Challenging authority is generally considered to be a fundamental and healthy characteristic of adolescence. Religious bodies, along with parents, schools and law enforcement agencies, represent a major authoritarian power to which many young people look for guidance and support, but also an authoritarian power to be questioned and challenged. In the adolescent’s quest for an independent sense of identity and meaning, I argue that young adult (YA) fiction can provide a vehicle for readers to explore and interrogate ideas about developing autonomy and self-determined agency as novice players in a world governed by adults. This paper will examine the way three stylistically different, contemporary Australian young adult novels represent concepts of authority and the authors’ underlying ideological positions. The texts considered are Gary Crew’s *No Such Country* (1991), Isobelle Carmody’s *The Gathering* (1993), and Libby Hathorn’s *Rift* (1998).

Bradford et al note that even before the events of September 11, 2001, many texts for adolescents and young adults ‘interrogate[d] Western fundamentalisms, generally by representing individual and collective resistance to conservative and patriarchal power structures’ (117). However, they claim that YA texts ‘tend to focus on personal development and questions of human agency rather than on wider questions of religious belief...and on the ideological implications of [the protagonists’] actions and judgements’ (117).

A common facet of the novels considered here is the presence of a malevolent adult leader (in each case white and male) representing an authoritarian institution, who is challenged by a young male with a few supporters. In *Rift* and *No Such Country*, it is a religious leader and in *The Gathering* it is the school Vice-Principal. Scutter argues that this latter novel has appropriated ‘the language of religious possession’ so that it ‘works like a religious book in the way in which it denies the primacy of reason and claims evangelical faith for its own’ (234). Consequently, I treat all three as novels concerned with some form of religious authority.

Each novel considered here incorporates, with varying degrees of originality, the familiar narrative structure of the heroic quest in which an outsider enters a troubled community and redeems it from the control of an evil power. In the process, each of the young heroes attains personal agency and a sense of meaning and purpose in his life. Each author presents anti-authoritarian ideologies that might encourage young people to interrogate and challenge oppressive power structures that they perceive as wrong.

While writers sometimes attempt explicitly to manipulate readers’ interpretations and meaning-making, ideologies expressed implicitly can be more powerful because, according to Stephens,

implicit, and therefore invisible, ideological positions are invested with legitimacy through the implication that things are simply ‘so’ (9).

Hunt claims that the ‘imbalance of power between adult writers and child readers complicates the matter’ of ideological influence in children’s and young adult texts (39). However, Sarland notes that assumptions are made about the influence of adult ideologies on implied readers, but when real readers are involved, the issue is even further complicated. He refers to Umberto Eco who agrees that all texts carry ideological assumptions, whether overt or covert, but argues that readers have three options: they can assume the ideology of the text and subsume it into their own reading; they can miss or ignore the ideology of the text and import their own, thus producing ‘aberrant’ readings—‘where “aberrant” means only different from the ones envisaged by the sender’; or they can question the text in order to reveal the underlying
ideology, which is the approach that ideological critique takes. Eco claims, however, that when real readers, other than critics, are questioned about their readings, it is clear that the second option of importing their own ideology is often taken up by readers, and ‘aberrant’ readings therefore abound (49). In this paper, I won’t be looking at the research on real readers’ responses but will consider, from a critic’s perspective, how the authors convey their ideologies, how the ideologies shape the novels and their potential to manipulate readers.

Carmody’s *The Gathering* is narrated in the first person by Nathaniel, a teenage boy who has frequently moved home with his mother since the divorce of his parents. The story is set in the Australian country town of Cheshunt, their latest home. Cheshunt presents an image of lawfulness and controlled behaviour, free from the delinquency displayed by young people in neighbouring towns. Cheshunt is, however, a totalitarian community ruled by traditional adult authoritarian figures—the police and school teachers. The author conveys her attitude to authority with many references to Nazism and Hitler’s Jugend, transmitting warnings to readers about where blind obedience to authority can lead. The school Vice-Principal, Mr Karle, maintains order and obedience in the town with the backing of a youth group known as The Gathering. Predictably, he attempts to coerce the reluctant newcomer to join up but Nathaniel rebels against this pressure to submit to the will of a suspect adult and becomes involved instead with a small group of outcast adolescents who are guided by a mysterious girl called Lallie. Nathaniel learns here that parts of the town were built on sites of ancient evil and that members of the outcast group, known as The Chain, have been mystically called together to eradicate the force of darkness which has embodied itself in Mr Karle, who is the vessel in which the evil is gathering—hence the name of the youth group and the book’s title. About half way through, the novel shifts from realism towards the supernatural, and Nathaniel begins to realise that Lallie is some sort of incarnate spiritual being. The plot culminates in a dramatic, and rather confusing, showdown between the forces of dark and light, with the expected triumph of good over evil. As well as conquering the evil forces, each of the young outcasts confronts their own inner demons and achieves personal growth, agency, and a sense of meaning and redemption in their lives.

