



WESTERN
PORT
WRITES

WHAT'S THE NARRATIVE?

FESTIVAL PROGRAM

9-11 OCTOBER 2026

OUR PARTNERS

We thank our partners and supporters for their generosity. We could not stage the festival without their backing and encouragement. We are heartened by their interest and commitment to increasing arts access in the Western Port region.

Festival Partners



**MORNINGTON
PENINSULA**
Shire

Community Bank
Bairnaring & District

Bendigo Bank

Somers PAPER
Nautilus

Official Festival Bookseller

PETERSEN'S
BOOKSTORE

Acknowledgement

Western Port Writes acknowledges the Bunurong | Boon Wurrung People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional owners of these lands and the original storytellers. We honour their enduring connection to land and sea and pay our respects to their Elders past and present.

Community Partners



Festival Supporters

Western Port Chamber of Commerce



Community Supporters

Flinders General Store
Somers Residents Association Inc (SRA)

Business Supporters

Diskmandotnet
David Gibbs & Associates
Just Press Print
Mornington Peninsula News Group
The Coast Real Estate
Vineyards by Clarke

Accommodation & Venue Partners

Friends of Coolart
MPSC Venues
Parks Victoria
Sanctuary Inn on Westernport
The Somers General
The Studio Somers

Donations Partner

Australian Cultural Fund

WELCOME

The Committee of Western Port Writes is delighted to launch the 2026 Festival Program – this year's theme is What's the Narrative?

Welcome to Western Port Writes 2026.

This year, we're thrilled to be showcasing wonderful narratives and many talented authors, thinkers, keepers and creators of stories, from Western Port, Mornington Peninsula and beyond. Our theme, *What's the Narrative?*, asks the question, what's behind these stories?

WPW 2026 begins with a memorable **Opening Night** on Friday 9 October, featuring two acclaimed journalists in conversation. **Day One**, Saturday 10 October, brings sessions on nature and the environment; healing gardens; personal journeys; and a panel of expert commentators analysing the state of politics in this election year.

Day Two, Sunday 11 October, dives into the scene of the crime; writing for women across generations; sharing First Nations knowledge; and a final session on the narratives that drive three distinctive novels.

Our **Children's Program** includes sparkly creative fun, followed by a fabulous storytelling panel with three beloved children's authors. It's free for children under 12.

In the lead-up to the festival, we're hosting two **Writing Workshops** for emerging writers on Saturday 19 September.

This year, our festival base is Coolart Wetlands and Homestead – a glorious setting for a weekend of words and creativity. We are delighted to have Petersen's Bookstore with us as official festival bookseller.

Our thanks to the many who help us bring the festival to life – but especially the talented writers joining us; our exceptional committee and dedicated volunteers; and you, our audience, with your enthusiasm and love of reading.

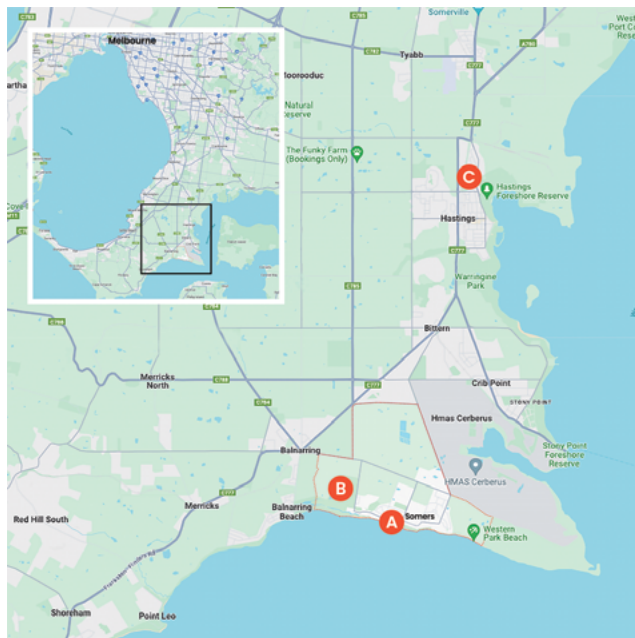
We began Western Port Writes to share stories, build a community of readers and writers, and create an accessible literary festival in our region. We hope you will join us in this celebration of words. Book your favourite sessions – or come to every event. See you there!

