



**Learning the rules: writing and researching school stories in history of education**

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## Learning the rules: writing and researching school stories in history of education

### Abstract

Purpose: This article sets out three dilemmas that challenge historians of education who write for both professional and academic audiences. It focuses on the example of using fiction as a source for understanding the informal education of girls in the twentieth century. It contributes to the debate over the purpose of history of education and the possibilities that intersecting and contested analytical frameworks might contribute to the development of the discipline.

Design/methodology /approach: The article discusses the rules of engagement and the duties of a historian of education. It reforms current concerns into three dilemmas: audience, method and writing. It gives examples drawn from research into girls' school stories between 1910 and 1960. It highlights three authors and stories set in Australia, England and an international school in order to explore what fiction offers in getting 'inside' the classroom.

Findings: Developed from a conference keynote that explored intersecting and contested histories of education, the article sets up as many questions as it provides answers but re-frames them to include the use of a genre that has been explored by historians of childhood and literature but less so by historians of education.

Research limitations / implications: The vast quantity of stories set in girls' schools between 1910 and 1960 necessarily demands a selective reading. Authors may specialise in the genre or be general young people's fiction authors. Reading such stories must necessarily be set against changing social, cultural and political contexts. This article uses examples from the genre in order to explore ways forward but cannot include an exhaustive methodology for reasons of space.

Practical implications: The article suggests fiction as a way of broadening the remit of history of education and acting as a bridge between related sub-disciplines such as history of childhood and youth, history and education. It raises practical implications for historians of education as they seek new approaches and understanding of the process of informal education outside the classroom.

Social implications: The article suggests that we should take more seriously the impact of children's reading for pleasure. Reception studies offer an insight into recognising the interaction that children have with their chosen reading. While we cannot research how children interacted historically with these stories in the mid-twentieth century, we can draw implications from the popularity of the genre and the significance of the legacy of the closed school community that has made series such as Harry Potter so successful with the current generation.

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11 Originality /value: The marginal place of history of education within the disciplines of history  
12 and education is both challenging and full of possibilities. The article draws on existing  
13 international debates and discusses future directions as well as the potential that girls'  
14 school stories offer for research into gender and education.  
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19 This article addresses the theme of the ANZHES annual conference 'Intersecting and  
20 contested histories of education'. The paper is framed within three dilemmas that face those of us  
21 who might be seen to be working on less conventional primary sources for interrogating what went  
22 on 'inside the classroom'. The paper begins by highlighting a selection of previous overviews and  
23 reflections by historians of education on the state of the field as it developed, and the available  
24 'rules' that might direct the ways in which we approach our task. It then introduces the genre of  
25 school fiction as a historical source and a discussion of three specific examples that include British  
26 and Australian authors and plots that include schoolgirls from Australia, New Zealand and Europe.  
27 Fiction set in schools and universities has been recognised as offering insight into a specific time and  
28 place (Alves, 2009; Bogen, 2014) but may not have been fully recognised as history of education per  
29 se. The article concludes by further reflecting on the dilemmas of audience, purpose and method  
30 that may broaden the parameters of our field.  
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### 39 Rules

40 The problem for history of education in recognising, or being recognised, as either historical or  
41 educational research, or both, has led to a considerable amount of soul searching and some vigorous  
42 debates over our rules of engagement with sources. Peter Cunningham identifies how we have to  
43 serve two masters (or mistresses) when he observes that ours is 'An ever widening and deepening  
44 field of research that brings historical perspectives and methods to bear on contemporary  
45 understandings of education, [and] has roots in professional interests around the public provision of  
46 elementary schooling.' (Cunningham, 2012: 73). He places its origins within the practical  
47 training of teachers and highlights the effect that this has on the status of history of education as  
48 history. He argues that those who write history of education *should* be aware that their  
49 audience is beyond academia. He offers an example of the history of elementary schooling in  
50 England and identifies a range of ways in which to interpret the plethora of available sources.  
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3 Cunningham suggests that we have to recognise that the consumers of history of education come  
4 from a wide range of interest groups and will use the information that we provide differently. There  
5 are therefore considerable implications for how we write history of education; for policy makers, for  
6 academics, or for trainee teachers to use to enhance their own understanding of the development of  
7 the system in which they find themselves. Additionally in these days of public accountability and  
8 impact, our audience may also be the general public. In the UK the History and Policy website was  
9 set up specifically with the intention for historians to inform policy makers  
10 (www.historyandpolicy.org), but as John Tosh notes, the idea of applied history does not always  
11 meet with unreserved approval (Tosh, 2006). Whereas History and Policy suggests that the work of  
12 conventional or traditional historians *might* have relevance for today; the reverse may be true for  
13 historians of education. Much research in our field follows Tosh's analogical method that begins with  
14 today's situation and traces back to try to find the origin of the problem (Tosh, 2006). These tensions  
15 of both purpose and method lie at the heart of reflections by distinguished scholars in our field.  
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26 Anxiety over the decline and fall of history of education is not new. The turn of the millennium  
27 witnessed a vociferous debate in the US and Europe over the state of the discipline which had at its  
28 heart the relationship between the historian of education as historian or as educationist, and  
29 therefore, the *raison d'être* of research in the discipline (Herbst, 1999; Richardson, 1999). Kate  
30 Rousmaniere's response acknowledged the difficulty of getting into the history of the classroom, and  
31 at the same time highlighted the interesting avenues presented by researching the lives of teachers,  
32 parents and pupils who left no records, turning the historian into the 'scavenger and interpreter of  
33 the debris of history' (Rousmaniere, 2001: 651). By 2003 Richard Aldrich identified three duties of  
34 the historian of education, followed ten years later by Marc dePaep's ten commandments (Aldrich,  
35 2003; dePaep, 2012). With increasing demands on the content and nature of teacher preparation  
36 programmes the marginal position of history of education remains a matter of debate in Europe.  
37 John Furlong and Martin Lawn's inquiry into the role of the disciplines in history of education  
38 included Ian Grosvenor and Joyce Goodman's reflection on the 'curious case' of history of education  
39 that identified 'moments of challenge' and 'insecurity'. Furlong and Lawn concluded that changing  
40 audiences for the disciplines had resulted in blurred boundaries, fostering non-disciplinary or  
41 transdisciplinary work. This is particularly pertinent for those of us working absolutely at the edge of  
42 research into the history of schooling (as distinct from education); our positioning within the liminal  
43 space of histories of girlhood, women, education, emotions, and materialities can be uncomfortable.  
44 Do we follow one set of rules, do we change the rules, or do we look for a new home? At a time  
45 when societies for the history of childhood and youth are growing in membership and scope, there  
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3 are interesting opportunities for historians of education for venturing into, or collaboration across,  
4 boundaries. We need to establish which questions we should be asking, and to whom. Examining the  
5 significance of the history of informal education as in the content of leisure reading for teenagers is  
6 one such area. As Seth Lerner observes 'The history of children's literature is inseparable from the  
7 history of childhood, for the child was made through texts and tales he or she studied, heard, and  
8 told back.' (Lerner, 2008:1).

