

## REINVENTING THE CLASSICS: SHAKESPEARE NOW!

The historian Yuval Noah Harari argues that large numbers of strangers only co-operate by a belief in common myths perpetuated in our folk stories and accepted by our religions. These infiltrate into literature and with time, become our guidelines. Though the worlds they describe might be different, they provide a torch for solving present day moral and ethical dilemmas. Immersing students into the great books and ideas of Western civilization is an excellent way of preparing them to meet the challenges of life.

*The Guinness Book of Records* lists over 500 feature-length film and TV versions of Shakespeare. Some remain faithful to the original script. Others blend characters, plots and themes into something ‘new and strange.’ Before I took to writing, I was a high school History and English teacher. Students were often flummoxed by Shakespeare’s wonderful, if archaic language, to the point that plot, character and language became lost in the need to translate.

Some might think me cheeky to attempt to rewrite the classics. But I had already done this twice: once for the middle grade novel ‘**Neptunia**’, and then in the YA verse novel ‘**In Hades**’, both loose adaptations of Homer’s ‘**Odyssey**’. I also wanted to show how timeless Shakespeare is by using vastly different settings.

I began with ‘**The Tempest**’. What if, instead of a magic island, in some distant future, Prospero and Miranda have been exiled by wicked brother Alonso to a spaceship in some lonely part of the universe? What if the only other inhabitants are the aliens Caliban and Ariel? In ‘**The Tryth Chronicles**’ nineteen-year-old Miranda, along with her father Prospero, the rightful director of the Naples2Meta-Planetary-Corporation, has been exiled by her uncle Alonso, to an isolated spaceship. Also on board are Ariel - a Tryth. And Caliban - a Xrobb. Prospero, using Blue Power, creates a tempest of meteors to destroy Alonso’s small spaceship and brings his brother, his nephew Ferdie and those that help run Alonso’s mega company to his giant starship. As in the original play, Miranda and Ferdie fall instantly in love. But Alonso’s subordinates have murder on their minds. And evil Caliban, wanting to make Miranda his bride, steals a tube of Blue Power and flies Ariel and four humans to the beautiful but dangerous planet of Tryth. What happens then tests Miranda’s courage to the limit.

My problem with '**Macbeth**' was relating it from the perspective of a contemporary youngster. It has always struck me that 'overvaulting ambition' is universal, and there are many ways to destroy an opponent apart from daggers, swords, bullets or poison. Our media delights in following the rise and fall of our more brazen business entrepreneurs. And don't many young people have trouble finding employment? In '**Gap Year Nanny**', Merri Attwater is home too early from her gap year, the only work she finds is as a nanny where she develops a crush on her employer, the charismatic Stuart Macbeth. One night she overhears Stuart's ambitious wife Lorna, persuade him to pay three Internet Gurus for advice on becoming more successful. Using Merri as his sounding board, Stuart admits to destroying his old boss Duncan and taking over the company. As the year progresses, Merri's life improves. But Stuart's overwhelming ambitions start to destroy him. What I did change from the original play was allowing Lorna Macbeth, who truly doesn't deserve it, another lease of life.

When it came to the setting of '**Romeo and Juliet**' I found a building in Berlin only rediscovered in 2008. Originally named '*The Hummingbird Restaurant and Theatre*', it reached its full glory in 1920's during the Weimar Republic when Berlin was a centre of cultural Europe but the building fell into disrepute after the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war. Twenties Berlin had enormous creativity, strong divisions between rich and poor, a weak government and too many small and aggressive political parties. So many instances still occur of youngsters from different ethnicities and religions falling foul of their conservative families. In '**Changing History?**' Melbourne based Taylor and her grandfather, visiting Berlin in July 2017, are exploring this old building now turned into an art gallery. Though Taylor wants to audition for entry into tertiary dance schools, she's told she won't make it. Worse still, her two closest friends are betraying her. Hit by a chunk of cornice, she regains consciousness in May 1928. Rom, the *Hummingbird's* junior manager, takes her home to his impoverished family. Now Taylor only survives by dishwashing, clearing tables, sharing a tiny room with dancer Juliet, and eventually joining her troupe. Rom and Juliet are deeply in love. But as they come from different religions, both sets of parents are totally against their marriage. When Taylor hears that Hitler is coming to Berlin, she persuades Juliet and Rom to help her poison him and thus prevent the Holocaust and WW2. But can Taylor really change history?

The Sydney based company Five Senses Education took on *Shakespeare Now!* Three books each averaging 270 plus pages was a mammoth effort, and I worried that a one-fits-all cover would be quickly dismissed. My good fortune was finding the artist Paul Taplin who created some startling results. Now all I can hope is that the youngsters who read these novels will be interested enough to go back to the originals, because there is no way any contemporary author can attempt to reproduce Shakespeare's wonderful poetry.

***'SHAKESPEARE NOW! A TRILOGY'***

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