Sally Holdsworth, Festival Director
and the Western Port Writes Committee

Key to events

- Workshop
- Panel
- Conversation
- Special event

LOCATION & VENUE



Map data © Google 2026

Getting there

Festival venues can be reached by car or public transport. Travel time from Melbourne is approximately 1 hour.

Public Transport: Take the Frankston line to Frankston Railway Station, then Bus Route 782, stopping at Somers (Coolart Wetlands stop). Then walk from main gate to Visitor Centre (approximately 400 metres).

By car via Peninsula Link: Follow East Link (M3) to Peninsula Link (M11), take the Balnarring exit (C784). Follow signs to Balnarring and Somers.

By car via Western Port Highway: Follow the Monash Freeway (M1) to the South Gippsland Highway (A780) to Hastings. Follow signs from Hastings to Somers.

Festival venues

A Opening Night

The Somers General

2 The Boulevard,
Somers 3927

B Day 1 and Day 2

Coolart Wetlands and Homestead

40 Lord Somers Road,
Somers 3927

Car park onsite

Homestead Accessibility:

Via firm gravel paths and small ramps

Observatory Accessibility:

Via stairs or firm, gently sloping gravel path

Full accessibility details at
[Parks Vic/Coolart webpage](#)

C Lead-up Events

Writing Workshops Saturday 19 September

Hastings Community Hub

1973 Frankston-Flinders
Road, Hastings 3915

SPECIAL EVENTS

OPENING NIGHT AT THE SOMERS GENERAL

6.00pm – 8.30pm

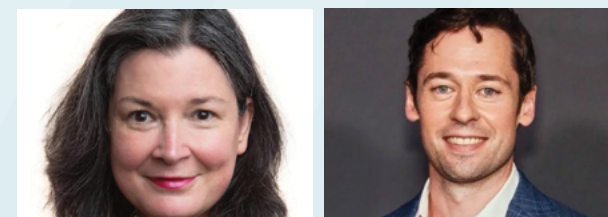


FRIDAY 9 OCTOBER

The Two of Us

She was his editor and he was her star reporter. In this revealing conversation the first female editor of *The Age*, **Gay Alcorn**, and one of Australia's most significant investigative reporters, **Nick McKenzie**, talk about journalism, power and friendship.

Join us for a memorable evening as we launch WPW26, and hear these powerhouse journalists in conversation. Enjoy casual, light fare, with grazing platters and bowl food. Drinks are available for purchase.



CHILDREN'S SESSION AT COOLART VISITOR'S CENTRE

12.30pm – 1.30pm

Children to be
accompanied by
an adult

Join Faery
Emily for sparkly
creative fun,
11am – 12pm

SUNDAY 11 OCTOBER

Wild Child – Wander and Wonder

Children are invited to meet three favourite authors! Join **Andrea Rowe** as she uncovers all the colours of the bush in her new book, *On A Bushwalk*. **Toni D'Alia** explores the busy world of frogs in *Frogs Are Our Friends*. And count the fairies in the forest with **Sheila Knaggs**, reading from her new book, *Fairy Forest*.

Free for children under 12. Bookings essential.



PROGRAM

Day 1

SATURDAY 10 OCTOBER

9.45am – 10am

**Coolart
Observatory**

Festival Opening and Welcome to Country

Official festival opening, with Welcome Ceremony by Bunurong and Palawa woman **Jillian West**.

10am – 11am

**Coolart
Observatory**



When Nature Speaks

Humanity's relationship with nature is complex: driven by both harmful exploitation and urgent conservation. As biodiversity declines and wildlife are impacted, **Chris Flynn**, **Josh Neille** and **Dr Kylie Soanes** examine our dependence on ecosystems and the ways we impact them. Moderated by **Tracee Hutchison**.