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14 Richard Aldrich drew on historian of the family Peter Laslett in formulating three duties for us to  
15 consider in our analysis of the past: first, the duty to the people of the past in order to understand  
16 them on their own terms, within their own times. We should be wary of passing judgment, or as  
17 John Tosh has noted, being selective about the past evidence we find for our concerns today. But  
18 equally, argued Aldrich we do have a duty to those in the present, perhaps reflecting Cunningham's  
19 recognition that professionals rely on historians for an accurate account of the events of the past in  
20 order not to repeat past mistakes. That there is no longer any room in many programmes of teacher  
21 education for a detailed exploration of the history of the current system has wider reaching  
22 implications for those who work within the system. Aldrich's final point was that our duty is to  
23 search for the truth and in doing that, to engage as many sources as possible. The truth in a post  
24 modern world becomes increasingly slippery, especially given the paucity of records that reflect the  
25 day-to-day lives of the school child under specific policy initiatives.

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35 Whereas Aldrich posited an analysis that offered a diversion into the whole realm of philosophical  
36 reflections on the nature of duty, De Paepe formulated 'ten commandments' which suggested that  
37 rather than being seen as a moral duty, there were certain procedures that should be imposed upon  
38 an erstwhile academic. These can be grouped according to my three dilemmas: who is our audience,  
39 how do frame our data analysis, and how do we write up our research? As DePaepe observed 'we  
40 tell the most acceptable story about that past with the resources, concepts and conceptual  
41 frameworks at our disposal', and he hinted at the ever present possibility of fiction stating that 'we  
42 produce a 'story about stories' (DePaepe, 2012a:437). First who is our audience? DePaepe stated  
43 that 'The history of education is history', 'thou shalt not write a history of the present, nor for the  
44 present' and then in response to my dilemma of *how* we go about the analysis 'thou shalt not fret  
45 excessively about presentism', 'thou shalt discourse about discourses', 'thou shalt interpret multi-  
46 perspectively' and 'thou shalt develop theoretical and conceptual frameworks from within the  
47 history of education.' As a way into my final dilemma he asked, how should this be written? 'Thou  
48 shalt write about the educational past'; 'Thou shalt strive for pure wisdom within the context of a  
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3 cultural approach' and 'Thou shalt teach people and especially teachers in that spirit' while you  
4 demythologise former narratives and discourses about the history of education' (DePaepe, 2012b:  
5 464).  
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### 8 9 **Reflections**

