Humans have always been fascinated by the idea of flying, and the classical myth of Icarus and his father Daedalus taps into our longing to take to the air. Yet the standard interpretation of the myth frames it as a cautionary tale that illustrates the disastrous consequences of over-ambition. Icarus should have plotted a middle course across the sky, flying neither too high nor too low. He also should have heeded the wisdom of his elders and obeyed his father’s instructions. Daedalus too was found guilty: the wings he fashioned violated the natural order. His powers as a craftsman were too great, and, although it was the son who fell, the father was punished.

This article undertakes a close reading of two retellings of this myth written for young adults: Nadia Wheatley’s short story ‘Melting Point’, from the 1994 collection *The Night Tolkien Died*, and Paul Zindel’s novel, *Harry and Hortense at Hormone High*, published in 1984. While drawing upon traditional readings of this well-known story, these texts also use the myth as a launching point to comment on the relevance and the integration of ancient myth within contemporary life and the status of classical studies within the western educational system.

Young adult literature has come to play a crucial role in the dissemination of myth in the modern age. In addition to the several hundred ‘direct’ retellings of classical myths that have been published for children and young adults over the last few decades, many other works, including J.K. Rowling’s popular Harry Potter series, draw freely upon mythological motifs and allusions. I will argue that the works of young adult writers like Wheatley and Zindel not only make an important contribution to the perpetuation of the Icarus story but also reflect on the tradition of
retelling mythic stories and their place within that tradition. The two texts share a preoccupation with the subject of textuality, experimenting with the presentation of words on the printed page and their effect on the reader. ‘Melting Point’ invokes the metaphor of translation to explore the myth’s reception through different linguistic and cultural contexts, while *Harry and Hortense* uses metafiction to reveal the artifice of the narrative and its self-conscious construction.

In her seminal critique of metafictional literature, Patricia Waugh defines the genre as writing which ‘systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.’ Among the simplest forms of metafiction are moments of direct address to the reader, the framing of a story within a story, and references to the genesis, performance, and the reading of tales. Linda Hutcheson has written that ‘the point of metafiction is that it constitutes its own first critical commentary,’ and the prominence of metafictional moments within recent retellings of myth indicates that the mythological tradition is becoming increasingly self-conscious about its own reception.

The title of this article is borrowed from a line in ‘Melting Point’, in which Xenia Hadzithakis declares that ‘in my version, Icarus is seventeen, like me.’ I am interested in the notion that through engaging with the mythic tradition, contemporary characters are able to refashion myth in their own image. Where other retellings promote different agendas by casting Icarus as a much younger child, in these texts the myth is invested with contemporary currency for young adult readers, with the arcs of Icarus’ flight symbolising the ups and downs of being a teenager.

**Icarus over Australia: Nadia Wheatley’s ‘Melting Point’**

When her Latin teacher asks her to summarise the events that prompt Daedalus and

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4 In Jane Yolen’s *Wings* he is a toddler, which according to Stephens and McCallum ‘effaces any responsibility of Icarus for his own fate’ Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children’s Literature (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1998), 71.
Icarus to flee from Crete, seventeen year old Xenia Hadzithakis responds:

‘Well, Daedalus was this sort of inventor bloke, and he went to Crete, and he built this maze called the labyrinth, so that the king—his name was Minos—could imprison the monster, who was called the Minotaur, that the king’s wife had given birth to after screwing with a bull. Jeez, Miss, imagine …’

Nadia Wheatley’s short story ‘Melting Point’ is one of numerous retellings of the Icarus myth published for children and young adults in the recent decades. However, the way in which it reworks the well-known narrative is quite unique. Where the majority of retellings of this story focus on the moral implications of Icarus’ flight and fall, this text uses the myth as a launching pad to address the universal experiences of homesickness, the longing for freedom, and youthful rebellion.

This article proposes that Wheatley’s text actively interrogates what the myth might mean—if anything—to us today. The contemporary frame narrative, set in a high school classroom in Sydney, draws attention to the status of classical studies within the educational curriculum. When Xenia asks ‘who gives a shit what the maidens did on the island of Crete in the dim dark days of ancient history? This is Newtown, New South Wales, Australia, in the last decade of the twentieth century’, she is acknowledging that the classics are no longer a cornerstone of the academic system. But while conceding that the discipline no longer holds the central, privileged position that it once did, the text promotes the idea that the stories from the ancient world retain relevance on both a personal and a cultural level.