In Libby Hathorn’s *Rift*, the malevolent authority figure is explicitly religious, although representative of a fundamentalist cult rather than a traditional religion. This novel is located in the realist genre and its intended message is more literal than that of *The Gathering*. References to real-world cult-related mass suicides, such as the Jonestown massacre, warn of the potential risks when radical religious or fundamentalist activity is allowed to flourish. *Rift* is narrated in the third person but focalised largely by adolescent Vaughan Roberts, whose irresponsible parents leave him in the care of his reluctant grandmother while they pursue show business careers overseas. This establishes another setting where a young outsider is abandoned by adults and left vulnerable in an isolated community. Vaughan’s nemesis is the Pastor of the Church of the Most Cherished Spirits, an American-style religious cult which he has introduced to the isolated Australian seaside town where Vaughan’s grandmother lives. The Pastor’s objective is to recruit the entire community, giving him absolute power—along with the money he extorts from his devotees. As well as the ordeal of having the Pastor as an adversary, lonely Vaughan longs to be part of the local gang of boys which exerts its own authority by making its rule for inclusion the completion of an initiation ceremony which involves a risky swim through an underwater tunnel. While practising for the swim, Vaughan becomes progressively preoccupied with protecting himself against the Pastor but, in a plot twist, it is eventually the Pastor who forces him to undertake the dangerous swim, hoping the recalcitrant boy will drown. Of course, Vaughan miraculously survives the swim and overturns the authority of the Pastor who is finally arrested for embezzlement. In the conventional style of the heroic quest, as well as saving the community, Vaughan’s mission results in his attainment of personal agency and spiritual growth, in contrast to the fake spirituality offered by the Pastor.
Gary Crew’s *No Such Country* is another heroic quest narrative with a malevolent quasi-religious leader as the main antagonist. The allegorical writing style and structure of this novel are considerably more sophisticated than the narrative styles of *Rift* and *The Gathering*. The story is located in the town of New Canaan—again an isolated seaside town—where two teenage girls privately but futilely express resistance to the oppressive rule of The Father, the white-clad priest who dominates the life of the superstitious community. The arrival of an outsider, Sam Shadows, a dark-skinned anthropology student, threatens The Father’s complacent domination of New Canaan, as Sam begins to investigate the suppressed history of the previous indigenous residents, which is linked to the mystery of his own heritage. The revelation of a massacre of the indigenous population is followed by another predictable but dramatic showdown between good and evil, resulting in exposure of the truth and banishment of the false prophet. The anti-authoritarian ideology expressed in *No Such Country*, however, has more discomforting implications for the Australian community than in *Rift* and *The Gathering*, where readers can distance themselves from the reprehensible authority figures. Crew states that the ‘point and purpose’ of *No Such Country* is to highlight that the ‘white invaders have never been held accountable for the massacres perpetrated against the indigenes’ (“Letters” 61).

In *The Gathering*, Carmody presents a hostile attitude to adult authority, most notably that exercised by parents, police and teachers (although old people, and English and History teachers are treated more sympathetically than others). The ideological endorsement of resistance to adult authority is overtly expressed throughout the novel and is most pointedly encapsulated as Danny, a member of The Chain, asks Nathaniel:

...Haven’t you figured out by now that in the sleazy [sic] adult world, there aren’t any good guys? (121)

While there may be value in encouraging young readers to interrogate conservative and patriarchal power structures, this blatant contempt for all adult authority might leave a reader feeling insecure about the world. Despite being a Children’s Book Council award winner in 1994, *The Gathering* received some negative criticism as well as acclaim. Possibly the most scathing attack is from Scutter who contends that:

Carmody has the child filled full of magic belief, indistinguishable from blind faith.

Adults, lacking this desirable belief, functioning only on detached rationality, are thus, in the logic of the text, empty vessels waiting to be filled with predatory evil. And this evil is represented as impersonal, dissociated, free-floating, like a kind of ectoplasm waiting for a host ...This is a sick book, and it can only have arisen within a very sick cultural discourse (234).

Despite the first person narration by Nathaniel, the authorial voice frequently dominates, which is ironic given Carmody’s attitude to adult authority. This domination is particularly evident in several didactic segments where the author has Nathaniel explain, in an uncharacteristically condescending voice, about Pavlov’s dog, the pain barrier and the distinction between primary and secondary historical sources. This authorial intrusion weakens the legitimacy of Carmody’s anti-authoritarian ideology, and the didactic tone may alienate some readers.

In contrast to the anti-adult position espoused by Carmody, in *Rift* Hathorn distributes good and bad fairly evenly among the adult and adolescent characters although the main source of evil here is the adult Pastor. Parents and traditional religious figures such as the Catholic priest in *Rift* are more often merely negligent and inadequate rather than intentionally immoral. Hathorn’s underlying ideology highlights the dangers, particularly for young people, of group pressure and the manipulation of disadvantaged people by authority figures. This message is voiced by one character who says ‘He’s a fake, this new Pastor... And he’s pushing a cult thing here with people who are out of luck and out of jobs’ (58). As one critic sums up, *Rift* reminds us how easily many can be persuaded by the simplistic and fallacious promises of those who seek power by preying on our insecurities, fears and willingness to take the easy path. *Rift*
reminds us how vigilant we must be in order to seek out and expose the false prophets and to care for and protect ourselves and our fellow travellers (Thompson 28).