10 Reflections on the role of history and the historian of education have also been of concern to  
11 ANZHES. In reflecting on the first twenty-five years of ANZHES John McMahon observed how  
12 historians of education had been initially marginalised from the general historian, that they were  
13 isolated from each other and that they lacked 'suitable reference materials, texts and  
14 methodologies' (McMahon, [www.ANZHES.com](http://www.ANZHES.com)). Similar to the British experience, history of  
15 education was originally taught in education departments. By the 1970s the historical imagination  
16 was 'peopled with the intersections of pupils, teachers, parents and curricula'. McMahon reflected  
17 how the second wave of ANZHES historians of education were more 'general historians with an  
18 interest in education'. He argued that historians of education became 'more respectable' in the eyes  
19 of general historians through using diverse frameworks and since 1995 this diversity had grown  
20 further, most notably in the amount of interest in gender and feminist history. These developments  
21 had led to methods that included 'quantitative studies, concept analysis, the use of theory,  
22 demography and analysis of social context' (McMahon, [www.ANZHES.com](http://www.ANZHES.com)).  
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34 Craig Campbell and Geoffrey Sherington noted the 'rise and decline' of history of education as, in  
35 parallel with the British experience it became detached from its original base in teacher education  
36 (Campbell & Sherington, 2002). They suggested that as historians of education increasingly had  
37 engaged with historians of childhood and youth, the professions, women and the family, associated  
38 with social history this had 'actually harboured the seeds of decline of the discipline' (Campbell &  
39 Sherington, 2002: 47). They also suggested that the dominance of a neo-liberal economic agenda  
40 had resulted in the further marginalisation of the turn to history in the introduction to policy  
41 discussions than in the past. In identifying phases of history of education as pre-revisionism,  
42 revisionism and post-revisionism they charted the increasing sophistication of history of education  
43 writing, paying particular attention to the contribution made by feminist approaches, especially in  
44 the work of Marjorie Theobald, later extended by the contributions of Tanya Fitzgerald, Sue  
45 Middleton, Julie McLeod, Kay Morris-Matthews and Kay Whitehead and others. In looking to the  
46 future in 2002 Campbell and Sherington suggested two possible directions: the re-introduction of  
47 history of classroom practice and curriculum within teacher education and new efforts to engage  
48 historians of education with policy makers. It may also be possible to identify a new opening for  
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3 promoting the history of education with the rise in popularity in Britain of Education Studies courses.  
4 A substantial number of students arrive at university to study education as a subject in its own right  
5 where the possibility lies for a return to disciplines based curricula focusing on history, sociology and  
6 philosophy of education. Within this model it is more likely that individual modules drawing on  
7 different disciplinary backgrounds will be inflected or intersect with other disciplinary traditions. A  
8 wider study of the concept of 'education' also allows for a wider range of sources to be used and for  
9 a reflection on the nature of education *outside* as well as *inside* the classroom. Those of us teaching  
10 on the degrees find that our own work is substantially enriched by discussions with those engaged  
11 across the disciplinary divide.  
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### 19 **Rules, reflections and dilemmas: the school stories**