As Xenia’s colloquial summary of the Cretan mythic cycle attests, ‘Melting Point’ engages with the myth from a distinctly Australian perspective, conscious of the fact that this is a story not just from another time but also from the other side of the world. But ultimately the temporal and spatial distance between the ‘dim dark days of ancient history’ and contemporary Sydney is elided, underscoring the continued vitality of myth in modern life. In this way, Wheatley’s work reflects a number of

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5 Wheatley, ‘Melting Point’, 212.
7 Stephens and McCallum, Retelling Stories, 69.
8 Wheatley, ‘Melting Point’, 208.
the preoccupations of the discipline of reception studies. The text pulls back from the primary act of retelling the Icarus legend to consider the tradition of the myth’s reception in its entirety, in the words of Roger Woodard, perpetually ‘reshaped and reenergised by continued retellings’. Through its evocation of the metaphor of translation, and its experimentation with the physical placement of text on a page, ‘Melting Point’ explores the multiform ways in which a story can be told. It is a text with significant implications for the way in which reception scholars, particularly those based in Australia, engage with the legacy of the ancient world and their own relationship to the past.

Xenia is a second-generation, Greek Australian teenager, who is in conflict with her grandmother, a traditional, black-garbed, no ‘speaka da Ingliss’ Yaya. Xenia is a bit wild, a trend setter, who ‘has the best ideas for places to hold parties’, ‘knows where to go to listen to the newest bands’, drinks bourbon, smokes dope and defies authority. Yaya is affronted by her forthrightness, the way she flaunts the school uniform code in her black strappy singlet, tiny miniskirt, fishnet stockings, army boots, and lengths of chunky silver chains around her neck. She wishes her granddaughter could dress and behave more like the retiring young maidens back on Crete.

True to her paradoxical name, which Wheatley reveals was ‘very, very particularly chosen,’ Xenia has an unexpected passion: she is studying Latin. ‘It doesn’t exactly go with my image’ she admits. But following a horrendous fight with Yaya one morning, in which she yelled at the old woman ‘if Crete’s so fucking fantastic, why don’t you go back where you come from?’, Xenia finds resonance, and ultimately solace, in translating Ovid’s version of the story of Icarus, Metamorphoses book 8, lines 183 to 235. By reflecting on, and then drawing connections between, the suffering of the exiles Daedalus and Ovid, one on mythical Crete and the other in Tomis, 

10 Wheatley, ‘Melting Point’, 216.
11 ibid., 209.
12 Xenia derives from a Greek term with the connotations of both ‘friend’ and ‘stranger’. 
14 Wheatley, ‘Melting Point’, 209.
15 ibid. 231.

'Icarus is seventeen, like me': Reworking Myth in Young Adult Fiction
the Black Sea backwater of the Empire, Xenia gains a more sympathetic understanding of her Yaya’s longing for her homeland after forty-four years in Australia.\(^\text{16}\)

Rhonda Bunbury has read ‘Melting Point’ in terms of its representation of multicultural identity.\(^\text{17}\) Although she raises questions about Wheatley’s authority to write from the position of a cultural and ethnic minority (given that she does not have a Greek background)\(^\text{18}\), she commends the text for its avoidance of cultural stereotypes, and for the way it resists a conclusion in which Xenia modifies her identity in order to conform with Yaya’s expectations. After reconciling over a sumptuous feast of Greek food on the school principal’s lawn, Xenia and Yaya plan a trip to Greece, with Xenia insisting she will go as she is, on her own terms. In contrast to her doomed mythic counterpart, Xenia’s future, according to Bunbury, ‘will see her flying high, with confidence and personal power.’\(^\text{19}\)

Multiculturalism is undoubtedly a crucial theme of the text, evoked within the story’s title. This melting point refers not merely to the moment at which Icarus’ wings fall apart but also to the Australian government’s ‘melting pot’ integration policies, in which migrants ‘were expected to give up their own cultures and “assimilate” into Anglo society’.\(^\text{20}\) Using Xenia as a mouthpiece, Wheatley expresses her scepticism for a strategy which essentially involves ‘throwing a whole lot of different ingredients into a pot and turning up the heat till everything melts into a big gluggy mess’.\(^\text{21}\)

The multiple meanings of the title is one aspect of the preoccupation with words and their flexibility throughout ‘Melting Point’. Wheatley has described ‘Melting

\(^{16}\) According to one version of the myth, Daedalus was originally from Athens and was exiled on Crete after killing his nephew. In 8 CE the Emperor Augustus banished Ovid from Rome to Tomis on the shores of the Black Sea. Ovid attributed his exile to *carmen et error* (a ‘poem and a mistake’).

