Anthony Browne, Walker Books, 2019

This picture book shares the story of renowned artist Frida Kahlo, who, as a child, discovered her own imaginary friend who mirrored her acceptance, belonging and love.

Little Frida, afflicted by polio, walks with a limp and is laughed at by other children. She feels isolated and lonely. One day her parents give her a gift of wings. At first, Frida is disappointed, but she then sees the wings as an opportunity to imagine she can fly and experience freedom. By using her imagination, she is empowered. A touching story about the nurturing power of imagination.



Just Flesh & Blood

By Jane Caro, University Queensland Press, 2018

In Jane Caro's final novel in her trilogy about Queen Elizabeth I, we see the powerful leader near death. As she lies in the darkness of her chambers, Elizabeth reflects on her achievements, loves, regrets and determination to rule her kingdom for peace and prosperity. Very close to her heart is the trauma of losing her mother by execution, ordered by her own father. Why? Because she had the "misfortune" of being born a girl — Elizabeth's gender sealed her mother's death.

This novel highlights the dangerous and mercurial court where betrayal, treachery and assassinations are ever present. It is a dangerous world for a woman monarch and Elizabeth knows this all too well.

Elizabeth thinks about the utterly charming, manipulative and ambitious Earl of Essex who ultimately betrays her. In his arrogance, he believes a woman will always succumb to a man's flattery. Her lesson is for other women to rule their lives with intelligence and not be duped into dangerous dreams of living happily ever after.

An inspiring novel for women of all ages.

Accidental Feminists

By Jane Caro, Melbourne University Press, 2019

Accidental Feminists is Jane Caro's study of women born in the 1950s and 1960s, who perhaps have never called themselves feminists, but actually are. These Baby Boomers were the first to work full-time, achieve financial independence, have access to birth control and have the freedom to follow their dreams.

However, this generation of women are also more vulnerable to homelessness and poverty, and many have had interrupted working careers that deprived them of good superannuation, opportunities for promotion,

high wages and favourable conditions. When older women lose their jobs, they find it harder to find new work. Their emotional and domestic sacrifices, as mothers, wives and daughters, have disadvantaged them financially.

Women workers today still tend to be concentrated in lower-status industries and are generally paid less than men. When more women enter a profession, its status and pay falls, which is why belonging to a union is vitally important.

For many women, of whatever age, they regularly feel infantilised, patronised, dismissed and undervalued. As they age, they become invisible and irrelevant. Perhaps this is why Caro has also written novels about Queen Elizabeth I. “When

I was a girl, Elizabeth I felt like a beacon of hope in a stiflingly male universe,” she says. “She not only ruled a kingdom, she was universally acknowledged to have done it well. She was the closest woman I could find who was recognised as a genius. We almost never use that description when speaking of women. Even better, she ruled her kingdom entirely alone, refusing to ever marry or have children.”

As Caro says, feminism is merely the struggle by half the human race to be taken seriously by the other half.

Janine Kitson is a Federation Life Member

Some Kids series

By Nelly Thomas, Black Inc, 2018

The Some Kids series is a beautiful contribution to the ever-growing number of children’s books that celebrate diversity. Each book reflects on the ways different children may look, live or express their identity. Illustrations feature young people who wear skirts or dresses, as well as those who prefer shorts or trousers, affirming that “some girls like this” or “some boys wear that”, while others may like a little of everything. Children from diverse racial and religious groups are represented, as are those with disabilities.

My six-year-old daughter was actively engaged all the way through Some Girls. She commented on the images and sentences that reflected her own identity, and asked questions about those who didn’t, agreeing fervently with the book’s assertion that “all girls can be whatever they want”. The connections she made between the book and her life were wonderful, including her recollection of an older child who once told her she couldn’t wear sneakers because they were “boys’ shoes”. My daughter also talked about some of her friends, including one who has a disability that can’t be “seen”; a discussion prompted by a picture of a child with a prosthetic leg. As soon as we finished the book, she asked to read Some Boys, too.

This series is a must for every school library.

Modern HERstory

By Blair Imani, Penguin Random House, 2018

This beautifully presented book explores the contribution of 70 women and nonbinary advocates who have made a positive contribution to social change in the modern world.

Each individual is profiled in a stunning two-page spread that features a powerful illustrated portrait and a biography that acknowledges their leadership and advocacy. The intersectional nature and diversity of the profiles is fantastic, with plenty of familiar names, including Serena Williams, Cameron Esposito, Ellen DeGeneres, Missy Elliott and Oprah Winfrey.

However, I’m ashamed to say that in many cases I had not heard of these individuals because biases in media and literature often overlook women of colour, disabled women, women of faith and young women. Kat Blaque, for example, is an amazing young transgender person who has utilised YouTube culture to educate the public about gender and sexuality along with the struggles faced by many people regarding body image. Mona Haydar, a rapper and feminist poet, comes from

a Syrian family and her work challenges stereotypes about Muslim women. This is the type of individual that English teachers everywhere could turn to for new, diverse texts to use in the classroom.

My only criticism of this book is that despite its wonderful diversity, it is very US-centric, with only a handful of

the women included born outside of America, and of those who were, they now live there. However, this doesn't diminish its power to pass the torch of social change onto our students, showing them they can make a difference.

Rebecca Langham is a member of the LGBTIQ Restricted Committee