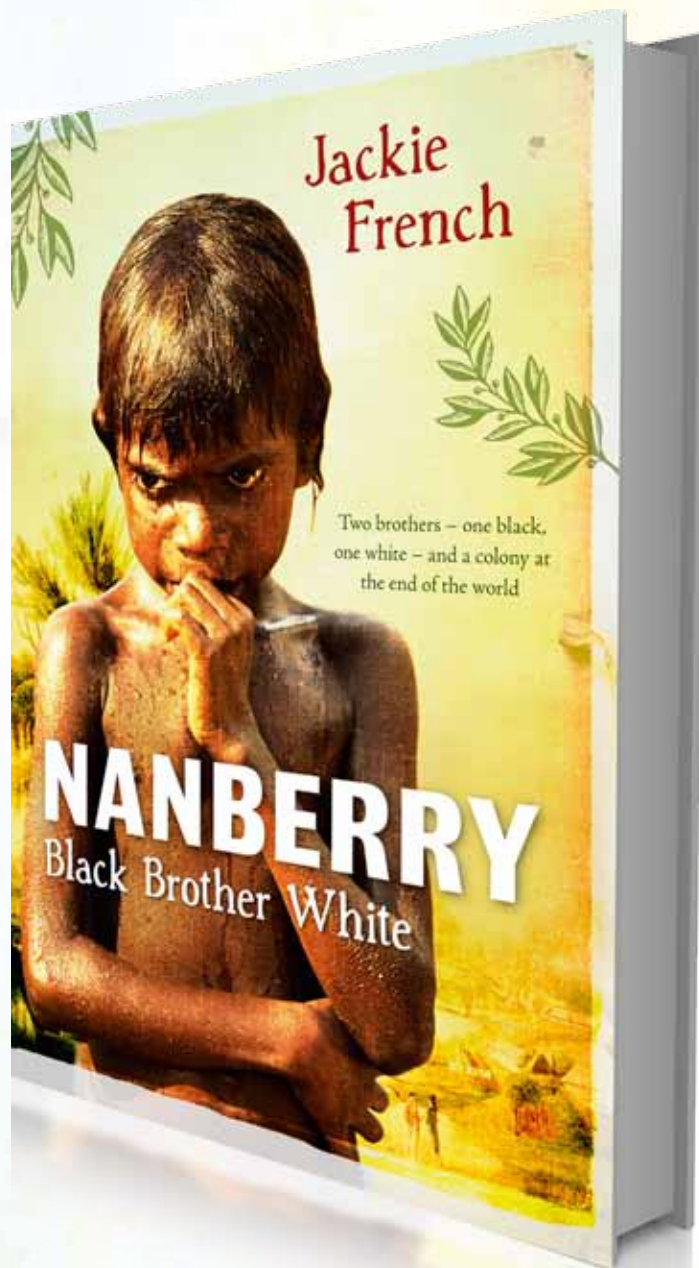


viewpoint

on books for young adults

vol 19 no 3

spring 2011



Two brothers - one black,
one white - and a colony
at the end of the world

Viewpoint

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in this issue...

Feature Articles

Pink and Blue and Read All Over	Malcolm Tattersall <i>et al</i>	2
Pippi at the Mid-Life Crossroad	Edel Wignell	7
Not the Book I Meant to Write	Vikki Wakefield	9
<i>All I Ever Wanted</i> by Vikki Wakefield	Pam Horsey	10
Ghosts, Timeslip & Talismans	Belinda Murrell	11
<i>The Ivory Rose</i> by Belinda Murrell	Stella Lees	12
Taking the Reader Seriously: Mike Shuttleworth	Jeff Prentice	13

Feature Reviews

<i>Nanberry</i> by Jackie French	Fran Knight	15
<i>The Taste of Apple</i> by James Laidler	Blair Mahoney	16
<i>The Dream of the Thylacine</i> by Margaret Wild & Ron Brooks	Mike Shuttleworth	17
<i>A Monster Calls</i> by Patrick Ness & Siobhan Dowd	Bernadette Welch	18
<i>A Pocketful of Eyes</i> by Lili Wilkinson	Anna Ryan-Punch	19
<i>Playground</i> compiled by Nadia Wheatley & illustrated and designed by Ken Searle	Peter Christiansen	20
<i>The Bridge</i> by Jane Higgins	Bill Wootton	22
<i>Sensitive Creatures</i> by Mandy Ord	Mario La Marca	23
<i>Scorpia Rising</i> by Anthony Horowitz	Sam Franzway	24
<i>POD</i> by Stephen Wallenfels	Elizabeth Braithwaite	25

Short Story

<i>Loving Ruby Red</i> by Kate Mani		26
-------------------------------------	--	----

Feature Reviews

<i>Beauty Queens</i> by Libba Bray	Susan La Marca	28
<i>Vinnie's War</i> by David McRobbie	Emma ten Eyk	28
<i>Alaska</i> by Sue Saliba	Suzanne Rofe	29
<i>Black Painted Fingernails</i> by Steven Herrick	Ruth Starke	30
<i>David</i> by Mary Hoffman	Jodi Wiley	31
<i>Cloaked</i> by Alex Flinn	Miffy Farquharson	32
<i>The Glass Collector</i> by Anna Perera	Liam Frost-Camilleri	33
<i>The Grasshopper's Run</i> by Siddharta Sarma & <i>The Midnight Palace</i> by Carlos Ruiz Zafon	Margaret Kett	34
<i>Little Sister</i> by Aimee Said & <i>What Happened to Goodbye</i> by Sarah Dessen	Jenny Zimmerman	35
<i>Silvermay</i> by James Moloney	Pam Macintyre	36
<i>My Mother's Eyes</i> by Mark Wilson & <i>I am Thomas</i> by Libby Gleeson & Armin Greder	Sarah Mayor Cox	37
<i>Gamerunner</i> by BR Collins	Eddie La Marca	38
<i>A Waltz for Matilda</i> by Jackie French & <i>Taj and the Great Camel Trek</i> by Rosanne Hawke	Tony Thompson	39
<i>Mean Streets</i> by Graham Marks	Liz Derouet	40
<i>Ministry of Pandemonium</i> by Chris Westwood, <i>Troubletwisters</i> by Garth Nix & Sean Williams & <i>The Secret Kingdom</i> by Jenny Nimmo	Bec Kavanagh	41
<i>Stresshead</i> by Allayne Webster & <i>Sisterhood Everlasting</i> by Ann Brashares	Diana Hodge	43