\(^{17}\) Rhonda Bunbury, ‘Old Neighbours, New Visions, at a Melting Point?’ in *Old Neighbours, New Visions*, ed. Maureen Nimon (Adelaide: Centre for Children’s Literature, University of South Australia, 1997), 59–70.

\(^{18}\) Throughout her writing career Wheatley has sought to promote and celebrate Australia’s multicultural identity. Her early works *Five Times Dizzy* (1982) and *Dancing in the Anzac Deli* (1984) both address the experience of Greek emigrants living in the Sydney suburb of Newtown, a setting which she returns to in ‘Melting Point’. Wheatley’s interest in Greek culture can also be traced back to the mid-1970s, when she spent a period living in Greece with her boyfriend Martin Johnston, and researched the life of Johnston’s mother, Charmaine Clift.

\(^{19}\) Bunbury, ‘Old Neighbours’, 64.

\(^{20}\) Wheatley, ‘Melting Point’, 223.

\(^{21}\) ibid., 223.
Point’ as ‘a story about words and language in many ways.’ The text is multilingual, combining lengthy passages of Ovid’s Latin together with phrases of Yaya’s modern Greek. Xenia’s broad Australian vernacular is contrasted with the more formal phrasing of the Latin translation she produces in class. This linguistic web is anticipated in the story’s epigraph, which features a dictionary entry for the term translation, with three definitions supplied:

**translation:** n. (1) The process of turning something (written or spoken) from one language into another; also, the product of this. (2) Transformation, alteration, change. (3) The act of being carried or conveyed to heaven without death.

This passage connects the method of linguistic conversion with the physical transformations implied in Ovid’s retelling. The term is cast as both process and product. Most striking is the third definition, for it does not accurately describe the experience of either Icarus (who categorically falls to his death) or Xenia, who does not fall at all. Instead, it appears to allude to the kind of immortality that is conferred on the characters of mythology. For while Icarus dies, his name and his story endure through continued retellings. In this way, Wheatley references the myth’s enduring afterlife in future transformations.

Wheatley is familiar with the subtleties of translation, having herself studied Latin at school. In an interview with Bunbury, she states that she finds ‘the act of translation in itself soothing, in the way that I think some people like doing crosswords; that is, as a puzzle you can get out.’ She permits Xenia to inherit this experience; the character enjoys translating ‘for its own sake. Doesn’t matter what the text is about, I just like ... puzzling out the meaning’.

The notion of translation as a puzzle is shown in an accurate representation of the way in which a Latin student might go about dissecting a passage:

*Tum lino medias et ceris alligat imas*
*atque ita compositas paruo curuamine flectit*
*ut ueras imitetur aues*

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22 Bunbury, ‘Interview with Nadia Wheatley’, 12.
23 Wheatley, ‘Melting Point’, 207.
Then Daedalus joined (the feathers) together at the centre and base with thread and with wax. And when he had arranged them like this, he bent them round into a gentle curve, so that they would look like (the wings of) real birds.

Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty has commented on the way in which meaning remains fixed, ‘even when the words of the translations change.’ She charts the way in which traditional stories endure through a culture to resonate beyond its borders. In contrast, Jeffrey M. Green has written that ‘the process of translation necessarily entails a certain revision of the original.’ He describes the painstaking, exhaustive decision-making that translators are required to perform:

[we] must weigh every word in the original sentence against near synonyms that might have been used; we must consider the order of the words, the structure of the phrases and clauses, the rhythm and sonority of the language, the level of diction, we must be sensitive to everything.

Although Wheatley glosses over much of the laboriousness of this process, this passage does demonstrate the complexity of the translation act, in which Ovid’s text is broken down into individual phrases, converted into English, and then reconstructed as a syntactically correct paragraph. The layout of these four blocks of text gives them prominence on the page, contrasting with the alignment of the rest of the text along the left hand margin. The careful shaping of this segment foreshadows yet more visually striking passages of concrete poetry, which depict the arcs of Icarus’ flight:

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*ibid.*, 217–18.


