

Young Adult Fiction: Joy Lawn

Trio of authors packs a punch

The following books each contain something unexpected. *Take Three Girls* (Pan Macmillan, 439pp, \$18.99) is written by three of Australia's best YA authors: Cath Crowley, Simmone Howell and Fiona Wood. They have each integrated a character into this story, which is for more mature readers.

Their characters are brought together by the teacher of the new wellness program set up for Year 10 students at a prestigious private school to help them deal with misogynistic online bullying. Clem, Kate and Ady are randomly put into the same group because they have the longest thumbs.

An elite swimmer, Clem naturally has large hands but she is avoiding training and feels "the future is just like a white blur of skywriting that time has made unreadable". She's losing her identity and putting on weight. She is yearning for a physical encounter with older Stu but also feels unsure.

Kate is a talented cellist, passionate but not competitive, who experiments with recording sounds and looping and layering tracks. She's been "slotted into the box of quiet, studious, geek" who's good with computers. She works hard to win a scholarship for the sake of her parents' farm but is pulled between schoolwork and music.

Unlike the other girls, tall, popular Ady isn't a boarder. She lives at home but her father's addictions are rattling the family. Ady's affinity with fabrics, clothes and beauty is rendered in sensory language. She's unsure why she's not interested in handsome Rupert and surprises herself by becoming protective of her new friends.

One of the skills of this collaboration is that each character offers insight into the others. Ady, for example, recognises Clem's confidence to "explore who she might be" and sees Kate as a "quiet musician [who] breaks the rules to walk on the wild side". The three writers develop and enrich each other's creations. *Take Three Girls* deserves a second read to fully appreciate the fine writing and the seeded threads which lead to the denouement.

A Semi-Definitive List of Worst Nightmares (Penguin, 272pp, \$19.99) is the second novel by Townsville-raised Krystal Sutherland. Her style here is a mash-up of gothic Wes Anderson with a nod to Markus Zusak's personification of death in *The Book Thief*.

Esther Solar dresses as Wednesday Addams,

Mary Poppins, Matilda and Eleanor Roosevelt. Due to her demented grandfather's stories about his career as a policeman who failed to solve the murder of the Bowen sisters, her family believes they are cursed. Her father has lived in the basement for six years, her twin brother Eugene cannot bear darkness and Esther keeps a list of her 50 fears as a superstitious protection from death.

After stealing her list, primary school crush Jonah films her facing her terrors. Their growing friendship gives insight into Jonah's own troubles and generates much of the novel's quirky humour, such as Houdini-like locker break-ins and "Lobster Shakespeare". Serious issues of anxiety, mental illness and attempted suicide are told sensitively in this thought-provoking novel. It is unusual, intriguing and leads to a discovery of "impossible splendor".

Emma Grey's debut novel, *Unrequited* (Angus & Robertson, 288pp, \$19.99), is a funny tale set in Sydney. Its tone and plot echo Shakespeare's romantic comedies.

Kat is forced to take her younger twin sisters to see boy band Unrequited. She despises the band and spends most of the concert listening to another artist on her iPod, even though lead singer Angus Marsden seems to be looking at her. She also draws the attention of young medical student Joel.

Kat regards herself as a normal, although unsophisticated, Year 12 student who would like to take someone to the formal but is happy watching boxed sets on Saturday nights. She also happens to be beautiful, a talented musician and composer, and is in the chorus of the musical *Legally Blonde*, where the lead is Joel's best friend, Sarah.

The farce comes into play when her sisters and best friend impersonate her as "Elle" on Twitter. Angus is desperate to meet her but also wants to explore the music of a young composer he's heard. Pushy singer Cassidy's interventions send the story into a kaleidoscopic spin. Who will end up with who? Who will be left unrequited?

Scot Gardner's *Sparrow* (Allen & Unwin, 224pp, \$19.99) is another fast-paced read. Set on the Kimberley coast, it is an exciting adventure that also highlights the effects of a deprived home life on young males.

Sparrow survives a juvenile prison boat camp accident and swims to a remote, croc-



Fiona Wood, left, Simmone Howell and Cath Crowley

ocodile-infested island. Battling the mud, mangroves and predators, he carves a precarious existence.

This story is interspersed with flashbacks to his childhood as a street kid in Darwin after his mother's death. Mute and artistic, he is mentored by old Sharky, who taught him to swim, and is befriended by waitress Elsa, who is later assaulted.

Told from the viewpoint of a victim, Sparrow explores how males from disadvantaged backgrounds can choose different paths. Once he saw the "simple truth before him — kindness

pays", Sparrow learns how to transcend circumstances that could ruin others.

Wilderness Country (Text, 272pp, \$19.99) is a sequel to *Road to Winter*, by outdoor education instructor Mark Smith. The novel is set in an Australian dystopia where society has been destroyed by a virus. Finn and his dog Rowdy survive by hunting, fishing and rationing supplies.

Last winter, he helped pregnant Rose escape from the Wilders, roaming gangs of men. Now he feels responsible for Kas, Rose's sister, and a younger girl. However, Kas is determined to find Rose's baby, Hope.

Travels with an aunt take a thrilling turn

Thuy On

Sign

By Colin Dray
Allen & Unwin, 341pp, \$29.99

After a failed laryngectomy to try to remove some cancerous lymphs, young Sam has a stoma, a hole, where his voice had once been. Rendered mute, he is shaken by the alienating experience, from diagnosis to hospital treatment to convalescence.

His stern, God-fearing aunt Dettie — his father's sister — recovering from her own heart operation, tries to reassure him. People bark,

like a toy, or a car, or a bone. Things come apart. But that's not the end of them. They

can be put back together. Fixed up. And you know what? Afterwards, those things are stronger, always, in the broken places.

Such sanguine advice is difficult for a child to understand. Sam is no longer able to sing the school song at assemblies, recite *The Man from Snowy River* or do his Kermit the Frog impression.

Colin Dray's debut novel, *Sign*, which was shortlisted for the 2015 *The Australian/Vogel's* Literary Award, presents a third-person narration that focuses on the world view of a boy bewildered by the machinations around him.

When his mother starts dating again, his aunt is less than impressed and concocts a wild scheme to reunite Sam and his younger sister Katie with their estranged father.

The bulk of the book is a road trip from Syd-

ney to Perth, with Aunt Dettie at the wheel. Wrenched from their home, the young siblings are told their mother will meet them on the other side of the country, having recently mended the rift with their father.

This is one of those novels where the reader is cognisant of the perjuries of adults well before such lies are signposted to those at the mercy of decisions inimical to their mental and physical health.

Dray's narrative becomes necessarily desultory as the fractured family hits the hot, dusty road with stopovers at caravan parks, convenience stores and greasy spoon diners. It's not long before the vicissitudes of the trek play havoc with driver and passengers.

Aunt Dettie must contend with roadkill, car sickness and whingeing, fretful, bored wards. The kids, meanwhile, have to face an increas-

ingly nettled aunt whose behaviour becomes inexplicable and erratic.

As the three slowly make their way across the "baked brown undulations of the horizon", the vegetation becomes sparser, the landscape flatter. Literally and metaphorically, *Sign* is a slow burn of a novel. Perhaps the parallelism is a bit too obvious and neat, but as they continue across the Nullabor, Aunt Dettie's unmedicated mind begins to unravel in direct correlation to the rising threat and the actual rage of bushfires.

While their rust bucket staggers past scorched fences, blackened trees and smouldering animal lumps, Sam and Katie begin to question their aunt's motives in her single-minded quest to have them returned to their absent father, a man who couldn't even farewell his offspring in person but who left behind his reasons typed on company letterhead.