11.30am – 12.30pm

**Coolart
Observatory**



The Wisdom of Gardens

Gardens enrich our lives in many deeply satisfying ways, from nourishing harvests and outdoor exploration to fostering connection, wellbeing and mental health. **Caroline Parker** and **Jac Semmler** reflect on the power of nature for individuals and communities with **Michael McCoy**.

12.30pm – 1.30pm

Lunch (Lunch boxes available for pre-order online)

1.30pm – 2.30pm

**Coolart
Observatory**



Our Duet

From different beginnings to a shared life together, **Sami Shah** and **Kylie Moore-Gilbert** reflect on the experiences that shaped them and the journey that brought them together. Exploring resilience, identity, love and belonging, this compelling conversation offers unique personal insights, moderated by **Belinda Hawkins**.

3pm – 4pm (panel)
4pm – 4.30pm (Q&A)

**Coolart
Observatory**



SPECIAL EVENT: A Nation at the Crossroads

In this Victorian election year we look at the forces reshaping Australian politics. Faced with economic uncertainty, cost-of-living pressures and debates about multicultural identity, traditional centrist politics are being challenged alongside a rise in populism. A timely discussion between **Sumeyya Ilanbey**, **Paul Strangio** and **Tony Barry**, moderated by **Gay Alcorn**. This session includes an extended audience Q&A with our expert commentators.

4.45pm – 5.30pm

The Barracks

Epilogue

Chat with fellow festival goers, mingle with the committee and enjoy complimentary refreshments to finish the day.

Day 2

SUNDAY 11 OCTOBER

10am – 11am

**Coolart
Observatory**



The Scene of the Crime

The scene of the crime is more than a distinctive backdrop. Setting and place assume a character-like role in crime novels, whether outback, urban or international. **Mate Antolos**, **Victoria Brownlee** and **Garry Disher** discuss how place shapes scenes, influences characters and drives plot lines, with moderator **Irma Gold**.

11am – 12pm

Coolart Garden

CHILDREN'S EVENT

Sparkly creative fun with **Faery Emily**

11.30am – 12.30pm

**Coolart
Observatory**



The Ages of Women

Jacinta Parsons chats with **Kate Legge**, **Kate Mildenhall** and **Lisa Moule** on writing about women across generations, life stages and gear changes, as women's lives reshape over time. The challenges and highs, how they write their stories about women – and the memorable female characters that populate them.

12.30pm – 1.30pm

Lunch (Lunch boxes available for pre-order online)

12.30pm – 1.30pm

Visitor Centre

CHILDREN'S SESSION

Wild Child – Wander and Wonder

1.30pm – 2.30pm

**Coolart
Observatory**



First Knowledges

First Nations knowledges are holistic, place-based systems of understanding developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples over 80,000 years. **Tyson Yunkaporta** and **Claire G. Coleman** talk to **Shelley Ware** on how Indigenous knowledge can inform Western knowledge in this rapidly changing world.

3pm – 4pm

**Coolart
Observatory**



What's the Narrative?

Three compelling novels. Each explores love, loss and grief, using the natural world to powerfully frame their characters' interior landscapes. **Melissa Manning**, **Claire Thomas** and **Michael Winkler** discuss 'what's driving the narrative' in their novels, with moderator **Angela Savage**.

4.15pm – 5pm

The Barracks

Postscript

Join us for light refreshments as we thank our volunteers and everyone who has been part of WPW26.

SPEAKERS & PRESENTERS



Gay Alcorn

Gay is a senior writer with *Good Weekend* magazine. She is a former editor of *The Age*, a former Washington correspondent and investigative reporter. She is a three-time Walkley Award winner and now sits on the Walkley Advisory Board.



Victoria Brownlee

Currently based on the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria is an international food writer and editor. She started food writing a decade ago as a blogger, then the Food & Drink Editor at *Time Out Shanghai*. Her latest novel, a mystery, is *The Writers Retreat*.