29 Green, *Thinking*, 50.
In her article ‘The Ghost of Icarus’, Elizabeth Allen describes ‘how certain ideas, myths and images haunt artists across generations and cultures.’\(^{31}\) She addresses the impact of Pieter Breughel’s renowned painting *The Fall of Icarus* on the work of poets W.H. Auden and William Carlos Williams, exploring how a myth transmutes through a series of textual and visual incarnations. In this passage, Wheatley allows the text itself to assume the shape of a boy with wings, recalling the work of artists who have revelled in the spectacle of Icarus’ flight and fall.\(^{32}\)

Just as Icarus exults in the freedom of flying, of escaping the limitations of gravity, so Wheatley liberates her story from the conventional method of positioning text on a page. For a moment, the words are significant not only for the meaning they connote, but also for their relation to each other and to the white space around them. The reader is no longer required to read from left to right, top to bottom, but is able to approach the text with greater freedom.

This message, focalised here on individual words on the page, extends to the way in which readers of ‘Melting Point’ are invited to engage with the extended tradition of retellings of the story of Icarus and his father. Like the concrete poetry, it too can be accessed from different vantage points. Xenia’s Latin teacher, Ms Boot, frames

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\(^{30}\) Wheatley, ‘Melting Point’, 228.


\(^{32}\) The stark lines of the text contain an echo of Icarus’ bold silhouette in black on blue in Henri Matisse’s renowned painting *Icarus* (1943).
the mythic tradition in straightforward chronological terms, marvelling at Ovid’s achievement in writing ‘something that lasts for two thousand years’. She invokes the ghosts of Ovid and the 1950s scholar Professor Evelyn J. Douglas (whose commentary Xenia is caught with on her lap) as if they sit beside Xenia as she is ‘valiantly labouring away’ at her translation. But behind its codification within Ovid’s seminal treatment lie the myth’s hazy origins as one of Yaya’s paramythi, a fairy tale in the Greek oral tradition. The text seems conscious of the ironies of a myth so centred on the Greek landscape—Xenia traces Icarus’ flight over islands of the Aegean—being preserved in a Latin source, and of a Greek girl encountering the myth not through the traditions of her own culture, but within an Australian classroom. Xenia reads the story of Icarus not as her Yaya’s granddaughter, but as a classicist.

Douglas’ commentary evokes the long tradition of the myth’s critical reception. It is a symbol of the formal, hallowed tradition of Oxbridge classics, utterly remote from the sunny classroom in Sydney. After Douglas’ crib is confiscated, Xenia is free to construct her own version of the myth, fashioning Icarus in her own image: ‘in my version, Icarus is seventeen, like me’. Implicit in this long list of the myth’s retellings is Wheatley’s own version, as well as future, as yet unrealised treatments. In this way, ‘Melting Point’ seems sympathetic to Elizabeth Cook’s notion that a ‘myth “is” everything that it has been and everything that it may become …’

Thus, although the story humorously questions the reasons anyone would want to devote themselves to the study of the classics (even Ms Boot, the Latin teacher, admits ‘[b]eats me as to why’), the text ends up wholeheartedly endorsing the classics as a worthwhile endeavour. Xenia’s year eleven Latin class might be small (it consists of only two students, and the other one is away at choir practice on the day the story is set), yet there is no indication that the subject is under threat due to

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33 Wheatley, ‘Melting Point’, 214.
34 ibid., 209.
35 ibid., 221.
36 ibid., 227.
37 ibid., 219.
such poor enrolments. In fact, the one-to-one teacher-student ratio is celebrated as a valuable learning opportunity. In what is effectively an advertisement for studying classics, Ms Boot introduces Xenia to the more salacious aspects of ancient history, from ‘the political influence of prostitutes in Periclean Athens, the importance of homosexuality in Alexander the Great’s army, [to] grisly murders amongst the later Augustan emperors …’\(^{40}\) Furthermore, Xenia is not really the sole student in the class, for in confronting readers so directly with the Latin language, they must translate alongside her.

