



**School: School of Creative Industries**

**Researcher: C. J. Skuse**

**Project Title: Absurdity and Reality in YA Fiction**

**UOA: 27 - English Language and Literature**

## Research Statement

Skuse's research employs absurdity and humour in the exploration of the complexities and realities of young people's experiences and inner lives. The presence of absurdity and humour in the narrative supports the reader as they confront dark and difficult subjects. A leading UK publisher explains the sophistication of this approach:

C.J. Skuse uses black humour and comedy to deflate pretensions and realities, and by showing the absurd and upsetting nature of reality, enables her characters to expose the truth behind growing up in today's world. Humour has always been an important part of how younger children's books show truth – but C.J. Skuse, by using it in YA and teenage contexts, exposes (and I believe rationalises) modern living to its fundamental nonsenses of pretension and artifice.

Skuse's exploration and examination of absurdity and reality are evident in her YA novels *Monster* (2015) and *The Deviants* (2016). In *Monster*, the absurdity hinges on melding the conventions of a boarding school novel with an escaped-beast horror story. The reality Skuse is seeking to uncover through this narrative is achieved by asking the reader to determine the identity of the real monster. In *The Deviants*, the exploration of absurdity and reality is rooted in Skuse's subversion of the *Famous Five* novels, and her determination to ask what happens when children grow up and have to face difficult truths about the world.

The shift from childhood to adulthood is a continuing theme in Skuse's work, with a particular interest in what happens when individuals are forced to leave childhood behind too soon, through traumatic events or the discovery of painful secrets. In facing the realities of the adult world, Skuse stresses the complexity of her protagonists. People are not good or bad, but full of contradictions; the bullies are damaged people who have encountered difficulties and have issues of their own; the protagonists are flawed, multifaceted individuals.

Skuse also offers hope to her readers, in spite of the difficulties her characters

encounter. By placing her characters in challenging situations and showing how they deal with them, Skuse shows her readers how we can find the strength to face things. In exploring the bond between the protagonist and her (absent) brother, *Monster* examines the impact that people in your life have on you and how you can gain certain beliefs and characteristics from your encounters with them. Skuse tells the reader, you can draw strength and knowledge from the people you know, and those you have known, even when they are not with you.

Skuse's research is embedded in her practice; through the process of writing discoveries are made about character's true motivations and the underlying themes of the story. In the writing of *Monster*, the nature of the monster changed – from a 'Beast of Bodmin' type creature, to escaped criminal, to male predator, through to the final realisation and identification of the 'Monster' referred to in the title of the book. Similarly, *The Deviants* starts with the discovery of a body on a beach, and it was only through the process of writing that Skuse uncovered the identity of that body, and realised the implications this had for her narrative.

The structure of Skuse's novels embraces this process of discovery and revelation, allowing readers to ask questions and formulate theories about the true nature of events as they travel through the story alongside its protagonists. Through this active involvement in the narrative, readers gain more empathy for the characters and, in turn, reflect on their own inner lives and the realities of the people around them.