Garry Disher

Garry was raised on a South Australian farm, lives on the Mornington Peninsula, and is an award-winning author of 60 books. His latest is *Mischance Creek* (2025). In 2023 he received the Australian Crime Writers Association's lifetime achievement award.



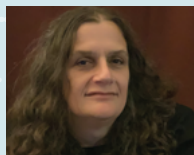
Irma Gold

An award-winning author, Irma has published acclaimed novels, *The Breaking* and *Shift*, short fiction, and children's books (her seventh forthcoming). She works as a freelance editor, and co-hosts the writing podcast *Secrets from the Green Room*.



Mate Antolos

Peninsula-based author Mate studied business and textile engineering before working in family enterprises. Following his parents' deaths, he turned to writing, publishing three novels, including *The Fall* (2025) and *The Child Soldiers of Melbourne* (2026).



Claire G. Coleman

Claire is a Wirloimin Noongar writer of widely published fiction, non-fiction, verse and art criticism. Her novels are *Terra Nullius*, *The Old Lie* and *Enclave*, and she wrote an award winning non-fiction book *Lies, Damned Lies*.



Chantelle Doulis

Chantelle owns Petersen's Bookstore Hastings (our festival bookseller) and is a passionate reader, runner, mum and community volunteer. Raised by book-loving women, she has always been immersed in reading and is rarely without several books on the go.



Belinda Hawkins

Belinda is a Walkley award-winning journalist whose 40-year career reporting from around the world with SBS and ABC included 22 years on *Australian Story*. Her book, *Every Parent's Nightmare*, follows the case of a young Australian found guilty of murder in Bulgaria, revealing the murky underbelly of the former Soviet satellite.



Tony Barry

With over 30 years' expertise advising government, media and corporate leaders across Australia, NZ and the UK, Tony is a respected political commentator, podcast co-host (*Back to Back Barries*) and election analyst. He specialises in strategy, campaigns, communications, research and risk management.



Toni D'Alia

Toni is an award-winning and CBCA-recognised Australian children's author whose internationally published books entertain, empower and educate. She loves to write heartwarming picture books, including *Frogs Are Our Friends*, which children and families can share and treasure.

Credit: Kinfolk Imagery Tenneill Golling



Chris Flynn

Based in regional Victoria, originally born in Belfast, Chris is the award-winning author of adult and children's fiction. His work has been shortlisted for major literary prizes, winning multiple awards, including Best Horror Novel 2025 for *Orpheus Nine*.



Tracee Hutchison

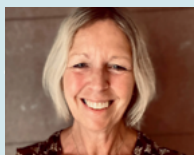
Tracee is a trailblazing broadcaster, journalist, author, filmmaker, and environmental advocate with a 40-year global media career. She is the former Chair of Green Music Australia and contested the Nepean by-election in May 2026 as an Independent Candidate.

SPEAKERS & PRESENTERS



Sumeyya Ilanbey

Sumeyya is a state political reporter for *The AFR* and has won Walkley and Quill awards for her journalism. Writing for leading national newspapers, she recently published a biography titled *Daniel Andrews: The revealing biography of Australia's most powerful premier*.



Sheila Knaggs

Born in Liverpool and with her childhood spent on the Isle of Man, Sheila now lives on the Mornington Peninsula. Her bestselling debut picture book, *Fairy Beach*, was shortlisted for the 2025 ABIA's, with *Campfire Kisses* and *Fairy Forest* released this year.



Kate Legge

Kate is an award-winning journalist and author of five books, including novels, essays, biography and memoir. *The Unexpected Elements of Love* was longlisted for the Miles Franklin, and *Delicious* was published in March 2026. Kate is now researching a political biography.



Michael McCoy

Michael is a garden designer, author, international tour guide and host of ABC TV's *Dream Gardens*. He has published three books on garden design, written for the press for over 35 years, and his design work has featured in publications worldwide.