Young Readers' Viewpoint

43

Book and Audio Notes

47

Index

52

volume 19 number 3 Spring 2011

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The Dream of the Thylacine
Margaret Wild & Ron Brooks
Allen & Unwin
9781742373836 \$29.99hb

In recent times it almost seems Ron Brooks's picture books have been rationed. Late last year there came the generous, revealing and invaluable memoir *Drawn from the Heart*. If it has been a while between picture books, there is still the inexhaustible legacy of those books that made Brooks's name and reputation as Australia's finest picture book maker. *The Bunyip of Berkeley Creek* prepares to celebrate forty weird and wonderful years, while *John Brown, Rose and Midnight Cat* (both texts by Jenny Wagner) remains as mysterious and affecting after thirty-five years. Children may grow up quickly, but great children's picture books endure.

For the celebrated picture book *Fox*, Brooks created a set of searing images to depict Margaret Wild's story of trust, betrayal and hope. Likewise, *Old Pig* (again the text by Margaret Wild), speaks not only to the vulnerable child, but to the knowing adult and to all readers that have lost a parent, a grandparent.

'Who in the world am I?' wondered Alice as she navigated her strange new life down the rabbit hole. The bunyip of Berkeley Creek echoed with a question of his own: 'What in the world am I?' Indeed, what kind of creature is the thylacine? The unfortunate animal is no longer here for us to pose this question: such meditations will remain forever moot.

Dream of the Thylacine mixes the raw power of *Fox* and some of the lyricism of *Old Pig*.

This new book swings between two worlds: the Edenic landscapes of Tasmania that were the thylacine's natural home and the stark, punishing world of imprisonment, the zoo where the last known thylacine died in captivity. Either way, score one more masterpiece into a catalogue crowded with them.

The thylacine is the most lamented, and ironically, the most enduring of Australia's extinct fauna. From beer labels to paranormal teen fiction, from tourism to tea-towels, the thylacine lives on in our cultural memory. But we have a right to feel angry about the slaughter, not just misty-eyed. It's pleasing that Margaret Wild's text – and Brooks's treatment of this text – invites the reader to feel raw emotions, not merely the approved ones. What other animals are passing from the country in our lifetime? How might future generations feel about them?

Trapped am I,
in a cage of twisty wire, cold concrete.

PROWL

RAGE

HOWL

Brooks has not only created vivid landscapes thrumming with life, he has set the text, re-built the words so that they grab the reader as pulsing Beat poetry. I like the way the text has been condensed, thickened up, made stronger by the design. It would have been too obvious and too easy to parcel those couplets primly across the book. This way, the poetry comes roaring to life, the white text seared into stark, monochromatic backgrounds. What might have been a lament becomes a howling rage against the dying light. The image of the thylacine facing the text pages is the familiar one: the trapped, dying animal viewed through wire. The image is degraded, like a fourth-hand copy, decaying like memory. The background on which the bold typeface is placed suggests another layer of meaning. Here the buildings, weathered timber of farm sheds, are not only signifiers of progress and expansion but are associated with repression and ultimately destruction. Thus the pioneer myth is inverted. The endpapers also show landscape through wire. Are we too imprisoned?

Text never appears on the double-page spreads of animal and landscape. It remains segregated, trapped, as it were, in this world. But there is no comfortable fantasy of the animal at one with nature. The landscape is already empty: the last known thylacine recalls, from the cage in which it will die, the landscape where it once ran wild. And this also closes off the clichéd possibility that somewhere out there... ‘See me swagger across the wild lands...see me glory at the edge of cliff’. But this swagger is halted. Everywhere there are limits.

Dream of the Thylacine is also an invitation for Ron Brooks to paint the landscapes of Tasmania that he knows so well. The text’s stark, desperate introduction gives way to the thylacine moving across its native space. The thylacine’s body is sleek and stylised; you just want to stroke its long, stripy back. There is an essential drama in the book’s design: as the trapped thylacine becomes more abject, the landscapes, the places of which it dreams and remembers and longs to escape into, become more seductive, more dreamlike, more enchanting.

The landscape scenes also allude to traditions in Australian painting: the quiet places of McCubbin, the cool blues of Arthur Boyd and Whitely’s dreamy, hypnotic curves. But to all that, Ron Brooks brings his own lyrical vision, a shaman’s calling of trees, rock, water and snow. *Dream of the Thylacine* calls to readers from all of these spaces – the art and the land. W H Auden wrote that ‘There are good books which are only for adults. There are no good books which are only for children’. *The Dream of the Thylacine* is the latter kind, a book for readers of every age. Teenagers might well respond to its Romanticism. One of the pages in the final is of a stony, weathered mountain range; the scene split by a rainbow, which softens the experience but can’t entirely efface the existential mood. This is a book about loss and enchantment. It is about finding consolation in place, in the physical world, the same physical world from which the thylacine has been taken.

Mike Shuttleworth is the curator of the exhibition *Look! The art of Australian picture books today*

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