Through this experience, the text demonstrates that myth has lost none of its emotional power. As Xenia makes her way through the passage, she becomes so absorbed in the story that she herself takes to the sky: ‘I can see the islands below me as I swoop in flight …’,\(^{41}\) and when Icarus falls to his watery death, she is moved to tears. As she weeps, Xenia experiences her own melting point, her black mascara running down her cheeks. Her affinity with the boy is so powerful that when Ms Boot asks her whether it is the death of Icarus which has upset her, she answers, ‘Yes/no/that and/this morning …’\(^{42}\) Her response, which simultaneously confirms and denies the effect the story has had on her, highlights a further melting point as the line blurs between her own troubles and that of her mythic counterpart.

Wheatley has said that she hoped even if they lacked the ability to understand English, readers would be able to grasp the meaning of the passages of concrete poetry.\(^{43}\) As he falls, Icarus’ final cries to his father fade away to nothing:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Daedalus} \\
\text{Dad Dad Dad}
\end{array}
\]

As with the mutual homesickness shared by Daedalus, Ovid, Yaya and even, in a

\(^{40}\) ibid., 214.  
\(^{41}\) ibid., 227.  
\(^{42}\) ibid., 231.  
\(^{43}\) Bunbury, ‘Interview with Nadia Wheatley’, 12.  
\(^{44}\) Wheatley, ‘Melting Point’, 230.
less serious form, by Xenia when she goes on an overnight Brownie camp, in this moment the specifics of myth are distilled to its purest, most universal form. The phonetic slippage from Daedalus to Dad renders the famous craftsman simply a father, any father, suffering the loss of his child.

This sense of myth’s universality is intensified in the story’s closing scene, in which Xenia and her grandmother escape school to catch the Manly ferry out past the Heads of Sydney Harbour. Looking down into the water, Xenia has a kind of epiphany, in which she realises ‘that, as all the oceans of the world ultimately join together, some of the water here in Sydney Harbour could once have been in that very sea where Icarus fell’. Suddenly, the gulf between contemporary Australia and the ancient Mediterranean is bridged, and the relevance of Icarus’ story in the contemporary age becomes real and immediate. Back in the classroom Xenia was dismissive of the truth of myth, reminding herself that ‘believing in Daedalus would be like believing in the Tooth Fairy’. But by the story’s conclusion, this distinction between myth and reality is harder to distinguish. Through her reconstruction of his flight and fall, and her close identification with him, Xenia has imbued Icarus with a genuine presence.

Charles Martindale has written that at the heart of reception studies is the interrelationship between past and present:

> [a]ntiquity and modernity, present and past, are always implicated in each other, always in dialogue—to understand either one, you need to think in terms of the other.

The moment on the Manly ferry seems to exemplify Martindale’s vision. ‘Melting Point’ is striking not only for its unorthodox way of retelling the Icarus myth, but also for what it reveals about the status of classical studies in the modern age. While acknowledging, often with humour, that the discipline no longer has the vitality it has had in the past, it underscores that the stories from antiquity remain critically relevant today. Xenia’s encounters with Icarus and with the exiled Ovid allow her to

45 Wheatley, ‘Melting Point’, 237.
46 ibid., 213.
empathise with her Yaya and her longing for home. At the same time, her experience of linguistic translation gives her insight into the way in which cultures—including her own—converge and stories develop.

The text’s Australian setting is especially significant, for, as far as I am aware, among the several hundred retellings of Greek myths produced for children in the last few decades, Wheatley’s work is the only one to engage with the questions around why we, on this side of the world, should remain interested in something that happened so long ago and so far away. In this way, ‘Melting Point’ is an exploration of myth’s reception, at once creative and critical.

‘A story about a hero’: Harry and Hortense at Hormone High

‘You weren’t there, Harry and Hortense,’ Jason said finally. ‘You weren’t there to see how much my father loved me when he fitted the wings on to my shoulders ... Then he put on his wings and flew off the cliff encouraging me to follow. I ran and got up enough speed, and I flew off the cliff behind him. I felt wonderful, and I knew we were the first ones in the world ever to fly! Me and my beautiful dad! And as we flew from the cliffs toward our homeland, he kept looking back to see how I was doing, if I was managing my wings in the right way. We passed the island of Samos and Delos with all the white stone lions. I remember the whole thing.’