Nick McKenzie

Acclaimed investigative journalist Nick is best known for his exposés of former SAS soldier Ben Roberts-Smith and corruption in the construction union. He is a reporter with *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *60 Minutes*. His book, *Crossing the Line: The inside story of murder, lies and a fallen hero*, was published in June 2023.



Kate Mildenhall

Kate is the author of four novels, including *The Hiding Place*, and much-loved children's book *To Stir With Love*. She has been shortlisted and longlisted for major Australian awards, and was co-host of *The First Time* podcast.

Credit: Gemma Carr Photography



Kylie Moore-Gilbert

A published author, founder of advocacy group AWADA, Kylie is also a writer, political science academic and research fellow. In 2022 she published her memoir, *The Uncaged Sky: My 804 Days in an Iranian Prison*.



Melissa Manning

Melissa is an Australian writer whose debut novel, *Frogsong*, was published in 2026. Her award-winning story collection, *Smokehouse*, won the 2022 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Fiction, and her short works are widely published, including internationally.



Lisa Moule

Lisa's debut novel, *The Mother of All Calamities*, was published in 2026. An award-winning short story writer, she has won or been shortlisted for major Australian literary prizes and co-hosts 3CR's *Published or Not*.



Josh Neille

Josh is a family-driven wildlife carer based in Victoria, dedicating his life to rescuing animals, with a particular love for wombats. Josh believes in actively involving kids in wildlife care to foster compassion, awareness, and a lifelong connection to the natural world.



Caroline Parker

A degree-qualified herbalist, author, award-winning tea blender, and the voice behind *The Cottage Herbalist*, Caroline Parker is based in Central Victoria. She shares this knowledge through hands-on workshops, foraging walks, and her internationally released book *The Medicinal Garden*.



Jacinta Parsons

A radio broadcaster and writer from Melbourne, Jacinta has worked at Triple R, Double J, ABC Radio Melbourne and ABC Radio National. She has released three books, her most recent in 2025, *A Wisdom of Age*.

SPEAKERS & PRESENTERS



Andrea Rowe

Andrea is a bestselling picture-book author whose stories celebrate nature, curiosity and emotional growth. Her books include *Jetty Jumping* and several CBCA Notable titles. She is a Victorian Public Libraries ambassador and May Gibbs Fellow.



Angela Savage

Angela is an award-winning writer and CEO of Public Libraries Victoria. She holds a PhD in Creative Writing and recently co-edited and contributed to *Spinning Around: The Kylie Playlist*, inspired by Kylie Minogue's songs.



Jac Semmler

Jac is an internationally recognised horticulturist and director of the award-winning Super Bloom plant practice. Jac's guiding mission is 'plants for the people', leading her to create dynamic living delight through planting design, high-skill horticulture, and plant x art projects.

Credit: Sarah Pannell



Sami Shah

Sami is a multi-award winning comedian, writer, journalist and broadcaster. He is curator of the OzAsia Festival's Weekend of Words, contributor to *Crikey*, host of the *News Weakly* podcast and lecturer in journalism at University of Melbourne.

Credit: Ben Clark Imagery



Kylie Soanes

Kylie is an urban ecologist, conservation scientist and science communicator, helping make cities better places for wildlife. Through innovative research, practical projects and engaging communication, she works with communities to protect and reconnect nature in urban environments.



Paul Strangio

Emeritus Professor of Politics at Monash University and award-winning scholar Paul is a political historian, author and editor of more than a dozen books on Australian politics specialising in political leadership.



Claire Thomas

A Naarm/Melbourne writer, Claire's novels include *The Performance*, longlisted for the Miles Franklin Award, and *Fugitive Blue*, winner of the Dobbie Award. Her third novel, *On Not Climbing Mountains*, was supported by a writing residency in Switzerland.



Shelley Ware

A proud Yankunytjatjara, Kokatha and Wirangu woman, Shelley is an educator, AFL media presenter, Indigenous Literacy Foundation Lifetime Ambassador, author and advocate. She champions First Nations voices, literacy, cultural understanding and opportunities for young people.