20 The genre of girls' school or college fiction has hitherto been of interest to women's and social or  
21 cultural historians (Cadogan and Craig, 1976; Mitchell, 1995; Hamilton-Honey, 2013; Moruzi and  
22 Smith, 2014). Having established that these are indeed fictions the authors generally explore textual  
23 analysis in order to consider the significance of communities of girlhood and the formation of female  
24 identity. Moving away from more traditional sources for history of education necessitates ongoing  
25 reflection on the significance of informal education during children's leisure hours that include both  
26 film (May & Ramsland, 2007; Howard, 2011; Dussell, 2016) and fiction (Kudlick, 2009; Trimmingham-  
27 Jack, 2009; Spencer, 2016). No-one would suggest a passive readership who simply absorbed the  
28 lessons in life offered by the authors, indeed reception studies has a literature of its own that  
29 recognises the significance of the complex interactions that children have with their reading  
30 (O'Shea, 2015). Neither did the stories reflect the reality of school life but the sheer popularity of  
31 the genre over the first half of the twentieth century demands that we make an effort to understand  
32 how the stories might relate to children's actual education policy and experience. As Botelho and  
33 Rudman have observed 'The development of children's literature parallels the development of the  
34 concept of childhood as a social construction...we link the literature aimed at children with the  
35 social, political, and economic ideologies of the time.' (Botelho and Rudman, 2009: 18). Within their  
36 critical multi-cultural analysis, they highlight both the harmful and advantageous aspects of the  
37 socialisation of children. The characters and stereotypes that they meet in their reading for example  
38 may serve to increase their awareness of other cultures or perpetuate less desirable attitudes to  
39 those outside their class, gender or ethnicity. Many of the school stories rely for their plots on the  
40 problems and eventual acceptance of new girls from different class or ethnic backgrounds (see  
41 discussion below). The authors make it clear that discrimination, usually brought about by the  
42 expectations of stereotyping, on the grounds of social class or ethnicity is unacceptable.  
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5 Bearing the discussion above in mind, this article now turns to reflect on the dilemmas of  
6 interpreting the writing of three authors of girls' school stories, Angela Brazil, Lilian Turner and  
7 Eleanor Brent-Dyer as valid sources for new directions in the history of education. The section offers  
8 an overview of the way that 'new girls' were enculturated into the expectations of boarding school,  
9 and offer fictional scenarios where characters from different class or regional backgrounds learn  
10 from each other. In the conclusion I reflect on how my three dilemmas offer ways to interpret these  
11 stories with the ever widening possibilities for history of education. Who is the audience? What  
12 theoretical frameworks might be employed? How should the research be written up? And the  
13 overarching question, how does this contribute to claims for a specific role for history of education  
14 in a fast moving changing academic environment?  
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22 Using fiction as source material produces a further layer of investigation for the researcher, that of  
23 the author biography or autobiography. While these are also open to accusations of bias, where they  
24 offer insight into the author's own schooling they provide both knowledge and reflection on the  
25 experience of secondary education provision for girls at a time when this was by no means universal  
26 in the late nineteenth to mid twentieth century. Angela Brazil (1869-1947) has been described as the  
27 'founding mother of the breezy and bracing twentieth century schoolgirls' story' (Cadogan, 1989: 9).  
28 She wrote around 50 full length novels, most of them school stories, and a range of short stories for  
29 magazine publications such as *Schoolgirls' Own*. Her autobiography highlights the blurred boundary  
30 between fact and fiction and was dedicated to 'the many girl readers who have written to me to ask  
31 what I did in my own schooldays.' (Brazil, 1925). Brazil's audience for her autobiography clearly  
32 drove her 'remembrances' and she created a story of herself that fitted the persona that her readers  
33 might have expected. Her biographer Gillian Freeman observed that 'the romantic persona she  
34 chose to project to her readers' sat uneasily alongside the 'calculating business woman who  
35 travelled at the expense of her publishers....the ardent, genuine and generous conservationist...the  
36 tireless committee woman ...and the author of forty-nine racy schoolgirls novels packed with slang'  
37 and 'was incongruously at odds with the cultured and self-consciously correct hostess who was in  
38 the 1920s and 30s the *doyenne* of Coventry Society.' (Freeman, 1976: 16). Brazil's first novel, *The*  
39 *Fortunes of Philippa* (1906) was based on her mother's experience who was born in Brazil and came  
40 to England to boarding school. Brazil stated 'Almost everything in my books has had its foundation in  
41 fact.' (Brazil, 1925: 311). After reading the autobiography, it seems more likely that almost  
42 everything in her life was fiction. Indeed, Brazil herself hints at her creative relationship with 'truth'  
43 when she remarks 'I was always much more fond of fiction than on solid fact, I revelled in the more  
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3 interesting parts of the textbooks, but I disliked the spadework of such sordid details as dates or  
4 grammatical rules.' (Brazil, 1925: 141-2).  
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8 Brazil's own education included three years in the preparatory department of Manchester High  
9 School for Girls where she tells the reader 'from nine to twelve years of age I...was just a happy-go-  
10 lucky, jolly, lively young person, thoroughly enjoying myself. What fun we had!' (Brazil, 1925: 106).  
11 This was followed by some years at 'Ellerslie' where 'the founder, Miss Anderson, was one of the  
12 pioneers in modern education...she had already set in motion a system which only a few schools in  
13 the country were beginning to feel after.' (Brazil, 1925: 138). Surprisingly perhaps, given the  
14 emphasis on competitive games in her novels, Brazil's own education did not feature much physical  
15 education (Brazil, 1925: 147). She hints that the schools in her novels were not only what her  
16 readers might have liked to attend, they were also her own wish list. She commented: 'If only they  
17 had had all that a few years earlier, *how* I should have enjoyed it - revelled in it! To act and play  
18 games! Why school would have been Paradise!' (Brazil, 1925: 149). In this case it seems the more we  
19 know of the author, the more the books appear as one woman's fantasy, and this opens the doors  
20 for us to include psychological and psychoanalytic approaches. Both the heroines and the authors  
21 appear to be looking for an escape from the constraints of the female role in the early twentieth  
22 century. As one reader of the Chalet School series, discussed later in this article wrote 'They [the  
23 books] were my reality – not my own surroundings' (McClelland, 1986: prologue).  
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36 Brazil's plots soon become familiar and the avid reader can be confident that in every story there  
37 would be a cast of characters that included firm, but fair, headmistresses and a set of popular girls  
38 who, despite a mischievous tendency, were inherently honest and reliable. There would be one or  
39 two less likeable characters who quite possibly would learn the folly of their ways by the end of the  
40 story. Despite adventures on cliff tops, beaches cut off from tides or darkening moors all would be  
41 well and the story would end with the heroine looking forward to her next term at the school. The  
42 genre was *not* universally appreciated by headmistresses. Frances Grey headmistress of St Paul's  
43 Girls School declared:  
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48 Do not, encourage your friends to give you story-books for presents, and especially  
49 storybooks that are about schools... From these books you get false conceptions of school  
50 life; all the trouble I get in the school I can trace to these books. I have read some of them:  
51 they are untrue, they are simply sickening! (Grey, 1910).  
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55 It seems most likely that in 1910 the most popular and prolific author of British stories was L.T.  
56 Meade (1844-1914) whose stories of intense female friendship (*Sweet Girl Graduate*, 1891) and  
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3 disobedience (*Rebel of the School*, 1902) may well have displeased early female educationists trying  
4 to persuade the general public of the desirability of girls' secondary education. Angela Brazil's  
5 heroines by contrast begin to develop a code of schoolgirl honour that we see more fully developed  
6 in the later work of Elinor Brent-Dyer, Elsie Oxenham and Dorita Fairlie-Bruce.  
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11 The plot of Brazil's *For the Sake of the School* revolves around the arrival of Rona from New Zealand  
12 to 'The Woodlands' a small girls' boarding school set in the wilds of Wales and the Craigwen Valley.  
13 Brazil informed her readers with some authority as to the authenticity of the setting: 'If as runs the  
14 modern theory, beautiful surroundings in our early youth are of the utmost importance in training  
15 our perceptions and aiding the growth of our higher selves, then surely nowhere in the British Isles  
16 could a more suitable setting have been found for a house of education.' (Brazil, 1915: 19). Ulyth  
17 tells her friends that Rona is arriving because they have been corresponding as pen friends,  
18 organised through *The British Girls' Gazette*. "The editor arranged for readers of the magazine in  
19 England to exchange letters with readers in the Colonies. He gave me Rona. We've been writing to  
20 each other every month for two years" "I had an Australian, but she wouldn't write regularly so we  
21 dropped it" volunteered Beth Broadway' (Brazil, 1915: 15). Ulyth is somewhat over-excited at the  
22 prospect of the arrival of Rona: "She seems like a girl out of a story ...She's written me the jolliest,  
23 loveliest, funniest letters! I feel I know her already. We shall be the very chummiest of chums. Her  
24 father has a huge farm of I can't tell you how many miles, and she has two horses of her own, and  
25 fords rivers when she's out riding'" (Brazil, 1915: 15). Readers may well themselves have experience  
26 of pen-friends as this service was offered through a range of publications. This story warns them not  
27 to jump to hasty conclusions based on their experience of either fiction or films.  
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40 Of course the course of true chumhood does not run smooth and Rona's exuberance is not  
41 welcomed, especially by Ulyth. The second chapter recounts the arrival of Rona who is a striking  
42 contrast to Ulyth, described as 'a dainty little damsel' fashionable and with glossy hair, always  
43 immaculate' (Brazil, 1915: 24). Ulyth's imagination had painted in the gaps left by Rona's 'bald  
44 account of her home' and she 'pictured her among scenes of unrivalled interest and excitement.'  
45 This was based on a film, 'Rose of the Wilderness' and 'although the scenes depicted were supposed  
46 to be in the region of the Wild West, she decided they would equally well represent the backwoods  
47 of New Zealand.' (Brazil, 1915: 25). It must have been clear to the reader where the story was going  
48 and, true to form, when Rona arrives she creates chaos rather than excitement. Having begged to  
49 share a room with Rona, Ulyth is soon begging the headmistress to separate them.  
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3 When Rona bursts into the dining hall she proclaims in 'a loud nasal voice' "'Travelling's no joke, I  
4 can tell you, I'm tired to death.'" (Brazil, 1915: 26). Rona does not live up to the 'Prairie flower' of  
5 Ulyth's imagination 'Solid was the word for it...an ordinary well grown, decidedly plump damsel, with  
6 brown elf locks, a ruddy sunburnt complexion and a freckled nose' (Brazil, 1915: 27). In short Rona  
7 disrupts Ulyth's space and her sensibilities. Rona is everything that Ulyth is not. Ulyth observes  
8 "'She's too terrible for words! Her voice makes me cringe ...she's unbearable. Yes, absolutely  
9 impossible'" (Brazil, 1915: 29). Unsurprisingly the headmistress does not allow Ulyth to change  
10 rooms saying "'Rona may not be what you imagined but you must remember in what different  
11 circumstances she has been brought up. I think she has many good qualities and that she'll soon  
12 improve.'" Miss Bowes asks Ulyth to look at it from the perspective of Rona and presents a little  
13 homily: 'You gave her cordial invitation to England, and now, because she does not meet your quite  
14 unfounded expectations you want to back out of all your obligations to her. I thought you were a girl  
15 Ulyth, who kept her promises.'" (Brazil, 1915: 31).

