

I Lost My Mobile at the Mall (Wendy Harmer, Random House, \$19.95 tpb, ISBN 9781741663716, November)

★★

I Lost My Mobile At The Mall is your standard teen-drama issue novel, resurrected. Elly Pickering loses her phone at the mall and then suffers a series of personal misfortunes before losing her computer to robbery and developing a phony new-found appreciation for the quaintness of outmoded technology. The drama is centred on Elly's parents' narrow-minded obsession with the idea that none of this would have happened if it weren't for new technology, so the characters are wafer thin, with limited repertoires. Through the tried and true method of spearheading the drama with a significant social event (in this case, a dance), Harmer keeps the reader engaged in the story at least, but when technology returns

to Elly's life, the conclusion becomes unbearably and implausibly fortuitous and optimistic. This is a 'technology issues' novel that tries, belatedly, to make amends with progress, in a frustratingly patronising tone. A number of infelicitous stylistic decisions render the novel uncomfortable to read, and so distended from reality that many readers will have difficulty relating to the events or experiences of the characters. It might appeal as lighter reading for early teens, but is unlikely to hold the attention of adult buyers or educators.

Ryan Paine is a Melbourne book reviewer and former editor of Voiceworks

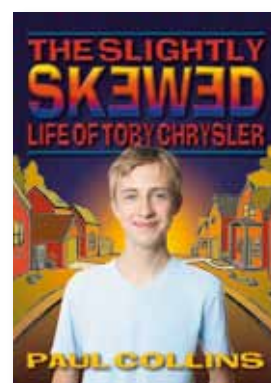


The Slightly Skewed Life of Toby Chrysler (Paul Collins, Celapene Press, \$16.95 pb, ISBN 9780975074244, November) ★★ ★★

Paul Collins' new novel follows Toby Chrysler's skewed life after the puzzling disappearance of his mother. Toby, or Milo as he is generally known as he is 'not so Quik', sets out to find her, but his efforts only plunge him into more and more serious trouble as misunderstandings multiply. Toby's Vietnamese friend Phuc's attempts at idiomatic English lead to malapropisms causing creative misinterpretations. Collins' style is tight and fits Toby's worldview with its literal perception of people and events. Readers from eight years up will easily follow the book's plot, but there is much for the older, observant reader. Toby is subtly presented as an unusual child—while he cannot read faces he can recognise and remember

the latitude and longitude of a position on earth and count scattered jigsaw pieces at a glance. Toby's life is skewed by his perception of it, like the narrator of Mark Haddon's *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. Toby's world is dominated by arguing adults, but this is all explained by an ingenious ending in which parenthood is properly attributed. Toby's life is rearranged and he finally sees it more clearly, as 'he not only had more family, but more—history'.

John Webb teaches in Perth, persuading young readers to acquire reading as a rewarding lifelong habit



Surf Ache (Gerry Bobsien, Walker Books, \$16.95 pb, ISBN 9781921150920, November) ★★

When Ella's family moves from Melbourne to Newcastle she is drawn away from her friends and boyfriend—from ballet school to the surfing scene, and the predictable new love interest she finds there. *Surf Ache* is, inevitably, described as a 'contemporary *Puberty Blues*'. Author Gerry Bobsien—a successful Newcastle artist, curator, trained blacksmith and art space director—has not quite produced a story equal to such praise. *Surf Ache* is a likeable love story and will appeal to fans of 'Dolly Fiction'. A successful book for young adults, however, attempts to entertain but also to be honest, as its readers will easily see through anything less. In *Puberty Blues*, the authors used experiences and language to tell the

truth about puberty and Australian surf culture. *Surf Ache* falls short of such a task, lacking the sincerity and character development required to do more. It tries and fails to capture realistic teenage dialogue—one of the first things young adults will notice. *Surf Ache* began its life as Bobsien's own surfing blog, and indeed, the character of the mother is the most fully developed. It would have been interesting to see how this story read as a novel for adults.

Rebecca Whitehead is a writer and bookseller



To the Top End: Our trip across Australia (Roland Harvey, A&U, \$24.99 hb, ISBN 9781741758849, November) ★★ ★★

Henry, Penny, Frankie, their parents and the accident-prone Uncle Kev sure get around (they had a good time *At the Beach*). Harvey documents their adventures through his characteristic detailed illustrations, crowding each spread so it forms a kind of picture puzzle to be enjoyed, à la *Where's Wally?* Children will delight in spotting characters, and features hidden from view at first glance. The artist makes skilful use of perspective. The title page, for example, is a high-flying bird's eye view of a forest, almost vertigo-inducing. The text, scratchily ink-penned in varied curves across the pictures, gives a travel diary from the young narrator's point of view, documenting 10 favourite tourist areas of Australia.

Original touches include a catalogue of sounds in the High Plains (like 'thwack' and 'sploosh'). Among the puns and visual gags there is serious geographic information, and the endpapers provide a map of the whole continent on which to trace the trip from Tasmania to the Top End. A pity the title is a bit ambiguous—without the subtitle it could seem to be only about the northernmost part of Australia. Great fun for five years and up, for family read-together sessions, and to sell to tourists.

Robin Morrow teaches children's literature, and is national president of IBBY (International Board on Books for the Young)