Where Xenia’s identification with Icarus helped her to empathise and reconnect with her grandmother, in Paul Zindel’s Harry and Hortense at Hormone High (1984) the affinity between modern teenager and mythic character is taken to an extreme, with Jason Rohr, a young schizophrenic, convinced he is the reincarnation of Icarus, returned to save the world. He believes that it is his purpose ‘to lead everyone out of the dark labyrinth’, beginning with the school community of Hormone High, where he has just enrolled. He is troubled by the narcissism, the apathy, and the decadence of modern life, and is certain that the answers to the world’s problems lie in a return to the ways of the ancient Greeks. His evangelical message is ignored by the school’s students and staff with the exception of Harry Hickey and Hortense McCoy who, like Jason, lament the absence of the hero in the modern world. Drawn in by his charisma and the truth of many of his pronouncements, even while troubled

49 Zindel, Harry and Hortense, 33–4
by his delusions of divinity, the pair befriend Jason and do their best to support him. As his behaviour becomes increasingly unpredictable, the school arranges for him to be incarcerated in a nearby sanatorium. Harry and Hortense help him to escape, and he remains in hiding as he completes his hang glider, fashioned out of junk yard scraps, powered by a lawnmower engine and, in homage to his mythic counterpart, covered in white feathers. After blowing up the school office and record room, Jason launches the glider off the school roof. His flight is impressive, but it gets tangled in the cables of the Staten Island Bridge and falls into the river. Harry and Hortense are left struggling to make sense of the death of their friend, but they ultimately find solace in the legacy he leaves behind.

Both *Harry and Hortense* and ‘Melting Point’ feature a school based setting. Hormone High (Harry employs the pseudonym to protect the school’s reputation in light of his exposé) is furnished with the standard trappings of the American high school—mean teachers, bullies on the football team, and horrible cafeteria food. But the story defies the narrative expectations established by this genre, so that these elements are merely a backdrop for the ‘story about a hero’, Jason Rohr. But *Harry and Hortense* is also a story about stories, with metafictional moments exposing the narrative’s construction and execution. Like Wheatley, Zindel is preoccupied with the status of myth in the modern world, but is less concerned with issues of antiquity’s relevance than the way in which myth provides meaning for individuals, communities, and for narrative itself. The text offers a harsh critique of modern society and the sources of its power and suggests that, although many of Jason’s ideas are barmy, he is right in suggesting that antiquity holds the answers for saving the world.

Jason’s attraction to the story of Icarus is a result of severe childhood trauma. When he was six, his father murdered his mother before killing himself. As diagnosed by Hortense, an amateur psychiatrist obsessed with the work of Freud, Jung and the analyst Harry Stack Sullivan, Jason has latched on to the myth as a way of providing himself with the image of a loving parent. When Harry asks her ‘[w]hat would have happened to Jason if he hadn’t read about the myth of Daedalus—if he hadn’t be-

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come Icarus?’ Hortense replies ‘[t]hen he might have been no one at all’. According to John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, Jason has ‘appropriated the Icarus story in order to construct a voice and subject position for himself.’ Although this extreme form of identification is ultimately disastrous, with Jason accidentally re-enacting Icarus’ fatal fall, Zindel appears to be suggesting that an identity shaped by myth is better than no identity at all.

Like ‘Melting Point’, which uses a Latin commentary as an emblem of the myth’s critical reception, *Harry and Hortense* acknowledges the influence of mythology on the fields of psychoanalysis and popular culture by evoking Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Although the work is not explicitly named, Harry’s familiarity with ‘books about the paths heroes have to take’ immediately calls to mind Campbell’s text, in which he explicates the monomyth pattern:

> [a] hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

Harry adopts the structure and language of Campbell’s monomyth to provide a frame for his retelling of the story of Jason’s life and death. He describes their first encounter with Jason as the Call to Adventure, which they deliberate over whether to refuse. Jason’s eccentric Aunt Mo is cast as the ‘little old crone’, who supplies ‘supernatural aid’ in the shape of a car jack which Jason uses to escape from the Sea Vista Sanatorium. Following Jason’s death, Harry is certain that ‘[t]here’s a part missing’ and realises it is the boon, ‘something the hero wins and brings back so the rest of the world can be better’. The story reaches a satisfying conclusion when Harry and Hortense decide that they can be Jason’s boon, committed to pursuing

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52 ibid., 149.
53 Stephens and McCallum *Retelling Stories*, 74.
54 Zindel, *Harry and Hortense*, 86.
56 Stephens and McCallum write that Zindel has ‘transformed the significance of the Icarus myth by mapping it precisely on to Joseph Campbell’s paradigm for the heroic life’, *Retelling Stories*, 74.
58 ibid., 60.
59 ibid., 86.
60 ibid., 148.
their respective talents and to heed the Call to Adventure when it comes again. Their vow to ‘always remember what he was trying to show us’, suggests that Jason’s legacy is to reveal the ways in which myth is integrated into modern life. The use of the archetypal heroic journey as a device to structure narrative is one way in which this is enacted.