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26 This novel also introduces readers to opportunities provided by one of the extra-curricular  
27 organisations for girls that were emerging alongside the Girl Guides. Central to the plot is the girls'  
28 membership of the Camp-fire League, an organisation that is run by 'a charming young American  
29 lady' who lived in the neighbourhood. The girls have to follow a strict code that includes giving  
30 service, being trustworthy and glorifying work (Brazil, 1915: 43). Ulyth recognises that to maintain  
31 her status as a Firemaker she will have to befriend and be nice to Rona, 'Was this what was required  
32 of her as a torchbearer – to pass on her own refinement and culture to a girl whose crudities  
33 offended every particle of her fastidious taste?' (Brazil, 1915: 49). Gradually Rona calms down, slims  
34 down, brushes her hair, the sunburn fades and she modifies her laugh. It is not only Ulyth who tries  
35 to rehabilitate Rona, 'the mistresses had instituted a vigorous crusade against Rona's loud voice and  
36 unconventional English' but at heart she means well. (Brazil 1915: 67). Rona says "'Ulyth I owe  
37 everything in the world to you. I understand now how good it was of you to take me into your room  
38 and teach me. I was a veritable cuckoo in your nest then, a horrid, tiresome, trespassing bird, a  
39 savage, a bear cub, a backwoods gawk as the girls called me. It's entirely thanks to you if at last I am"  
40 "The sweetest prairie Rose that ever came out of the wildernesses" finishes Ulyth. (Brazil, 1915:  
41 264).