While Rift and The Gathering convey their ideologies rather predictably in stories of the world as readers expect it to be (with some supernatural enhancements in The Gathering), Crew turns readers’ assumptions upside down in No Such Country with the intervention by a progressive, educated Aboriginal scientist (a black saviour) in a backward superstitious white community. This reversal is suggested in the novel’s subtitle, A Book of Antipodean Hours, a twist on the medieval Book of Hours which guided European Christians in prayer. As noted earlier, Crew’s stated purpose in writing No Such Country was to highlight that ‘white invaders have never been held accountable for the massacres perpetrated against the indigenes’ (“Letters” 61) and his message concerning patriarchal power structures and the need for atonement in post-colonial societies is powerfully conveyed through his allegorical narrative with its rich symbolism. This novel’s layout is more sophisticated than the other two considered here, having nine sections with Biblical reference titles, including ‘Annunciation’, ‘Nativity’, ‘Atonement’. The hieratic language register with which the novel opens alerts the reader to its allegorical nature:

One summer night there appeared in the sky over the lagoon at New Canaan a configuration of stars in the shape of an hourglass... (3)

Another unconventional aspect is that the reader is not invited to identify closely with any particular character through focalisation, but is kept at an objective distance from which to evaluate the novel’s events and themes. Further, as Nimon and Foster note, Crew’s approach to character... is... at odds with the usual presentation that is found in novels for adolescents (and children) in that there is little or no development in individuals: rather, they unfold before the readers, but do not, in fact, change. (138)

However, the characters the reader is mostly likely to identify with—Sam, Rachel and Sarah—each achieve agency by the close of the novel, signifying the triumph of hope and human worth, which Crew said he wanted to emphasise (McKenna and Pearce 97). Although the discovery of the Aboriginal massacre in this novel is equally as shocking as the fear and suspense evoked in The Gathering and Rift, Crew conveys his ideology more subtly and with greater profundity through his extensive use of metaphor and symbolism, by focusing on the story rather than the characters and through his attempt to subvert readers’ expectations.

Traditional religious authority is explicitly rejected in The Gathering and Rift, as the main protagonists overtly renounce any connection with religion. When asked by a nervous old woman in The Gathering whether he is a Mormon, Nathanial proclaims: ‘No... I’m not anything religious’ (112). Religious faith is similarly rejected by Vaughan in Rift when the Pastor asks, Do you believe as I do, my boy?... if you acknowledge that [you’ve been called to this place] and allow the Cherished Spirits to enter your soul, purpose will be revealed to you (50) to which Vaughan responds vehemently, ‘I don’t go in for that stuff. My mum and dad are agnostics and so am I!’. Despite his agnosticism, Vaughan is not oblivious to spiritual facets of life and finds purpose and meaning in other directions, rejecting the pressure to submit to the duplicitous spiritual authority of the Pastor, as he ponders,

If anything was his purpose here, if you needed a purpose at all, the discovery of an underwater world, the dives with Rod, must be it (51).

The underwater world, often a spiritual metaphor, carries the dual symbolic significance of both danger and ecstasy for Vaughan.

In all three novels, there is an underlying sense of a culture in search of some kind of meaning and purpose to replace the religious authority which has diminished with increasing secularisation. There are religious references and allusions (mostly Christian) throughout each novel, and echoes of traditional religion suggest that people are still responding to the lingering influence of its authority. For instance, in Rift, the self-professed agnostic, Vaughan
prayed in his watery cathedral—not for his salvation for he knew he’d been saved—but a prayer of thanks, crossing himself and luxuriating in the ability to do so (176).

In *The Gathering*, despite his denouncement of religion, Nathanial’s first impulse, when his dog is killed by members of the youth group, is to pray:

I found myself praying to God...But if there was a God, he was as incapable of undoing what had been done as I had been of stopping it (214-215).

In *No Such Country*, the effectiveness of the allegorical storytelling is enhanced with symbolism and religious intertextual references to suggest the need for both individual and communal acknowledgement of wrongful actions performed in the pretext of religious authority. In each of these heroic quest narratives, there is a distinct authorial message that traditional religious authority is unreliable and people must learn to bear their own crosses and find their own spirituality.

In conclusion, young adult fiction can operate as an effective vehicle for encouraging adolescent readers to interrogate and challenge authoritarian concepts, to develop autonomous views about personal agency and freedom and to discover their own sense of meaning and purpose. The three novels discussed here reveal some ways in which authors attempt to express their ideologies concerning conservative and patriarchal power structures and I believe they demonstrate that the ideologies expressed implicitly are more likely to penetrate than more overtly articulated positions.
**WORKS CITED**

**Primary sources**


**Secondary sources**