*Harry and Hortense* shares with ‘Melting Point’ a self-conscious awareness of storytelling process. Jason’s obsession, ‘*I have a story I need someone to write for me*’, is fulfilled by Harry; readers come to realise that Zindel’s book is the story Jason requested. Metafictional moments occur throughout the text, in which Harry suspends the narrative to remind readers that he is ‘writing this book in the office of the *Bird’s Eye Gazette*’. He is anxious to establish the authenticity of his account, as if concerned that Jason’s madness will corrupt the story: ‘[e]verything in this book is absolutely true. It just *sounds* nuts’.

The story’s preoccupation with text and its presentation is also revealed in the use of a range of different font styles. These serve to imbue the narrative with a form of authenticity, as if Harry has inserted the original documents into his transcript. The missives that Jason distributes throughout the school are printed in italics and conclude with an oversized handwritten signature reading ‘*Icarus, a god*’. His final note, pinned to the school’s front door, reads ‘*No school today! I have a lot of dynamite …*’ The disturbing conclusion is placed over the page: ‘*And am going to blow it up!!! Sincerely, Icarus!!!*’ The increasingly erratic style of his handwriting charts Jason’s descent into madness. When Hortense writes Jason a letter entreaty him to give away his delusions of divinity, it is printed in a contrasting font and signed off with Harry and Hortense’s own large black autographs, which, in stark contrast to Jason’s, are tidy and controlled.

As Harry and Hortense recognise, Jason is deeply disturbed. But his delusions about his divinity aside, his critique of the problems facing the modern world is rational.

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61 ibid., 149.
62 ibid., 21.
63 ibid., 10.
64 ibid., 86.
65 ibid., 137.
66 ibid., 138.
and convincing.\textsuperscript{67} He believes that the corrupting forces of narcissism, immorality, and cynicism mean that ‘[n]o one cares what happens to anyone except himself’.\textsuperscript{68} He laments the lack of community engagement, the death of family life and the worship of the television. His pronouncement that, ‘our country no longer cherishes its children’,\textsuperscript{69} is especially interesting in the context of a novel targeting young readers.

Jason’s plans for saving the world begin with the school, which he is determined ‘to lift ... up to a new level’.\textsuperscript{70} He attacks the school for failing to provide ‘a meaningful curriculum’\textsuperscript{71} complaining that the teachers hide in their offices and have no genuine care for their students. He upholds Aristotle as ‘a great teacher’ who ‘taught his students things they needed to know’, a list which recalls the licentious topics discussed in Xenia’s Latin classes, and finishes with ‘the stories of Homer and mythology, where the secrets of happiness and godliness lie’.\textsuperscript{72} In this way, Zindel uses Jason to promote the revival of classical studies, and myth in particular, within the classroom.

In his final performance, Jason uses stolen dynamite to blow up the school’s main office and record room, leaving the front lawn littered with ‘a mass of burning record cards and syllabi and stockroom supplies and what looked like old curricula’.\textsuperscript{73} This dramatic act recalls Xenia’s own rebellion on the ‘sacred patch of lawn in front of the principal’s office’,\textsuperscript{74} where she takes Yaya to feast on their picnic lunch. But Jason’s explosion is more than a challenge to the school rules; he attacks the physical and symbolic source of the school’s bureaucratic power. The office contains Jason’s own file, ‘crammed with notations and extra documents’,\textsuperscript{75} detailing his history of mental illness and the terrible story of his childhood. In destroying and liberating these documents, leaving them lying for all to read on the lawn, Jason exposes the failure of the school and health system to save him.