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53 Brazil may have been aware of trampling on the sensitivities of her New Zealand readers; when  
54 Ulyth asks one of the teachers "'Are all colonials like Rona? I've not met one before'". The teacher  
55 responds:  
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3 Certainly not. Most of them are quite as cultured and as up to date as ourselves. There are  
4 splendid schools in New Zealand, and excellent opportunities for study of every kind. Poor  
5 Rona, unfortunately has had to live on a farm far away from civilisation and her education  
6 and welfare in every respect seems to have been utterly neglected. (Brazil, 1915: 50).  
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11 In a blast of intertextuality Brazil gives Ulyth the hobby of story-writing and one of Rona's exploits is  
12 to allow her school friends to read a story she has been writing. Unfortunately, it is a school story  
13 and she has used her friends as models for the characters at 'Oaklands' including the twins 'Pearl  
14 and Doris who were fat, stodgy girls who wore five and halves in shoes and had 27 inch waists' (Brazil,  
15 1915: 71). Brazil self-consciously parodies her own style but in doing so demonstrates the popularity  
16 and her awareness of the criticism of the genre. Jonathan Rose warns us against assumptions that  
17 readers are passive in their consumption of texts and usefully concludes that 'we can only  
18 understand the mentality of a given audience by reconstructing (as far as possible) its cultural diet,  
19 and then asking how the audience interpreted those cultural experiences'(Rose, 2007:605). The way  
20 that Brazil demonstrates awareness of her readers by emphasising her up to date knowledge of  
21 educational ideas, introducing her readers to new organisations and offering covert advice to would-  
22 be novelists who draw too literally on their experience perhaps gives us insight into how the authors  
23 expected their readers to interpret this cultural genre.  
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34 A similar self-awareness of the genre is present in Lilian Turner's *Jill of the Fourth Form* set in  
35 Australia. Lilian wrote about 20 books for children. She attended Sydney Girls' High School and then  
36 became a journalist. *Jill of the Fourth* was published in 1924 and all Turner's books were published in  
37 London by Ward Locke. Other titles included *Three New Chum Girls* (1910) *The Girl from the*  
38 *Backblocks* (1914) and *Peggy the Pilot* in 1922 ([www.australianchildrensliterature.com](http://www.australianchildrensliterature.com)).  
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41 In discussing *Three New Chums* and *Paradise and the Perrys*, Brenda Niall comments that Turner  
42 'express[es] her mildly feminist impulses, but suggest[s] no future for the independent woman.  
43 While family life is shown to be drudgery, marriage seems the only realistic goal.' ([adb.anu.edu.au](http://adb.anu.edu.au)).  
44 *The World's News* described Turner as 'a simple, wholesome, restful writer, upon whom it is a  
45 pleasure to fall back for stories for growing Australian girls to read. She helps to keep the tastes of  
46 young people pure and simple, and what more could be said of any writer.' (19/12/1908). While  
47 Angela Brazil's books may have found their way to the colonies to be read by girls in New Zealand  
48 and Australia, Lilian Turner we can assume was writing for a predominantly Australian audience and  
49 we can identify familiar tropes, such as the naiveté of the new girl, that appear to have crossed  
50 national borders. Kristine Moruzi has examined the genre extensively for Australia and the Empire  
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3 and her observation on girls' annuals that they addressed a 'seemingly homogenous readership  
4 comprised of Britain and its settler colonies, without attending to the unique demands or identity of  
5 these readers' also rings true for the school stories (Moruzi, 2014: 167). Moruzi highlights the way  
6 that girls' literature represented a 'consistent set of moral values, responsibility, duty and femininity,  
7 regardless of where she happens to live' (Moruzi, 2014:171). The significance therefore of these  
8 somewhat formulaic novels in terms of their potential as conduits of informal education is strong.  
9 Lilian Turner also wrote for the *Australian Girls' Annual* (as did Angela Brazil) suggesting that the  
10 audience for the annuals was of a similar mentality to that of the longer novels under discussion  
11 here.  
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19 Turner's story of Jill follows the fortunes of a rather spoilt young girl of 15 who recognises her  
20 pampered self in the description in a novel of a girl who could not even dress herself. Brought up to  
21 believe herself an invalid by an over concerned aunt, Jill writes to her father who is away in London 'I  
22 want to go to boarding school and rough it and be like other girls! Oh daddie make them stop  
23 coddling me while I've a chance' (Turner, 1924: 34). Up to this point 'for Jill Colville, only child of a  
24 well-to-do Colonel; only niece of a wealthy spinster aunt; only grandchild of an Australian cattle king  
25 – well an ordinary classroom was not to be thought of' (Turner, 1924: 41). Jill's education at that  
26 point is with a private governess. Her knowledge of school came only from stories so we can be  
27 reasonably sure that the audience would also recognise the genre, 'She had read stories of girls who  
28 had been wild and unmanageable; of girls who had swung themselves out of dormitory windows,  
29 caught at the branch of a tree nearby and gone downwards downwards, safely into forbidden  
30 territory just for fun!' (Turner, 1924: 55). Jill reads a list of school advertisements, perhaps offering  
31 both reader and historian some idea of the provision of girls' boarding schools at the time. Location,  
32 'bracing sea air, gymnasium, swimming bath, playing fields, dancing room, more than 20 visiting  
33 masters and mistresses' (Turner, 1924: 55). She succeeds in persuading her father to send her to  
34 boarding school and in preparation visits a bookshop demanding books about boarding school  
35 'Shelves running from floor to ceiling, counters stacked and stacked from end to end and from side  
36 to side met Jill's eyes. All those school stories!' (Turner, 1924: 65). She asks the assistant to select  
37 four books for her and he picks stories about boys' schools. Jill thinks to herself that 'there can't be  
38 such a difference'. She sets to work to learn the school language from the boys' books, including  
39 gems such as 'Snivelling young shaver' (Turner, 1924: 78). She notes 'tricks played on pupils on first  
40 nights'. She packs her case with all sorts of items to help her climb out of windows and imagines  
41 herself in various scenarios with her 'Dream girl or bosom friend'. . Once more the self-conscious use  
42 of novels within novels highlights the self-awareness of those writing in this genre and, somewhat  
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3 ironically, the way in which they sought to educate their readers *not* to believe everything they read  
4 (in other authors') books.  
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8 Once at Highcastle College, Greenfields, Jill's behaviour mystifies everyone. She hides out of the  
9 dormitory on the first night in order to avoid 'pranks'. There *is* an extraordinary initiation  
10 scene where the Primrose dormitory make Jill first hold a glass of water out at arm's length, then  
11 race round the dormitory over and under the beds. Jill falls and lets out a torrent of the slang she  
12 had picked up from reading school stories, only to be met with much laughter. Gradually school  
13 works its magic spell. After six weeks 'There she was, jesting with laughing and flicking soapsuds  
14 about with the most mischievous of them; there she was ignoring doors and climbing through the  
15 window to the balcony...she was a changed, a healthier and happier girl.' (Turner, 1924: 175). The  
16 final scene sees the girls on a picnic trip and when one falls and gets caught on a ledge, it is of course  
17 Jill who rescues her. In contrast to Brazil's story that focuses on accepting different national  
18 backgrounds, Turner's narrative focuses on social class. The girl brought up in splendid isolation  
19 learns through membership of a school community that being a useful member of society is not  
20 dependent upon wealth. Even the elite schools have a part to play in the changing nature of interwar  
21 society.  
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32 One series of over fifty school stories relied not on the girls of the region for its pupils, but focused  
33 on the United Nations of the inhabitants of the Chalet School, located first in Austria before moving  
34 to the Channel Islands, Herefordshire and finally to Switzerland. As with Angela Brazil we can trace  
35 readership of the books to Australia, confirming the popular transnational appeal of the genre  
36 (McClelland, 1986: 174). This series of books was written by Elinor Brent-Dyer who, unlike the self-  
37 contained adventures of Angela Brazil and Lilian Turner, developed her characters over a period  
38 between 1925 and 1970. Readers got to know generations of families beginning with the founder of  
39 the school, Madge Bettany and her young sister, Jo. Brent-Dyer had spent some time as a school  
40 teacher and for ten years ran her own school, The Margaret Roper School, in Hereford, while she  
41 was writing some of the early chalet books. Helen McClelland has pointed out the similarities  
42 between the fictional schools and Brent-Dyer's institution. It is particularly hard for the historian of  
43 education to find evidence of the activities in the early independent girls' schools and McClelland's  
44 research using extensive local newspaper reports brings together fact and fiction, 'Elinor wanted her  
45 real-life school, wherever possible, to do the same things the Chalet School did' (McClelland, 1986:  
46 144). Unlike the other books discussed here, the inhabitants of the Chalet School do not indulge in  
47 schoolgirl slang, and the characters appear as schoolgirls and then as wives and mothers of the next  
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3 generation. They do get up to some extraordinary adventures but the situation of the school and its  
4 international student body provide endless possibilities for understanding the construction of  
5 national identity, female friendship and citizenship through literature. The trope of the  
6 disadvantages of home over formal schooling is also a regular feature in the Chalet plots (*Eustacia*  
7 *Goes to the Chalet School*, 1930; *Lavender Laughs in the Chalet School*, 1943).