Credit: SBS. Aaron Wan



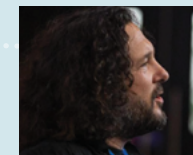
Jillian West

Jillian West is a proud Bunurong woman from Point Nepean and Palawa from the Bass Strait islands. She supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in work, education and their life journey, to give them a voice through mentoring, employment and education.



Michael Winkler

Michael Winkler writes fiction and non-fiction; *Grimmish* was shortlisted for the 2022 Miles Franklin Award, and *Griefdog* was published in 2026. He won the Calibre Prize for 'The Great Red Whale', and his work is widely published and anthologised.



Tyson Yunkaporta

Tyson belongs to the Apalech Clan in Far North Queensland, is a researcher at Deakin University and author of the *Sand Talk* trilogy. He investigates complex issues of global catastrophic risk using Indigenous systems of knowledge and methods of inquiry.

LEAD-UP EVENTS: WORKSHOPS

SATURDAY 19 SEPTEMBER

WORKSHOP 1

11am – 12.30pm
**Hastings
Community Hub**



The Craft of Short Stories

There's an art to creating a compelling short story. Join award-winning writer Melissa Manning to discover the elements of an engaging story. In this workshop Melissa will focus on building a convincing narrative, a persuasive story arc, and creating characters with depth – all in short form. The workshop includes writing exercises to help refine your technique and captivate readers.

Melissa Manning's debut interlinked story collection, *Smokehouse*, won the 2022 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Fiction, and was shortlisted for the University of Southern Queensland Steele Rudd Award.

Her award-winning stories have been published widely, including in *The Best Small Fictions* (US), *To Carry Her Home* (UK), *Award Winning Australian Writing* and *Overland*.

WORKSHOP 2

1pm – 2pm
**Hastings
Community Hub**



Writing Romance

Have you dreamed of writing romance? Join Ali Berg and Michelle Kalus, co-authors of four romance novels, and hear their tips on how to craft authentic characters and build chemistry; the impact of a compelling narrative; romance genres and tropes; and the road to publication. The workshop will include writing exercises and Q&A.

Ali Berg and Michelle Kalus, best friends since primary school, are the co-founders of Australian social initiative Books on the Rail, where they leave books on public transport for people to read. They are co-authors of four novels, including *The Book Ninja* (2018) and *While You Were Reading* (2019). Their third novel, *Fancy Meeting You Here*, was released in December 2021, and their latest novel, *Love Overdue*, was published in 2025.

TICKETING

Limited day passes* available for Saturday and Sunday. Tickets available via the Festival website.

Festival

Friday Opening Night	\$60
Saturday Day Pass	\$100 (all sessions)
Sunday Day Pass	\$95 (all sessions except children's)
Single Tickets	\$25
Concession Tickets	\$20 full-time students and concession card holders
Children's Sessions	Free for children under 12 (tickets must be booked)
A Nation at the Crossroads/Q&A	\$30 (Saturday 3pm)
Lunch Boxes	Available for pre-order online

Workshops

Workshop 1	\$25 (\$20 concession)
Workshop 2	\$25 (\$20 concession)
Workshop Day Pass	\$45 (\$40 concession)

*Day passes available until sold out.

Committee

Festival Director
Sally Holdsworth

Program, Events, Schools
Karina Smith, Program Director
Chantelle Doulis
Belinda Hawkins
Sally Holdsworth

Finance & Operations
Marg Tilleard, Treasurer
Ro Dowling, Sponsorships
Claire Gustavsson, Logistics
Olivia Randall, Logistics
Marnee Wills, Coolart
Julie McInnes, Volunteers

Website & Marketing
Tilly Fay
Bronwen Gibbs
Sally Holdsworth

Festival Artwork
Tilly Fay

Program Design
Elise Hassett

Western Port Writes is auspiced
by Somers Paper Nautilus
(ABN: 76 943 277 318)

