

Review of *May Street Stories* by Carmel Davies.

by Jodie Whitehurst

When I recently became aware that Urban Lyrebirds were releasing a new series of readers for adult EAL learners, I was genuinely excited. I have long been a huge fan of their brilliant *Sing with Me* series and the equally fabulous *Passages* books, thus my expectations were high. I am delighted to report that *May Street Stories*, a collection of six readers written by Carmel Davies, have exceeded my expectations.

At first glance, these books, beautifully illustrated by Veronica Dixon, are aesthetically compelling with vibrant colours and thoughtful design elements. The cover of each of the six readers features its key characters and, along the spine, a motif of cultural significance to that particular story. Upon closer observation, as you leaf through the pages, it becomes apparent that these motifs reappear in the illustrations throughout the books on characters' t-shirts, crockery or other items. Such appealing design is sure to draw our learners in immediately.

The *May Street Stories* are rich in themes which are relevant to adults learning EAL in Australia. The overarching theme of the series is that of community, as illustrated by the way in which its characters frequently help their neighbours in need. Other topics explored within the stories include: making friends, learning English, workplace rights, racism, emergencies, indigenous Australians, food allergies, responding to crime and managing technology in the lives of teenagers. Such themes have enormous potential for inspiring class discussion and writing. Additionally, for students who may have recently arrived in Australia, many of these issues are key to their settlement.

An exploration of a wealth of cultures has clearly been a major focus for Davies in the creation of these stories. Within the setting of the books, a block of flats on May Street, the residents hail from diverse cultural backgrounds. As each story begins, we learn the origin of its characters and are immediately presented with the geographical location via a map. Additionally, important aspects of each culture are embedded within the storylines. These include references to food, customs, such as an Ethiopian coffee ceremony, and national animals such as New Zealand's kiwi. Another example of multiculturalism being embraced is in Book 5, *Where's my bike?*, in which the Brazilian character, Rafael, addresses his partner, Angela, as 'Querida', a term of endearment in the Portuguese language. With the characters being not only culturally diverse, but spanning across a wide range of ages and occupations, from students to council workers to grandparents caring for their grandchildren, it is likely that learners will make personal connections to their own experiences.

The layout of the stories is engaging and user-friendly with a good balance of text and illustrations on each page. While the stories are written in prose, all the dialogue is presented in a scripted format. This immediately sets the scene for students to read the dialogue aloud and offers enormous potential for roleplay and other drama-based activities that a teacher may wish

to utilise in the lesson. The language is well-pitched for post-beginner learners of English, presenting a colourful and useful range of vocabulary and appropriate tenses. In addition, the inclusion of colloquial terms, such as 'guy' and '24/7', enhances the authenticity of the dialogue. Whilst the stories are simple enough to be accessible to new learners, they are rich with dramatic tension, which will undoubtedly motivate and intrigue readers. The positive outcomes and messages within the stories are also likely to be well-received.

Much like other Urban Lyrebirds resources, each of the *May Street Stories* contains a set of activities to be completed by the students. These include comprehension questions, sentence ordering tasks and discussion topics. Such exercises instantly provide teachers with an excellent basis for exploring the stories in greater depth.

Given how thoughtfully written and designed the *May Street Stories* readers are, I am personally very inspired to use them with my students. I feel sure that the language development, conversation and enjoyment to be gained from reading and exploring these texts will be significant. It is worth noting that in addition to the printed texts, PDF versions can be purchased and accompanying audio tracks are also freely available on the Urban Lyrebirds website. Congratulations to author, Carmel Davies, and illustrator, Veronica Dixon on the publication of these outstanding resources.