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12 Brent-Dyer emphasises the potential for the international nature of girls' friendship and again shows  
13 awareness of the school story genre when, in the early days of the school, Gisela refers to *Denise of*  
14 *the Fourth* by 'Muriel Bernadine Brown'. Helen McClelland has suggested that this is a reference to  
15 Angela Brazil's books (McClelland, 1986), it's also possible that Brent-Dyer is referring to Evelyn  
16 Everett Greene, a contemporary of L.T. Meade who wrote in a similar florid style. Jo, reading *Denise*  
17 *of the Fourth* declares 'fancy anyone writing sentimental tosh like that sunset!' and reads a very  
18 flowery 'extract' as a parody of the oversentimental prose. 'It's idiotic! Head girls don't go round  
19 with their hair all over the place like that: they wouldn't be allowed to – not in a decent school any  
20 way! And I've never heard of a school where the girls give the Head "a slender golden chain on  
21 which was swung and exquisite pendant hung with diamonds". The most we ever rose to at the High  
22 was a really decent reading lamp.' (Brent-Dyer, 1925: 129-131). The changing nature of the  
23 apparently monolithic school-story over the twentieth century does also offer the potential for  
24 analysis against the changing provision of girls' secondary education and the recognition of the  
25 emergence of a distinct construction of girlhood as a stage in growing up.

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The girls at the Chalet School come from all over the world, although most are from Europe. The  
Australian pupil arrives in *Shocks for the Chalet School* (1952). Emerance Hope is as undisciplined as  
poor Rona some years earlier, again this is clearly the fault of her upbringing. While Rona had been  
brought up by her father and a rather rough housekeeper, Emerance's troubles are as a result of  
"being brought up by a pair of the maddest cranks on earth. They are by way of being Catholics...are  
also vegetarians; think that children should be allowed to develop along their own lines, and have  
never made the slightest attempt to check their daughter's wildest goings on." Mrs Hope claims  
that if you say 'No' to a child "You prevent its natural development when you do that. Children  
should grow up as free as birds of the air." (Brent-Dyer, 1952: 17). However, after Emerance sets  
fire to the summer house, her father decides to pack her off to the Chalet School to learn some  
discipline. The discipline at the Chalet School is irksome but she has been threatened with a 'French  
Convent' if she is expelled and so tries to conform. Brent-Dyer uses the character of Emerance to  
highlight why school rules are *not* made to be broken and why for a community to live in harmony

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3 conformity is needed. But Brent-Dyer also emphasises that Emerance (like Rona) is not naturally  
4 wilful, the head complains that the parents “let her go her own way, and now, when she has to  
5 come to order and meets unpleasantness she can’t take them and tries to pay back other folk for  
6 them...she’s never been taught to think.” (Brent-Dyer, 1952: 250-1). The final denouement to this  
7 story comes when Emerance blocks a drain and creates a flood on the playing fields after a difficult  
8 few days that resulted in the girls not talking to her. The final pages see the girls making up and each  
9 admitting that they were partly to blame. (Brent-Dyer, 1952: 256). When the story is retold to Jo –  
10 now herself an author, she puts the adventures of the blocked drain into her own school stories  
11 (Brent-Dyer, 1952: 257), so Brent-Dyer, like Brazil and Turner, plays with layers of ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’  
12 in this case drawing her reader further into the first layer of chalet school ‘truth’ by including an  
13 already fictional event in a further work of fiction by one of the characters.  
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### 22 **Conclusion: school stories for the historian of education**