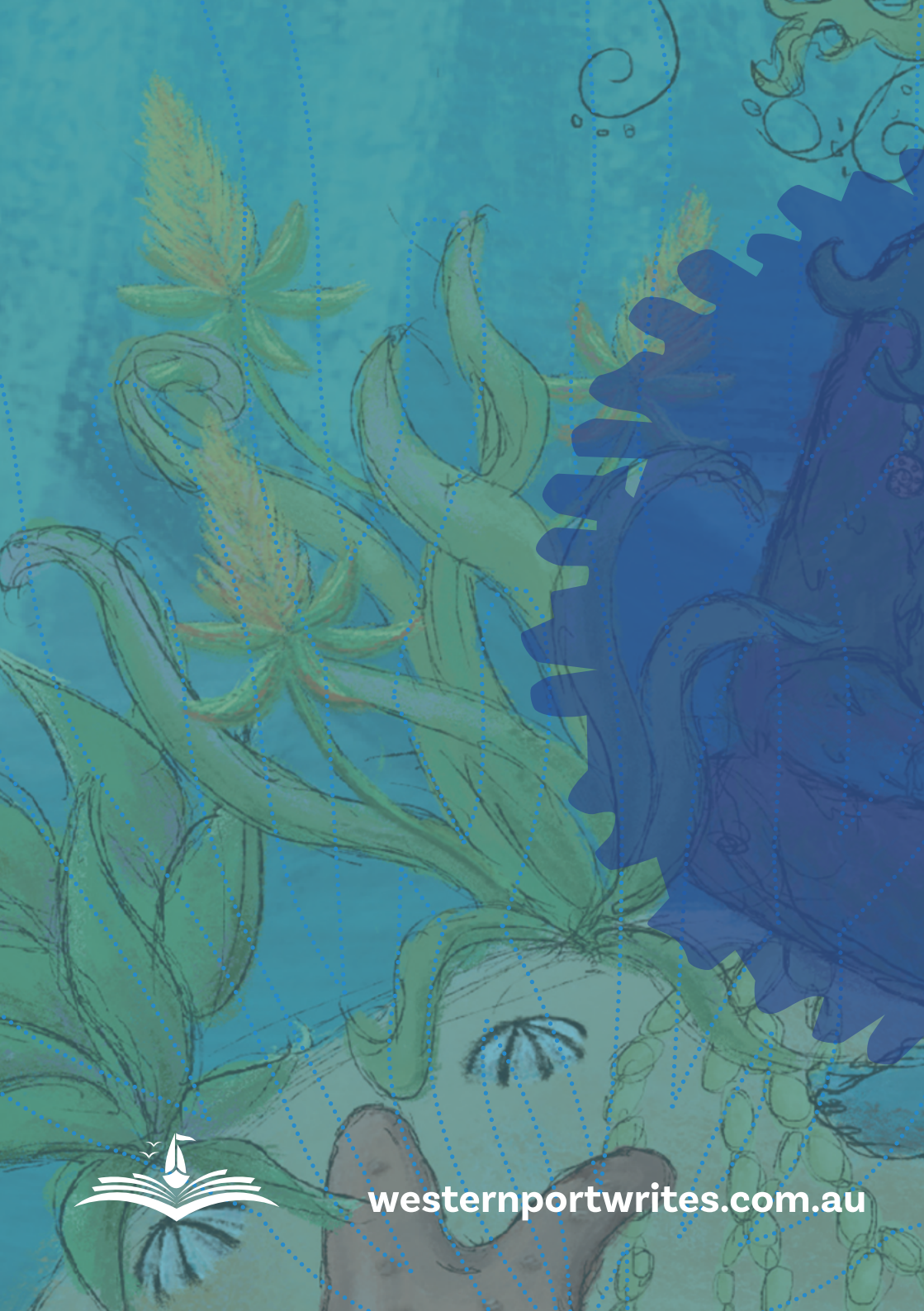
Connect online

@westernportwrites

Western Port Writes

westernportwrites.com.au





westernportwrites.com.au