\textsuperscript{67} Stephens and McCallum refer to ‘his sane insanity’ in Retelling Stories, 74.  
\textsuperscript{68} Zindel, Harry and Hortense, 32.  
\textsuperscript{69} ibid., 50.  
\textsuperscript{70} ibid., 34.  
\textsuperscript{71} ibid., 73.  
\textsuperscript{72} ibid., 73.  
\textsuperscript{73} ibid., 141.  
\textsuperscript{74} Wheatley, ‘Melting Point’, 234.  
\textsuperscript{75} Zindel, Harry and Hortense, 59.
In addition, the explosion signifies the destruction of the school’s pedagogical model, opening up the possibility of the development of the ‘meaningful curriculum’ which Jason advocated. In this way it represents at once a break with tradition, but also a return to it. As the student body watches Jason fly away from the wreckage in his hang glider, Harry observes that their screams changed from jeers to cheers, ‘as though for the first time we were hearing anyone at Hormone High express something real and good and truthful’.76 Jason’s death is undeniably tragic, but there is a sense that it is not in vain.

In her work *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Julie Sanders has proposed that

> Each moment of reception is individual and distinct, albeit governed by manifold conventions and traditions, by prior knowledges and previous texts: the old story becomes in this respect a very new one, told—and read—for the first time.77

This article has argued that Wheatley’s ‘Melting Point’ and Zindel’s *Harry and Hortense at Hormone High* participate in the reception of the Icarus myth on multiple levels. The way in which these texts refashion the myth is as unique as Sanders suggests. In a testament to the fluidity of the mythic narrative, the relationship between Icarus and his father is cast in very different ways, as a signifier of intergenerational tension in ‘Melting Point’ and as a loving, if imaginary, bond in *Harry and Hortense*. Monika Fludernik has noted the way in which retellings of a traditional narrative invariably ‘focus on quite different aspects of the story’,78 but, in spite of these distinct interpretations, each text expresses an awareness of the possibilities for alternative ways of reading.

Sanders reflects upon the notion of a very old story being reworked as a new one. Children’s literature plays an important role in introducing ancient myth to a new generation, and, in doing so, demonstrates that the myth of Icarus has meaning for modern teenagers. While Jason’s identification with the myth is too extreme, it nonetheless provides him with a framework—indeed the only framework—around

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76 ibid., 141.
which to structure his identity. It does seem important to acknowledge that these
two texts are fast becoming less contemporary—Zindel’s work was published almost
thirty years ago. Yet, in spite of their advancing age, these stories retain significance
for the study of myth, the classics and their reception now and in the future.

Wheatley and Zindel employ fiction to engage in a genuine debate about the cur-
rent status of classical studies within the educational system of the western world.
While ‘Melting Point’ concentrates on the decline of classical languages in Austra-
lian schools, *Harry and Hortense* promotes the revival of ancient world studies as a
strategy for reinvigorating the school system more generally. Marion Gibbs has writ-
ten that ‘[t]he key to the future of classics lies with his teachers,’ 79 and while Jason’s
vision of Aristotle and Socrates as contemporary high school teachers is comical,
his project to make teachers accountable, engaged and interesting is genuine. Xe-
nia’s Latin teacher Ms Boot seems conscious that she is part of a dying breed but is
nevertheless determined to inspire her students to the end.

The image of Daedalus fashioning sets of wings for his son and for himself is rich in
symbolism for the different ways that this story has been pieced together from antiq-
uity to the present day. ‘Melting Point’ describes the wings’ careful construction with
the feathers placed *in ordine*, in a row. 80 This image evokes the long line of retellings
of this story—from Yaya and Ovid to Wheatley and Xenia herself—and grants each
one equal privilege. The wings which Jason fashions are much more chaotic. They
are a ‘junky homemade sort of thing that one really wouldn't want to do any serious
sky gliding in’. 81 But much like the way in which Jason, in spite of his illness, is able
to clearly articulate the problems plaguing modern society, his wings appear hap-
hazard and yet are in fact a sound and sturdy construction.

The scattering of the school documents on the lawn at the end of *Harry and Hortense*
is an evocative signifier of the striking, and at times anarchic, way in which text is
used within these books. Peter Hunt has written that ‘[c]hildren’s books centre on

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79 Marion Gibbs, ‘The Place of Classics in the Curriculum of the Future’ in *The Teaching of Classics*
narrative; in a sense they are *about* narrative.\textsuperscript{82} The self-consciousness about language, storytelling and the appearance of text on paper is part of a significant trend within contemporary retellings of myth written for young readers, one which turns the mythmaking tradition back upon itself.

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\textsuperscript{82} Hunt, *Criticism*, 118.