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24 The vast quantity, if not quality, of popular school stories for girls in the first half of the twentieth  
25 century would seem to offer a further source for understanding the part that school played in the  
26 imagination and informal education of adolescent girls. The genre gained in popularity before the  
27 advent of universal secondary education but also retained a loyal audience when a majority of  
28 readers spent time in a formal classroom. It is significant however that even as secondary day school  
29 became a common experience, it is the stories of elite boarding schools that appealed to the young  
30 audience. This section returns to the three dilemmas that confront a historian of education using  
31 fiction and questions whether school fictions offer us a bridge across the disciplinary boundaries and  
32 enable us to engage with a wider audience at a time when the meaning and purpose of education is  
33 a matter of widespread debate.  
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42 First, who is our audience? It would be hard to claim that, however analysed, work on school stories  
43 would be of a great deal of direct use to trainee teachers (one of the original audiences for history of  
44 education). Although the last of the Chalet books was published in 1970, it is difficult to see how  
45 ‘useful’ the ‘wish list’ of what school could be like 50 years ago is for today. But in that case although  
46 failing to meet Aldrich’s dictum of being true to the people of the present, we do conform to  
47 Depaep’s commandment *not* to write a history of the present or for the present. Both Brazil and  
48 Brent-Dyer use their characters to voice what seem to be the authors’ views on changes in teaching  
49 methods and educational theory. Teachers in the early books have little or no training in pedagogy,  
50 some (not all) have degrees. None of the female teachers are married and in work full-time, they  
51 might return in a crisis to ‘fill in for a few weeks’. So perhaps they give us an insight into popular  
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3 perceptions of teachers, even if the schools in which they are teaching and the events that drive the  
4 stories are clear fable. Aldrich urges us to seek for the 'truth' by using as many perspectives as  
5 possible, in this case maybe, to find popular views on educational change? Reflections on this  
6 dilemma seem to suggest that, if what we are doing *is* history of education, we should seek an  
7 audience beyond teachers, beyond policy makers and into the general public in order to raise  
8 awareness of how easily stories of the classroom can become 'fact'. It is all too easy to read in these  
9 stories a golden age of education where pupils and teachers were less constrained by official policy  
10 and governed by personal adherence to concepts of duty and conformity.

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18 Secondly, what frame of analysis can help the historian to interpret schoolgirl fictions? How do we  
19 find our way through the multitude of frameworks on offer? How can we 'develop 'theoretical and  
20 conceptual frameworks from *within* the history of education'? (Depaepe). This appears to be both a  
21 challenge and open up a range of possibilities. How do we stop being one of Mary Norton's eclectic  
22 'Borrowers' and confirm that, in striving for 'pure wisdom within a cultural approach' we take  
23 intersecting, particularly in this instance frameworks developed within feminist history and  
24 contesting narratives that include narratives of emotions and girlhood, and make them our own.  
25 History of education then becomes not the poor relative looking for a home with richer relatives, but  
26 has a clear sense of its own home, domain and direction. There has not been space in this article to  
27 explore in depth the theoretical and methodological possibilities that the use of this genre opens up,  
28 but even in a brief content analysis has demonstrated the possibilities that more than a superficial  
29 reading might initially suggest. The stories do not tell us what schools were like, what girls or  
30 teachers were really like, but they *do* help recognise that fiction as it works on the imagination *can*  
31 inform readers' perceptions of the world – in other words, is an educative experience. We can never  
32 un-read a book and in stories like the Chalet School read by girls 'between thirteen and fourteen:  
33 just the age when the schoolgirl is at the wicked worst' (Brent-Dyer, 1952: 18), the characters  
34 continue to live in the minds and chatter of their fans as they negotiate their own schooldays, and  
35 even later as they organise their memories of their own education.

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48 Finally, the third dilemma, *how* do we write? How do we establish our academic credentials and  
49 theoretical rigour, a challenge that has been faced by historians of education originally writing for  
50 those in, or going into, the classroom not the academy, and by women's and feminist historians  
51 seeking acceptance in the academy without writing in a way that is inaccessible to the very people  
52 that we write about? What is Depaepe's 'most acceptable story about that past' using 'the  
53 resources, concepts and conceptual frameworks at our disposal'? How do we match theory and  
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3 content in finding a balance between recounting the narratives, quoting the authors and bringing  
4 the characters to life, in order to communicate some of the enthusiasm with which these stories  
5 were read? There may be a conflict between the way we write or broadcast for a general audience  
6 and how we write for our scholarly publications. Are the contested histories the ones for general  
7 consumption, or those that are the more theoretically grounded (but perhaps sometimes obscure)  
8 reflections that inevitably have to cut out so much that is rich within the stories themselves.  
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14 It was hoped that this paper for ANZHES would contribute to the ongoing debates over the  
15 role that history of education plays within both educational and historical research. Researching  
16 school stories within history of education might help to set up yet more 'rules' for those of us who  
17 broadly describe ourselves as historians of education but who work at the margins of 'useful' or  
18 'applied' history of education for teachers and policy makers. In common with the new girls of our  
19 stories (especially the Australian and New Zealand ones) we may not initially 'fit' with the ethos of  
20 the 'historical' institution, we maybe a little wild, or untamed or misunderstood, but after a range of  
21 trials and tribulations we may learn and conform to the rules in order to be accepted into the  
22 community. At the same time the Old Girls and Boys may have also learned something from the  
23 process, and the mirror that more unconventional sources can hold up to existing rules and  
24 expectations ensures that everyone new and old benefits from an encounter with the unfamiliar and  
25 overlooked.  
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